

“In Defense of Speculative, Systematic Metaphysics” (Draft)¹

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The nature and status of contemporary metaphysics has been much on my mind lately, as a colleague and I finish an edited volume about The Metaphysical Society of America, under the somewhat cheeky title *Being in America: Sixty Years of the Metaphysical Society*. Our goal is to tell the history of the Society and its role in American philosophy through its Presidential Addresses. As I thought about writing this paper, my mind was drawn to one Address in particular, delivered by William Ernest Hocking in 1958. In the opening of his Address Hocking begins by praising the members of the Society for, as he put it, “being metaphysicians with conscious intent. For,” he continued, “it is the metaphysician who most completely fulfills the ideal of Living Dangerously. It is he who most fully renounces the security of current certitudes in the search for authentic certitude. It is he who chooses – let me say – to *live out of doors* in complete exposure to what we call Fact.”¹

In an effort to follow in the footsteps of Hocking and our founder Paul Weiss—surely metaphysicians with conscious intent—my rather aim is to defend the grand tradition of metaphysics, but not as the aim at a closed system of apodictic truths, but rather as an open-ended, fallibilistic pursuit of ever-more-adequate accounts of reality. Specifically, building on the work of Charles Sanders Peirce and Alfred North Whitehead, I will argue that, if we are, as Hocking said, to live out of doors in complete exposure to fact, we should conceive of

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metaphysics, not as the quest for absolute certainty, but as “working hypothesis.”² However, before I can defend this positive thesis, it will be important to understand the historical context out of which it emerges and to which it is responding. For, part of my thesis is that, although the sweeping attacks on metaphysics that characterized much of the twentieth century have subsided, metaphysics as speculative philosophy is no less in danger. Thus, my comments will be divided into two parts, with the first being largely historical and critical and the second positive and exploratory.

I – The Assault on Metaphysics

For two and a half millennia, metaphysics has been understood as the attempt to give a systematic account of the necessary and unchanging principles of reality. For instance, although the term metaphysics itself was unknown to the ancient Greeks, they distinguished the *physiologoi*, who studied the flux of nature, from the lovers of wisdom, who sought the unchanging *archê*, the first principles of reality. Similarly, though reduced to the status of handmaiden, in the middle ages the medieval divines constructed complex metaphysical systems accounting for every element of reality. And, despite having been born in opposition to the perceived excesses and failures of the Aristotelianism of the late middle ages, modernity did not abandon the metaphysical impulse. Indeed, some might argue that metaphysics reached its zenith in this period.

Take, for instance, Descartes whose methodical doubt was in service of establishing something, as he put it, “firm and lasting in the sciences.”³ (Here I set aside the claim that Descartes’ turn to the subject might be seen as the abandonment, even destruction, of metaphysics by replacing it with epistemology.) Concerned about the march of skepticism and envious of the apparently apodictic proofs of mathematics, Descartes razed all of his beliefs in

order to pour a new and unshakable foundation on which to rebuild thought. Setting aside the particulars of his project, my main concern here is to note how Descartes defined the *aim* of metaphysics: the aim of first philosophy is to find a clear and distinct principle, an Archimedean point,⁴ that will guarantee absolute certainty. This is what it means to establish something “firm and lasting in the sciences.” Indeed, early scientists defined the aim of their investigations in much the same way. After all, Newton’s discoveries were final and permanent “laws,” not highly probable inductive generalizations. It will be important to return to this complex relationship between science and metaphysics in the second part. For now my point is merely that, regardless of one’s estimation of its success, metaphysics in the modern period was defined by the quest for absolute certainty, both for those who sought to live up to its high ideal and those who sought to critique it. It was against this conception of metaphysics as a closed system of necessary and absolutely certain principles that thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries protested so bitterly.

Though little unifies the multitude of philosophical tributaries of the twentieth century, a surprisingly common theme is the repudiation of metaphysics. In his 1988 Presidential Address to the Metaphysical Society, Richard Bernstein notes that in the opening decades of the twentieth century three competing philosophical projects each declared war on metaphysics. The first assault on metaphysics started late in the 19th century with August Comte and logical positivism. “In one fell swoop...,” Bernstein writes, positivists “sought to dismiss metaphysics by claiming that metaphysical ‘propositions’ are pseudo-propositions. They are nonsense; they lack cognitive meaning.”⁵ It was in reaction to the excesses of positivism that Alfred North Whitehead sought to develop his own metaphysical system.

In this context I cannot help but share a recently discovered letter from 1936 between Whitehead and his former student Henry S. Leonard. Since Whitehead instructed his heirs to destroy all of his personal papers, such letters are regrettably rare. (My colleagues and I at the Whitehead Research Project I hope to publish the surviving correspondence as the first volume of a Critical Edition of Whitehead.) In this particular letter, Whitehead is responding to Leonard's recent book, which was dedicated to his former professor. Forgive me for quoting a passage at some length. Whitehead writes [READ SLOWLY]

Logical Positivism is a topic rarely distant from my thought. Every mathematician and symbolic logician is, in his habit of thought, a logical positivist. Yet to some of the expositions I find myself in violent opposition — especially to the very habit of dismissing questions as unmeaning *i.e.* unable to be expressed in existing symbolism.

Wittgenstein annoys me intensely. He is the complete example of the sayings:

I am Master of the College

What I know not, is not knowledge.

Logical Positivism in this mood — its only mood — will produce a timid, shut in, unenterprising state of mind, engaged in the elaboration of details. I always test these general rules by trying to imagine the sterilizing effect of such a state of mind, if prevalent at any time in the last ten thousand years. The fact is that thought in the previous two centuries has been engaged in disengaging itself from the shackles of dogmatic divinity. Thus it unconsciously seeks new fetters, *viz* anything offensive to the Pope of Rome. But I see no reason to believe that the stretch of Bertrand Russell's mind or of Wittgenstein's mind, or of Carnap's mind, has attained the limits of insight or expression

possible in the evolution of intelligent beings. They are bright boys, good representatives of a *stage* of rationalization, but nothing more.⁶

Leaving aside the uncharacteristically harsh tone of his comments, it is important to note that what Whitehead most objects to, what seems really to have him irritated, is not this or that particular claim, but the “sterilizing effect” of positivism. “Of course most men of science, and many philosophers,” Whitehead wrote three years earlier in *Adventures of Ideas*, “use the Positivistic doctrine to avoid the necessity of considering perplexing fundamental questions – in short, to avoid metaphysics -, and then save the importance of science by an implicit recurrence to their metaphysical persuasion that the past does in fact condition the future.”⁷ One can choose one’s metaphysics, but one cannot choose not to have a metaphysics.⁸ As I will discuss more fully in the second part, the adventures of ideas cannot move forward, metaphysics cannot be progressive, unless it is engaged in explicitly. Lest I get ahead of myself, for now let me simply agree with Bernstein that “Whatever judgment we make about the legacy of positivism, it failed in its attempt to rid us of metaphysics. Indeed its own unquestioned metaphysical biases have become evident.”⁹

The second “wave” of challenge to metaphysics in the twentieth century crested in the mid-1940s, with the rise of ordinary language analysis. As Bernstein describes it, “The strategy here was not to dismiss metaphysics as nonsense but to bypass it.” “But,” Bernstein continues, “it soon became evident that metaphysical issues could not be avoided. On the contrary, philosophers like Strawson and Sellars argued that analytic techniques could themselves be employed to tackle metaphysical issues.”¹⁰ Strawson’s book *Individuals*, with its distinction between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics, is a notable illustration of Bernstein’s latter point.

Finally, the third wave of challenge to metaphysics came from postmodernism and deconstruction and is most associated with Heidegger and Derrida.¹¹ For some, deconstructionist postmodernism is defined by its attempt to overthrow and overcome metaphysics. However, I tend to agree with Bernstein when he argues that:

The deconstruction of metaphysics [by Heidegger and Derrida] does not mean abandoning it or completely rejecting it. Rather it means keeping alive what has always been “central” to this tradition – “the inquisitive energy of the mind” that never stops “questioning what appears to be obvious and definitive.”¹²

I will leave it to those more expert in the work Heidegger and Derrida to debate whether Bernstein is right. At present my concern is merely to highlight how these very diverse and indeed opposed philosophical trends—positivism, ordinary language analysis, and postmodernism—combined early last century to create a philosophical environment that was openly hostile to traditional metaphysics.

It was in response to this the indefatigable Paul Weiss, a former student of Whitehead's, founded in 1947 *The Review of Metaphysics* and, three years later, The Metaphysical Society of America. The Society's second President, John Wild, reflects the mood of the founders of the Society in his 1954 Address at Harvard.

In the Western world, this negativistic movement [against metaphysics] has proved to be a far more serious and lasting threat. Failing to take a firm root in Europe, the place of its origin, it moved to England and North America, where the central disciplines of philosophy were found to be less firmly grounded in sound empirical traditions of academic life and thought. Here for many years it has now run its course, and has exerted a powerful destructive effect. In many secular schools and universities, the history of

philosophy has been neglected, logic and linguistics have replaced ontology as the focal discipline, and many philosophers moved by the widespread fear and idolatry of “science,” have abandoned the performance of their vital descriptive and synoptic functions. This has had a markedly disintegrating effect on the cultural life of the West at a time of crisis and world upheaval.

But [Wild argued] this is, fortunately, not the whole story. Certain thinkers refused to be swept along in the destructive currents and stood firm, especially those, like A. N. Whitehead, who were more intimately acquainted with the restricted sciences and their necessary limitations. Metaphysics, while seriously weakened academically, did not completely die away. One unambiguous indication was the formation of this society five years ago.¹³

For more than sixty years, the members of the Metaphysical Society have sought to keep open a clearing in the philosophical wilderness for true speculative philosophy.¹⁴ What is particularly remarkable about the Metaphysical Society is that, unlike many other philosophical organizations, it is defined primarily by a particular philosophical attitude, rather than some particular philosophical content.¹⁵ Whether Hegelian or Thomist, Kantian or Whiteheadian, what unites the members of the Society is their commitment to pursuing the “grand tradition” of metaphysics. As stated baldly in the opening of its constitution, “The purpose of the Metaphysical Society of America is the study of reality.” It is this attitude, this willingness to live dangerously out of doors, that I wish to defend today.

Yet, the observant student of philosophy might nod in recognition of this history lesson, but note that much has transpired in the sixty years since Weiss founded his review and society. As my undergrad students might say, attacks on metaphysics are so last century. Indeed, some

might argue that metaphysics is now among one of the most exciting and growing areas of research in mainstream Anglo-American philosophy. In a certain sense, this is entirely correct. Mainstream philosophy in America is no longer hostile to metaphysics. However, this belies a deeper point. Although in America today metaphysics is considered to be a respected and vibrant area of research, it is not clear to me that systematic, speculative philosophy is any less under attack. Let me try to explain my meaning.

Part of the difficulty has to do with the evolution of “analytic philosophy.” Despite being the dominant approach to philosophy in America, with the failure of both positivism and ordinary language analysis, there is no longer a philosophical *project* that defines contemporary analytic thought. As Brian Leiter has noted, today analytic philosophy is “a style of doing philosophy, not a philosophical program or a set of substantive views.”¹⁶ What seems to define the analytic “style” is, Leiter argues, the aim at argumentative clarity and precision, the use of the tools of logic, and the identification with science and mathematics.¹⁷ Thus understood, “analytic metaphysics” generally aims at the analysis and clarification of metaphysical puzzles and paradoxes using the tools of logic and science. I’ve added the qualifier “analytic” to indicate that, although mainstream philosophy in America is no longer hostile to the term “metaphysics,” as it was in the middle of the last century, it is not clear to me that work published as metaphysics—some of which I readily admit is quite rich and interesting—lives up to the “grand tradition” of speculative philosophy philosophical speculation. Although the discussion and clarification of important metaphysical *topics* is alive and well in Anglo-American thought, speculative philosophy—the systematic attempt to give an account of reality—seems to have been abandoned.

Take, for instance, Strawson's book *Individuals*, which he describes as an "essay in descriptive metaphysics." As Peter Hacker has noted, "descriptive metaphysics does not differ from conceptual analysis in intent. Like conceptual analysis ... it is concerned with describing and clarifying the concepts we employ in discourse about ourselves and about the world."¹⁸ In this sense, descriptive metaphysics is simply conceptual analysis "at a very high level of generality."¹⁹ Thus, Hacker continues, "Where traditional metaphysicians conceived of themselves as limning the ultimate structure of the world, the descriptive metaphysician will conceive of himself as sketching the basic structure of our conceptual scheme—of the language we use to describe the world and our experience of it."²⁰ In this sense, from the perspective of speculative philosophy, descriptive metaphysics is not a resurrection of metaphysics, but a rejection of it.²¹ As Hacker puts it, "Metaphysics thus construed yields no insight into reality, but only into our forms of description of reality. So it is just more grammar, in Wittgenstein's extended sense of the term."²²

Thus, although the sweeping attacks on metaphysics have subsided, my claim is that metaphysics as speculative philosophy is no less in danger. That is, it is no longer the *existence* of metaphysics that is under assault, but its *essence*. Whereas earlier generations of undertakers sought to bury, overcome, or otherwise bypass metaphysics, many today want instead to replace it with what I consider to be an anemic simulacrum, a pale imitation. To be perfectly blunt, I fear that metaphysics has lost its philosophical nerve. Becoming disillusioned with its explanatory ability, metaphysics has become content with description. In the remainder of this essay my rather unfashionable goal is to take up once again what Bernstein calls the "utopian impulse"²³ of metaphysics, but one chastened by the scientific discoveries of the last century. Let us bravely seek to fulfill the ideal of "Living Dangerously." Let us renounce the "security of current

certitudes in search for authentic certitude” and “live out of doors in complete exposure to ... Fact.”²⁴

II – Metaphysics as “Working Hypothesis,” Fallibilism and Speculative Philosophy

Great metaphysicians—whether Aristotle or Kant, Thomas or Descartes—have always sought to be literate of and adequate to the science of their day. Though I applaud the fact that many contemporary philosophers continue this tradition and recognize the importance of attempting to staying abreast of the latest discoveries in science, I fear that too many simply see themselves bringing conceptual clarity to the work of scientists, rather than functioning, as Whitehead put it, as the “critic of abstractions”²⁵ and to “to challenge the half-truths constituting the scientific first principles.”²⁶ I fear that, in many ways, contemporary philosophy has not fully come to terms with the world revealed by Darwin, Einstein, Maxwell, and Plank, nor the revised model of scientific investigation implied by their work.

As science has pursued its beautiful recursive, self-correcting method of investigation, it has revealed a universe that is quite different from that pictured by Newton and Descartes. Indeed, I would argue that the moderns were wrong both with respect to their description of reality and with respect to their understanding of what can be achieved in science. [READ SLOWLY] Reality is *not* a *closed* system composed of *inert* bits of matter defined by *absolute*, unflinching laws of nature that can, in principle, be known with *absolute* certainty and represented adequately by mathematics. Rather, it seems that our reality is an *open, evolving, dynamic* system composed of *vibratory energetic events* woven into extraordinarily complex webs of *interdependence* that are inherently indeterminate and, therefore, only knowable with statistical and probabilistic certainty.

It turns out, then, that science does not and cannot arrive at absolutely certain truths. Or, as Whitehead provocatively put it, “the Certainties of Science are a delusion.”²⁷ Though supported by centuries of careful observational evidence, there is nothing necessary or absolute about, for instance, Newton’s so-called laws. Thus, with Whitehead I would argue that, as he put it, “None of these laws of nature gives the slightest evidence of necessity. They are the modes of procedure which within the scale of our observations do in fact prevail.”²⁸ “Thus, [Whitehead writes,] the laws of nature are merely all-pervading patterns of behaviour, of which the shift and discontinuance lie beyond our ken.”²⁹

The task for the contemporary metaphysician, if he is to live dangerously, is to give a systematic account of such a universe. Yet, how can we be adequate to such a universe while not abandoning speculative metaphysics? If the universe is an evolving, emergent process that is not knowable without absolute certainty, then how is the grand tradition of metaphysics possible? The answer I believe, is to be found in the work Charles Sanders Peirce and Alfred North Whitehead, who are responsible for one of the most important and one of the most neglect discoveries in the 2500 year history of metaphysics.

In his 1911 posthumous work *Some Problems of Philosophy* William James notes that some object that too often metaphysics is dogmatic. “Too many philosophers [he writes] have aimed at closed systems, established *a priori*, claiming infallibility, and to be accepted or rejected only as totals.”³⁰ However, as James goes on to note, the solution to this problem is not to be found in the rejection of metaphysics in favor of science. No, what James goes on to astutely note is that the dogmatism of metaphysics can be remedied by modeling its *method* on science’s self-correcting method of “hypothesis and verification.”³¹

Since philosophers are only men thinking about things in the most comprehensive possible way, they can use any method whatsoever. Philosophy must, in any case, complete the sciences, and must incorporate their methods. One cannot see why, if such a policy should appear advisable, philosophy might not end by forswearing all dogmatism whatever, and become as hypothetical in her manners as the most empirical science of them all.³²

Though he does not mention it here, this is in fact the method developed by Charles Sanders Peirce, whom James rightly credits with founding Pragmatism. As early as the 1860s Peirce was arguing against the dogmatic influences of Cartesian thought, developing in a series of essays over decades a model of philosophy (and of metaphysics) as an open-ended investigation conducted by a “community of inquirers.” Metaphysics aims at giving a complete, systematic account of reality, but, like science, it recognizes that such an investigation fallibilistic, progressive, and open-ended; there is no finality.

Peirce’s insight is, I contend, one of the most important and underappreciated discoveries in the history of metaphysics. According to this model, metaphysics is conceived as an ameliorative and asymptotic form of inquiry that fallibilistically seeks to give ever-more-adequate accounts of reality by testing them against experience. Unfortunately, for a host of reasons, Peirce was never able to provide more than a sketch of such a system. That distinction goes to another mathematician, Alfred North Whitehead who, as far as I can tell, independently developed a very similar model of speculative philosophy. (Mercifully, perhaps, in this essay I will largely bracket the complex details of Whitehead’s “philosophy of organism” in order to focus on the model of metaphysical speculation that he develops.)

For Whitehead, speculative philosophy “embodies the method of the ‘working hypothesis’” (AI 222). Thus, just as James had suggested, Whitehead puts the self-correcting, progressive nature of scientific investigation at the heart metaphysics. In doing so, he fundamentally alters the nature of metaphysical inquiry. Metaphysics, is not the aim at a closed system of apodictic truths, but an open-ended, falliblistic pursuit of ever-more-adequate accounts of reality. Thus, metaphysics is still the attempt to give a systematic account of every element of reality, but it finally gives up the pretense that metaphysical principles must—indeed, that they can be—necessary or absolutely certain. We must become deaf to the siren song of finality and certainty, reminding ourselves always that there are no absolute, final truths to be had in metaphysics, or any other investigation. However, unlike the skeptics who make similar claims, Peirce and Whitehead recognize the progressive nature of metaphysical inquiry. Although metaphysical systems may not be true or false, to be rejected, as James noted, in total, they may certainly be better or worse. This better and worse implies a standard. It is here that Whitehead improves on Peirce.

For Whitehead, metaphysical speculation is to be judged in terms of four criteria, two of which are rational and two of which are empirical. Rationally, our metaphysical systems should aim at being both *logical* and *coherent*. That is, they should avoid contradiction, and each element of the system should be interpretable in terms of the rest. It should hang together. Avoiding contradiction or being logical is a minimal bar, easily crossed by most theories. However, coherence is a bigger challenge. As Gödel proved and as Whitehead experienced first hand in writing with Russell the *Principia Mathematica*, even mathematical systems cannot hope for pure coherence. Thus, for Whitehead coherence is a rational ideal toward which systems asymptotically aspire, but which they never fully achieve.

However, for Whitehead, speculative philosophy must not be content with constructing self-consistent thought castle's in the sky; we must, as Hocking put it, live in "complete exposure to Fact." Thus, Whitehead also proposes two empirical criteria: speculative metaphysical systems must not only be logical and coherent, but also *applicable* and *adequate* to every element of experience. Again, the former empirical condition, *applicability*, is a minimal condition. Our metaphysical theories must be applicable to at least some element of experience. For instance, it is in terms of applicability that, Whitehead argues, Descartes' system fails. The notion of a disembodied *cogito* is simply inapplicable to any element of our experience. However, the most important and interesting criterion for speculative philosophy is that it must also aim at being *adequate* to every element of reality. It is this insistence on adequacy, again a maximal ideal only asymptotically approached, that fundamentally alters the metaphysical project. For in order to determine whether a metaphysical system is adequate it must be pragmatically tested. As Whitehead puts it,

Whatever is found in "practice" must lie within the scope of metaphysical description.

When description fails to include "practice," the metaphysics is inadequate and requires revision. There can be no appeal to practice to supplement metaphysics, so long as we remain contented with our metaphysical doctrines. Metaphysics is nothing but the description of the generalities which apply to all the details of practice (PR 13).

Metaphysics can only be conceived as "working hypothesis," it can only be progressive, if it is possible for hypotheses to be wrong, to be contradicted. Our abstract formulations must be continually test for their adequacy to our full experience of reality.

Importantly, then, although metaphysics *aims* at a completely adequate account of reality, Whitehead does not believe that any metaphysical system "can hope entirely to satisfy these

pragmatic tests.” Thus, he continues, “At the best such a system will remain only an approximation to the general truths which are sought.³³” It is in this sense that metaphysics is to be understood as “working hypothesis.” Metaphysical categories are not to be taken as “dogmatic statements of the obvious” but as, in Whitehead’s words, “tentative formulations of the ultimate generalities.”³⁴

To help explain his view of speculative philosophy Whitehead provides a helpful analogy. He likens this model of speculative philosophy to the flight of an airplane. Our metaphysical investigation “starts from the ground of particular observation” and then “makes a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization” and system building. However, and this is key, it most once again land “for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation.”³⁵ It is this recursive nature of speculative philosophy that brings about the amicable marriage of the rationalist and empiricist elements of metaphysics. We start from our own experience, we take flight into speculative metaphysical system building, but we must land again and test the applicability and adequacy of our accounts. Only in this way can metaphysics retain its noble aim, but avoid dogmatism. I hasten to note, if only in passing, that if a vicious reductionism is to be avoided, this testing of metaphysical hypotheses must be understood within the context of a very radical empiricism in the Jamesian sense of the term.

One of the things that I most admire about Whitehead is that he models this falliblistic approach to metaphysics in his own life and work. In his *magnum opus*, *Process and Reality*, Whitehead defends his “philosophy of organism” as one such attempt at a system. However, unlike so many metaphysicians before him, he does not claim to have arrived at *the* metaphysical system to end all systems. He knows and expects that it will require continuous revision over time.

Philosophy [Whitehead writes in *Adventures of Ideas*] is at once general and concrete, critical and appreciative of direct intuition. It is not – or, at least, should not be – a ferocious debate between irritable professors. It is a survey of possibilities and their comparison with actualities. In philosophy, the fact, the theory, the alternatives, and the ideal, are weighed together. Its gifts are insight and foresight, and a sense of the world of life, in short, that sense of importance which nerves all civilized effort.³⁶ [TELL LIBRARY OF LIVING PHILOSOPHERS STORY, IF TIME.]

Once the pretense at finality is abandoned, metaphysics is free to become a progressive form of inquiry. John Herman Randall relays a humorous anecdote regarding this in his 1967 Presidential Address to the Metaphysical Society.

Metaphysical inquiry thus, like all scientific inquiry, is progressive, never finished; it never reaches final conclusions. I remember once hearing a Teutonic philosopher ask, “Then metaphysics has no more, and no greater certainty, than physics?” John Dewey, who was present, rose, smiled his inimitable smile, and repeated, “No greater certainty than physics!” Anyone who finds that a serious objection is obviously not interested in inquiry: he is looking for faith.³⁷

The mantra of the metaphysician as much as the scientist must be, as Peirce put it, “Do not block the road to inquiry!” Finality and absolute certainty are a sham, but we need not therefore give up on genuine systematic metaphysics. Thus, as Whitehead aptly puts it, “The proper test [of metaphysics] is not that of finality, but of progress,”³⁸ progress in giving a more logical, coherent, applicable, and adequate account of reality. We seek rational coherence of our metaphysical systems, but these systems must be made to land on the firm ground of experience

and demonstration their applicability and adequacy. It is this, I suggest, that makes it possible to avoid the tendency to dogmatism that has plagued most efforts at metaphysical system building.

There is no first principle, [Whitehead writes,] which is in itself unknowable, not to be captured by a flash of insight. But, putting aside the difficulties of language, deficiency in imaginative penetration forbids progress in any form other than that of an asymptotic approach to a scheme of principles, only definable in terms of the ideal which they should satisfy. The difficulty has its seat on the empirical side of philosophy (PR4).

By saying that the difficulty has its seat on the empirical side Whitehead means that reality always necessarily outstrips our ability to adequately characterize it. Though language is the tool of philosophy, he is not enamoured of its adequacy in adequately capturing the fullness and richness of experience.

Philosophers can never hope finally to formulate these metaphysical first principles, [Whitehead writes]. Weakness of insight and deficiencies of language stand in the way inexorably. Words and phrases must be stretched towards a generality foreign to their ordinary usage; and however such elements of language be stabilized as technicalities, they remain metaphors mutely appealing for an imaginative leap (PR 4).

It is for this reason that he often recurs to the poets, who in their evocations capture a larger share of reality than the scientist's experiments. This brings me to the final implication regarding this fallibilism model of metaphysics. If it taken seriously, fallibilistic metaphysics would seem to require a philosophical pluralism. If one is a consistent fallibilist, then one must necessarily recognize that there is no single system, method, or approach.

Personally, I find that Whitehead and Peirce have come closest in living up to the ideal of speculative philosophy. However, I am also convinced that important contributions are made by

Kant and Hegel, as well as Plato and Thomas. However, I hasten to add that the pluralism demanded by a commitment to speculative philosophy is not what Bernstein has aptly called a “flabby”—pluralism which simply accepts the variety of perspectives, ‘vocabularies,’ paradigms, language games, etc.” “[For] such a flabby pluralism,” Bernstein continues, “fails to take seriously that there are real conflicts and clashes in metaphysical positions which need to be faced.”³⁹ The fallibilist pursuit of metaphysical system building requires what Bernstein calls “engaged pluralism.” Forgive me reading at length Bernstein’s elegant characterization.

[As an engaged pluralist, Bernstein writes,] One accepts the fallibility of all inquiry and even the lack of convergence of metaphysical speculation. One accepts the multiplicity of perspectives and interpretations. One rejects the quest for certainty, the craving for absolutes, and the idea of a totality in which all differences are finally reconciled. But such a pluralism demands an openness to what is different and other, a willingness to risk one’s prejudgments, seeking for common ground without any guarantees that it will be found. It demands – and it is a strenuous demand – that one tries to be responsive to the claims of the other. Such an engaged pluralism does not mean giving up the search for truth and objectivity. For metaphysical speculation is always concerned with keeping “the spirit of truth” alive. But the quest for truth and objectivity is not to be confused with the quest for absolutes. Claims to truth and objectivity are always fallible.⁴⁰

Thus, in sum, the many attacks on metaphysics have not lead us beyond metaphysics, but back to metaphysics.⁴¹ Like those “utopian diggers”⁴² who founded the Metaphysical Society of America, we must have the courage to continue the grant tradition of metaphysical system building. However, we must also recognize that metaphysics is not the pursuit of final,

necessary, or absolute truths. Metaphysical inquiry is as open and dynamic as the reality it seeks to understand. As metaphysicians with “conscious intent,” we must have the courage “live out of doors in complete exposure to ... Fact” and recognize the fallibilism and engaged pluralism inherent within metaphysical speculation.

Rationalism [Whitehead writes in *Process and Reality*] never shakes off its status of an experimental adventure. The combined influences of mathematics and religion, which have also greatly contributed to the rise of philosophy, have also had the unfortunate effect of yoking it with static dogmatism. Rationalism is an adventure in the clarification of thought, progressive and never final. But it is an adventure in which even partial success has importance (PR 9).

¹ William Ernest Hocking, “Fact, Field and Destiny: Inductive Elements of Metaphysics,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 11.4 (1958): 525.

² Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: Free Press, 1933), 222.

³ Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Trans. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993 [1641]), 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵ Bernstein 261-62).

⁶ Transcription by George R. Lucas, Jr. Original held at the Library of Congress. Facsimile available at http://www.ctr4process.org/publications/ProcessStudies/PSS/PSS_17_2011_Phipps.pdf.

⁷ AI 126.

⁸ In an unpublished paper George Allan recently used this term of phrase, though he used “worldview” in the place of “metaphysics.”

⁹ Bernstein 261-62

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² (Richard Bernstein, 1988 “Metaphysics, Critique, Utopia” 267, author’s emphasis).

¹³ John Wild, “The New Empiricism and Human Time,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 7 (1954): 537-538.

¹⁴ “At a time when anti-foundational slogans are being abused to dismiss the entire history of philosophy and metaphysics, caricaturing the entire tradition as if it were exclusively concerned with discovering such an *Urgrund*, we should not forget how much has been opened up by those utopian diggers. Their enduring philosophical significance is in keeping the spirit of truth alive, in not allowing the inquisitive energy of the mind to go to sleep.” (Richard Bernstein, 1988 “Metaphysics, Critique, Utopia” 258

¹⁵ Ernan McMullin, 1974, “Two Faces of Science” 655-56. “The aim of the Metaphysical Society was to hold lines open to the diversity of past philosophies that the overly harsh criteria of positivism threatened to reduce to meaninglessness or self-deception. There was room in the new Society for Whig pragmatism and Tory Thomism, for the radical world-view of Marxism as well as the apolitical individualism of the existentialists, for the cautious temper of a Husserl just as much as for the cosmic assurance of a Hegel. ... A diverse group, to be sure, at loggerheads on most issues, in agreement perhaps only on one: that the reach of rational inquiry was not simply to

be measured by the modes of verification of natural science nor by the constructive resources of the *Principia Mathematica*.” (ibid.)

¹⁶ <http://www.philosophicalgourmet.com/analytic.asp>

¹⁷ <http://www.philosophicalgourmet.com/analytic.asp>

¹⁸ P. M. S. Hacker, “Strawson’s Rehabilitation of Metaphysics,” *Strawson and Kant*, ed. Hans-Johann Glock, (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 49.

¹⁹ Ibid., 53.

²⁰ Ibid., 55.

²¹ “So conceived, descriptive metaphysics *breaks* with the metaphysical tradition, which purported to give us insights into the necessary structure of reality” (Hacker 55).

²² Ibid., 59.

²³ Richard Bernstein, 1988 “Metaphysics, Critique, Utopia” 257-58

²⁴ Hocking 525.

²⁵ Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 87.

²⁶ Whitehead, PR [1929] 1978, 10.

²⁷ AI 154.

²⁸ MT 155. “Life on this planet depends on the order observed throughout the spatio-temporal stellar system, as disclosed in our experience. These special forms of order exhibit no final necessity whatsoever. The laws of nature are forms of activity which happen to prevail within the vast epoch of activity which we dimly discern” (MT 87). See also MT 95.

²⁹ MT 143. “The laws are the outcome of the character of the behaving things: they are the ‘communal customs’ of which Clement spoke. [...] What we know of external nature is wholly in terms of how the various occasions in nature contribute to each other’s natures. The whole environment participates in the nature of each of its occasions. Thus each occasion takes its initial form from the character of its environment. Also the laws which condition each environment merely express the general character of the occasions composing that environment. This is the doctrine of definition of things in terms of their modes of functioning” (AI 41-2).

³⁰ Ibid.?

³¹ Ibid.

³² James, *Some Problems* 25-6

³³ PR 13.

³⁴ PR 8.

³⁵ PR5.

³⁶ AI 98.

³⁷ John Herman Randall, Jr. 1967, “Metaphysics and Language” 600

³⁸ PR 14.

³⁹ Richard Bernstein, 1988 “Metaphysics, Critique, Utopia” 270. Bernstein also distinguishes two other forms of pluralism that he rejects: “fortress-like pluralism” and “anarchic pluralism.”

⁴⁰ Richard Bernstein, 1988 “Metaphysics, Critique, Utopia” 271

⁴¹ I do not think that metaphysics can solve practical problems of everyday life. But in keeping alive the utopian impulse, metaphysics keeps open the space for critique. Metaphysical questioning requires us to uncover and probe the ideals that are presupposed in critique. When we think through the various attempts to kill metaphysics in our time, they do not lead us beyond metaphysics but back to what has always been central to the metaphysical tradition. The danger today does not come from the utopian impulse of metaphysics but rather from the various attempts to kill off metaphysics. Against those who are deeply suspicious of all forms of utopian thinking, I want to claim we need more utopian thinking. Metaphysicians have always been stargazers and dreamers. We need to keep open the oppositional space of critique (Richard Bernstein, 1988 “Metaphysics, Critique, Utopia” 272).

⁴² Richard Bernstein, 1988 “Metaphysics, Critique, Utopia” 258.