

Title: “On the Very Idea of an  $n$ th Dogma: Quine, Davidson, and Differentiated Experience”

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—Cameron Lugo

## 1 Introduction

Among the many differences categorizing philosophical camps throughout history, one fundamental dualism underlies them all: rationalism vs. anti-rationalism. “Rationalism,” as I’m defining it, is a trend of thought that involves some degree of allegiance to the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) and a corresponding degree of allegiance to some variety of monism. At its most austere, rationalism demands discarding anything inexplicable from ontology—a demand that, ruthlessly applied, entails a radical monism upon which no numerical concepts intelligibly apply to reality.<sup>1</sup> “Anti-rationalism” is simply the negation of rationalism: it’s a trend of thought that involves suspicion toward, if not outright rejection of, PSR and some degree of an ontological allegiance to atomism. The limiting case of anti-rationalist atomism is a radical atomism upon which, as with monism, no numerical concepts intelligibly apply to reality because there is no unity between things.<sup>2</sup> Rationalism and anti-rationalism are mutually displacing: a given degree of rationalism involves an inversely proportional degree of anti-rationalism; the two are held in a kind of correlative tension. Between the limiting cases of pure rationalism and pure anti-rationalism exists a spectrum where the vast majority of philosophers fall.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper, I expand a thesis suggested by Michael Della Rocca that Willard V. O. Quine’s and Donald Davidson’s respective philosophies of meaning conceal a rationalist

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1. Michael Della Rocca, *The Parmenidean Ascent* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 77–82. Compare Peter van Inwagen, *Metaphysics*, 2nd ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2002), 25–27.

2. Not even unity could be applied to atoms, since counting something as one involves subsuming it under a count noun, which in turn involves a relation (and thus some degree of unity).

3. My idea for this rationalism–anti-rationalism schema was inspired in part by Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964). See Acosmism, Atomism, and Skepticism below.

impulse.<sup>4</sup> Both Quine and Davidson seek to identify a rational ground for differences of meaning. While Quine relativizes differences in meaning to distinct conceptual schemes, favoring an anti-rationalist commitment to multiplicity, Davidson rejects Quine's dualism between conceptual scheme and empirical content, accusing Quine of espousing a third (and likely last) dogma of empiricism. However, I disagree with Davidson that Quine's scheme–content dualism is the *true* Last Dogma. I adduce a regress argument to pinpoint the *true* Last Dogma and demonstrate that neither rationalism, anti-rationalism, nor a correlation of the two can ground the intelligibility of multiplicity. Predictably, rejecting the Last Dogma of Empiricism obliterates the possibility of experience, generating a deeply skeptical scenario upon which finite perceivers either don't exist or cannot think. While a transcendental argument might stave off this scenario, worries remain.

## 1 Quine

### 1.1 Indeterminacy of Translation

Quine's thesis of the indeterminacy of translation is that there are multiple ways of translating languages (or interpreting meanings within a language) that are compatible with all possible empirical observations yet are logically incompatible with each other. Quine's thesis is notoriously elusive, but here's a brief attempt to unpack it. First, holophrastic indeterminacy is Quine's idea that the meaning of entire sentences is inscrutable.<sup>5</sup> To support this nebulous hypothesis, Quine invokes an "argument from above," appealing to the more accepted belief that physical theories are underdetermined by observable evidence.<sup>6</sup> If a physical theory is underdetermined, a translation of it will also be underdetermined. While it might seem that this merely makes the indeterminacy of translation a species of the underdetermination of theories, Quine insists this isn't the case. Instead, whenever two theories are compatible with all possible observational data, there is, for precisely that reason, no principled way to determine whether a foreign physicist holds to one theory or the other. Not only is there no way to expose the foreign physicist to decisive observational evidence to adjudicate between the two theories (because there is none), but theoretical interrogation cannot provide a basis for choice between translations, either; all such interrogation would proceed internal to the foreigner's language and would, to that extent, be subject to the same indeterminacy.<sup>7</sup>

A second aspect of the thesis concerns the inscrutability of reference (or ontological relativity), which Quine supports using an "argument from below." While holophrastic indeterminacy dealt with the meaning of entire sentences or theories, the inscrutability of reference deals with individual terms within sentences. The idea is this: for any object  $a$  there is a proxy function that maps  $a$  onto a different object, say  $a'$ , while reassigning predicates so that

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4. Della Rocca, 171–6.

5. Peter Hylton and Gary Kemp, "Willard Van Orman Quine," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Spring 2020). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/quine/>.

6. Willard V. O. Quine, "On the Reasons for Indeterminacy of Translation," *Journal of Philosophy* 67, no. 6 (1970): 179–80, 183.

7. Quine, 180.

they are true of *a'* in the if and only if they were true of *a*.<sup>8</sup> While the totality of the speaker's verbal behavior remains invariant, the proxy function does not merely map objects to equivalent sentences. Quine's well-worn example: there is, parallel to the case of holophrastic indeterminacy, no principled way to determine whether the term '*gavagai*' in a foreigner's language refers to the logically incompatible English terms 'rabbit,' 'rabbit stage,' 'undetached rabbit part,' or perhaps even the whole sentence 'rabbitness is manifesting there.'<sup>9</sup> Artificial as these examples might seem, "our" common sense ontology isn't enough to counterbalance Quine's unyielding explanatory standard (more on that momentarily).<sup>10</sup> Importantly, the inscrutability of reference can be recreated even between speakers of the same language by applying the proxy function to objects within that language.<sup>11</sup> Because of this, whatever conclusions follow from narrow thesis of the indeterminacy of radical translation similarly follow from the inscrutability of reference in general.

### 1.2 *Quine's Rationalism–Anti-Rationalism Tension*

Quine's reasons for the indeterminacy of translation betray his commitment both to rationalist and anti-rationalist principles. Quine's anti-rationalism manifests itself in his methodological naturalism, by which I mean his commitment that only the methods employed in the mathematical and natural sciences should be used in philosophy.<sup>12</sup> Quine quite explicitly ties his naturalism to facts about differences in meaning, insisting that a question about whether two expressions are different in meaning cannot be settled except through empirical observation of people's verbal behavior.<sup>13</sup> From this, we could attribute the following verification-type principle to Quine. Call it Principle Q:

Principle Q: For any expressions *x* and *y*, there is a fact about a difference of meaning between *x* and *y* only if a difference between *x* and *y* is discernible in principle by empirical observation.

Quine contends that there simply is no absolute fact about a difference in meaning if two terms or sentences are logically incompatible yet empirically equivalent.<sup>14</sup> This connection between whether there are facts about meaning and whether putative facts are discernible by empirical observation shouldn't surprise.

What might be surprising in light of Quine's naturalism and empiricism is that latent in Principle Q are two quintessential rationalist principles: the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) and the Identity of Indiscernibles (PII). Roughly, PSR prescribes that there be an explanation for

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8. Hylton and Kemp, "Willard Van Orman Quine."

9. Willard V. O. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), 52–53.

10. Willard V. O. Quine, "Ontological Relativity," in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 34–35. Quine distinguishes between the pragmatic point of how to sensibly understand each other and his philosophical point regarding meaning, extension, and reference.

11. Quine, 47.

12. On methodological naturalism, see Paul Franks, "From Quine to Hegel: Naturalism, Anti-Realism, and Maimon's Question *Quid Facti*," in *German Idealism: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Espen Hammer (London: Routledge, 2007).

13. Quine, "Ontological Relativity," 29.

14. Quine, "Reasons for Indeterminacy," 180–1.

every fact or that there is a reason for everything that exists (or happens, etc.). PII states that  $x$  and  $y$  are numerically distinct only if there is a discernible difference between them. As noted above, Quine's motivation for affirming the inscrutability of translation rested in part on a failure to fulfill an explanatory demand for a reason for deciding between two hypotheses.<sup>15</sup> This demand that facts be made intelligible can be interpreted as an application of PSR.<sup>16</sup> It would be expected, then, that Quine chooses to jettison any putative facts about differences in meaning when there is no rational ground for differentiating between the two—a rational ground, of course, at least partially dependent upon empirical observability. Such facts, were they to exist, would be brute facts, facts without an explanation, a violation of PSR.

Along comparable lines, Quine's Principle Q involves a commitment to PII. Indeed, Principle Q is not far from a restatement of PII. Although a more emphatically rationalist rendition of PII might allow  $x$  and  $y$  to be numerically different even if human observers could not discern their difference(s), Quine's use of PII is adjusted to his naturalism. For him, indiscernibility is tied to what humans could observe in principle.<sup>17</sup> But the indeterminacy of translation implies that there is no empirical way to discern a difference in meaning between any two  $x$  and  $y$ . Therefore, conjoined with PSR and PII, Quine's naturalism makes empirically indiscernible variant translations nonsense.<sup>18</sup> Nor is it the case that there's merely an inscrutable fact about the differentiation of meaning. Instead, Quine denies that there is any fact about differentiated meaning.<sup>19</sup> If there *were* a fact of the matter, it would be inexplicable.

Here's where the correlative tension between Quine's rationalism and anti-rationalism—as manifested in his adherence to methodological naturalism, PSR, and PII—starts to unravel. First, his rationalism problematizes the very idea of differentiated meaning. This compels him toward the precipice of a radical semantic monism in which there are not even differences between meanings of our own thoughts about rabbits, rabbit parts, or what have you, insofar as there are no facts about differentiated meanings in general.<sup>20</sup> Second, his anti-rationalism, as exemplified in his empiricism, restrains him from tumbling over the precipice, because surely our *experience* of meaning is differentiated.

Instead of letting the rationalism–anti-rationalism rubber band snap, springing to one extreme or the other, he keeps the tension while striking a compromise: he retains his commitment to differentiated meaning within our own thoughts, but he does so by making differentiated meaning intelligible relative to other differences. Quine introduces differences

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15. Quine, 180. Willard V. O. Quine, "On Empirically Equivalent Systems of the World," *Erkenntnis* (1975–) 9, no. 3 (1975): 328.

16. Actually, this demand needn't involve a full-blown PSR of universal scope but simply a localized demand for explanation. For the purposes of this paper, consider this a localized application of PSR tantamount to a diluted version of PSR.

17. While the link between empirical verification and PII might be surprising, it's noteworthy that in Max Black's *locus classicus* treatment of PII, this very link is present. Max Black, "The Identity of Indiscernibles," *Mind* 61, no. 242 (1952): 155–6. "The only way we can discover that two different things exist is by finding out that one has a quality not possessed by the other or else that one has a relational characteristic that the other hasn't."

18. Quine, "Ontological Relativity," 30.

19. Quine, 47.

20. Quine.

between conceptual schemes to ground differentiated meaning within our experience. That is, his use of PSR requires that he ground what differences he retains in *further* differences: differences between primitively adopted and ultimately inscrutable background conceptual schemes.<sup>21</sup> There can be a discernible difference between *x* and *y* relative to one of these conceptual schemes, but the moment we ask about whether *x* or *y* really refers to *x* or *y* beyond the conceptual scheme, we need a further background conceptual scheme to adjudicate which sense of *x* or *y* we are talking about. And any questions about the meaning of *x* and *y* will be relative to *that* conceptual scheme, *ad infinitum*, without ever answering a question about an absolute fact of the matter. This is what Quine calls his thesis of relativity: reference is nonsense except in relation to a conceptual scheme.<sup>22</sup>

## 2 Davidson

### 2.1 *The Third Dogma of Empiricism*

Although celebrating Quine's refutation of the dualism between analytic and synthetic statements in his momentous "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," Davidson faults Quine with retaining a third, and probably last, dogma of empiricism: a dualism between conceptual scheme and empirical content. Davidson objects to the idea of a neutral, uninterpreted empirical content and thinks that it props up both verificationism's analytic–synthetic dualism and Quine's scheme–content dualism insofar as some common substratum must underlie the differences between all conceptual schemes.<sup>23</sup> This is true because for something to be a conceptual scheme, whether translatable or not, it must stand in a certain relation to experience. The problem Davidson pinpoints is that there is seemingly no way to explain exactly what that relation is or exactly what things are related. In particular, there's no intelligible ground for comparison of conceptual schemes, since comparison between them must embark either from (a) a theory-neutral reality or (b) a fixed stock of meanings; but Quine's thesis of the indeterminacy of translation obstructs either option.<sup>24</sup>

Let's explore this point further. According to Davidson, conceptual schemes either (a) "fit" or (b) "organize" something, and that something is either (i) reality or (ii) experience. First, fitting either the facts or the totality of experience couldn't be an intelligible ground for recognizing differences between conceptual schemes; neither adds anything intelligible to the notion of being true. But being true cannot explain differences between conceptual schemes because recognizing truth between them presupposes the ability to translate determinately between them, which Quine's thesis precludes. Rephrased, if truth were divorced from meaning and translation, then truth couldn't be a principle to test whether a conceptual scheme is radically

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21. Quine, 48, 51.

22. Quine, 48–49.

23. Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 47 (1973–4): 11.

24. Davidson, "Very Idea," 17.

different than our own. Making successful use of truth as a neutral test for differences between conceptual schemes would require us, absurdly, to grasp some truth independently of grasping its meaning.<sup>25</sup> Quine's holophrastic indeterminacy thesis therefore precludes us from being able to make sense of conceptual schemes "fitting" reality or experience.

Second, organization of reality couldn't be an intelligible ground for recognizing differences between conceptual schemes. It fails to explain the difference between conceptual schemes because it involves appealing to a common ontology. However, recognizing differences among ontologies is precisely what inscrutability of reference (ontological relativity) rules out. Nor could organization of experience be what grounds our ability to recognize differences between conceptual schemes, for the notion of organizing pluralities presupposes common principles of individuation. Again, if inscrutability of reference obtains, that isn't possible.<sup>26</sup>

## 2.2 *Davidson's Rationalism–Anti-Rationalism Tension*

From this, I propose that Davidson presupposes the following principle:

Principle D: For any conceptual schemes  $x$  and  $y$ , there is a fact about a difference between  $x$  and  $y$  only if a difference between  $x$  and  $y$  is discernible in principle upon a rational ground.

You know where this is going. Davidson, too, implicitly motivates his arguments with PSR and PII; he's just moving in the opposite direction as Quine. First, Davidson's whole rejection of the idea of a neutral, uninterpreted empirical content beyond all conceptual schemes is, I'd submit, a PSR-driven rejection of brute facts: since we ascertained that there's no way to render the relation of a conceptual scheme to content that stands outside of all conceptual schemes, the existence of neutral, uninterpreted empirical content is inexplicable. But PSR rules out such brute facts, so the scheme–content dualism is illicit.

Second, Davidson's use of PII is evident here, too. Not only would the existence of neutral, uninterpreted empirical content be a brute fact, Della Rocca rightly observes that, on Quine's perspective, we could never ground the purported fact that anyone else operated with a conceptual scheme different than our own.<sup>27</sup> While Quine doubles down on the inexplicability of differences between absolute meanings, leading him to posit a multiplicity of conceptual schemes to preserve relative differences between meanings, Davidson doubles down on the inexplicability of differences between conceptual schemes. In fact, Davidson rejects conceptual schemes precisely because there is "no intelligible basis on which it can be said that schemes are different" (or one, for that matter).<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps lamentably, perhaps laudably, Davidson's demand for intelligibility doesn't push him over the precipice into radical monism; he doesn't opt to deny both differences in meaning and differences between conceptual schemes. Instead, he performs a Moorean shift, rejecting the

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25. Davidson, 16–17.

26. Davidson, 14. Quine, "Ontological Relativity," 34.

27. Della Rocca, *Parmenidean Ascent*, 174–5.

28. Davidson, "Very Idea," 20.

premise that originally compelled Quine to posit a multiplicity of conceptual schemes: Davidson simply denies that indeterminacy of meaning or translation reflects a failure to capture significant distinctions.<sup>29</sup>

Yet, since Quine's Principle Q involved PII, a Moorean shift alone wouldn't warrant Davidson's rejection of Quine's conclusions unless Davidson rejected Principle Q. And the difficulty with *that* move would be that there wouldn't be a principled basis for rejecting Principle Q while still maintaining PII or Principle D, both of which Davidson's very critique of Quine so intimately involved. Accordingly, Davidson supplements his Moorean shift with a "principle of charity," according to which we should attribute the maximum number of shared beliefs to our interlocutors. For Davidson, the principle of charity is a transcendental precondition for the possibility of disagreement, for genuine disagreement presupposes some area of agreement.<sup>30</sup> Because affirmations are two-variable vectors of meaning and belief, the principle of charity enables linguists to hold the belief variable sufficiently constant to allow them to solve for meaning. The possibility of determinate interpretation or translation is saved.

### 3 The Last Dogma of Empiricism

#### 3.1 *The Ungroundedness of Multiplicity*

A brief recap. The rationalist assumption that if a difference is unintelligible, it is unreal propels both Quine's and Davidson's arguments. Upon denying that there are absolute facts about different meanings, Quine seeks to make experience of differentiated meaning possible by his thesis of relativity, grounding differences in meanings in different conceptual schemes. Davidson, in contrast, seeks to make experience of differentiated meaning possible by grounding differences in a deeper unity. However, I fear that such quests to ground multiplicity are unsatisfactory. At least in the long run. Just as Davidson discarded Quine's scheme-content dualism because, however "holistic" on the inside, it still rubbed up against brute facts in the form of neutral, uninterpreted empirical content, so too might any multiplicity-admitting theory, however rational on the inside, scrape against brute multiplicity at its edges.

We could abstract the differences from Principles Q and D to derive the more robustly rationalist Principle Z (because 'Z' sounds enigmatic and because, as we'll see, it'll expose the *true* Last Dogma):

Principle Z: For any  $x$  and  $y$ , there is a fact about a difference between  $x$  and  $y$  only if a difference between  $x$  and  $y$  is intelligible upon a rational ground.

To the extent that any multiplicity is real, not just multiplicity about meaning, it seems to be ungrounded. Here's an original yet Bradley-inspired regress argument to bolster my claim that tolerating multiplicity means tolerating brute facts. Suppose that  $a$  and  $b$  are numerically distinct yet nonetheless unified (related) in some way, analogous to the unity-in-multiplicity that the

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29. Donald Davidson, "Belief and the Basis of Meaning," *Synthese* 27, no. 3/4 (1974): 321–2.

30. Davidson, "Very Idea," 19.

components of propositions exemplify (more on unity momentarily). If there is an ontological ground for the unity-in-multiplicity of  $a$  and  $b$ , as Principle Z mandates, it seems that the ground would either be simple (exhibiting no internal differentiation) or complex (exhibiting internal differentiation).

Suppose first that the ontological ground is simple; in this case, for all I can tell, the (putative) distinctness of  $a$  and  $b$  would either be (i) ungrounded, (ii) unreal, or (iii) depend on an intermediate ground between  $a$  and  $b$  and the simple ground. Given Principle Z, a simple ground couldn't obviously ground the distinctness of  $a$  and  $b$  if there were nothing in the ground in virtue of which entities grounded in it would be numerically distinct. Either the (putative) distinctness of  $a$  and  $b$  would be erased in virtue of being grounded in the same, simple entity or the numerical distinctness of  $a$  and  $b$  would need to come from someplace else. But if the distinctness of  $a$  and  $b$  were (at least partially) grounded in some intermediate ground between  $a$  and  $b$  and the original simple ground, this intermediate ground would itself either be simple or complex. If simple, the ungrounded–unreal–intermediate ground trilemma just resurfaces, threatening an infinite regress.

Suppose instead that the ontological ground is complex. Perhaps it itself is a unity-in-multiplicity with (at least) two components  $c$  and  $d$ , hence perfectly suited to ground the numerical distinctness of  $a$  and  $b$ . However, this pushes the problem of grounding multiplicity back a step. For the reasons just adduced, the (putative) distinctness of  $c$  and  $d$  in the ground would either be (i) ungrounded, (ii) unreal, or (iii) depend on an intermediate ground between  $c$  and  $d$  and a further, but simple, ground. This throws the ally of multiplicity back on all the problems raised in the previous paragraph. Hence, if unity-in-multiplicity is grounded, we're up against a dilemma: If the ground is simple, an infinite number of intermediate partial grounds is required to bridge the gap between numerical difference and the simple ground. But if the ground is complex, then *that* ground itself requires a ground, which is either simple (impaling us on the first horn) or complex (initiating a vicious regress of complex grounds). If we opt out of a regress, paired with Principle Z, either multiplicity is ungrounded or unreal.

Why not ungrounded? Perhaps my regress merely points to an inevitable facet of any metaphysical theory: if multiplicity is (at least partially) real, it must be taken as primitive, basic. Put differently, enduring a smidgen of anti-rationalism could, in the long run, be more rational than outright rationalism. In reply, my suggestion is that metaphysically ungrounded differences aren't compatible with unity. Insofar as a metaphysical theory cannot give an account of how or why  $a$  and  $b$  are numerically distinct yet unified (such as by producing a distinctness-preserving ground for that unity), the theory implies the kind of radical atomism demanded by anti-rationalism, even if that radical atomism only brushes up against the outermost extremities of a theory. While anti-rationalist philosophers might wish to insist that the relational unity of ' $aRb$ ' (viz., " $a$  bears some relation to  $b$ ") is explanatorily primitive, their ontology, seen in the widest possible scope, still implies, I'd maintain, that reality is ultimately composed of some collection of atoms ' $a, b, \dots$ '. Philosophers who invoke primitive unity aren't merely unentitled to their



primitive unity; my regress shows that their implicit ontology *eradicates* their primitive unity. Any unity attributed to *a* and *b* would be by mere fiat.<sup>31</sup>

I submit, then, that the *true* Last Dogma of Empiricism isn't Quine's scheme-content dualism, *pace* Davidson. Ironically for Davidson, the true Last Dogma is this: *that there are dualisms*. On consistent rationalist grounds, the Last Dogma is evidently false given the radical monism rationalism entails. But even on empiricist-friendly anti-rationalist grounds, barring recourse to fiat unity, the Dogma is false to the extent that making sense of a *dualism* presupposes some degree of unity—at least the modicum of unity required to count to two. At very least, there must be relations between things such that discrete things could be subsumed under a numerical concept. If the Last Dogma is false, for anyone to be entitled to unity-in-multiplicity at all, the rationalism–anti-rationalism dialectic must be transcended.

### 3.2 *Acosmism, Atomism, and Skepticism*

Predictably enough, jettisoning the Last Dogma of Empiricism erases, in some fashion, the possibility of experience. Insofar as my regress exploits both poles of the rationalism–anti-rationalism dialectic by pushing each to greater consistency, we're faced with two equally bleak options. Ramping up rationalism's explanatory demand eliminates any ground for numerical difference, per Principle Z; hence, on rationalist terms, numerical differences (indeed, numerical designations) are unreal.<sup>32</sup> And pushing anti-rationalism full way eliminates any ground for unity between numerically distinct things. The possibility of finite experience is thereby imperiled either by acosmism or atomism: if no numerical designations apply to reality, finite perceivers are unreal; but if there is no unity of any kind, finite perceivers cannot think (since thinking at minimum requires the unity-in-multiplicity which predication exemplifies). Either way, finite perceivers couldn't be the ones constructing the appearance of unity-in-multiplicity, let alone its actuality. Rationalism annihilates *experiencing*, anti-rationalism annihilates *reasoning*.<sup>33</sup>

But what if the deleterious effects of pure rationalism and pure anti-rationalism were eased by setting the two in correlative tension? Why not permit some degree of rationalism (to supply unity) and an inversely proportional degree of anti-rationalism (to supply diversity)? Setting rationalism and anti-rationalism in correlative tension, as I suggested that most philosophers do, couldn't give us our hoped-for appearance of unity-in-multiplicity, much less its actuality. If anything, blending rationalism and anti-rationalism threatens to compound the problems with each pole taken individually.

Even worse, there'd remain the vexing question of how the mutually displacing principles could ever be set in fruitful correlation. My regress threatens to show itself again: If rationalism correlates rationalism and anti-rationalism, then the difference between the two would be absorbed into undifferentiated unity. The correlation can't come from anti-rationalism because then, *ex hypothesi*, there would be an ultimate and irreconcilable chasm between

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31. Bertrand Russell offered essentially this response to his own version of Bradley's regress with his theory of relating-relations. See Bertrand Russell, *Principles of Mathematics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 99–100.

32. Della Rocca, *Parmenidean Ascent*, 77–82.

33. Inspiration for this argument is due in part Lovejoy, *Great Chain of Being*, 331–2.

rationalism and anti-rationalism that arises from the brute difference between them. The only way, as far as I can see, to “solve” the problem of unity-in-multiplicity by correlating rationalism and anti-rationalism would be to assert that the relation between them is primitive. But, again, insofar as our ontology at its most fundamental would either seem to collapse into unqualified monism or atomism, bare fiat unity (or multiplicity) would contradict the metaphysical implications of our theory.

My reasoning thus far generates a deeply skeptical scenario, the kind that James Conant dubs “Kantian.” While Conant’s “Cartesian” skepticism asks whether what we take to be possible is actual (e.g., how we could know whether a particular interpretation is correct), Kantian skepticism asks how what we take to be actual is possible (e.g., how it is possible for anyone to so much as mean anything).<sup>34</sup> If I’m right that rationalism and anti-rationalism equally imply that there cannot exist any (finite) perceivers, either because of a total dearth of diversity or of unity, yet there is nevertheless appearance of unity-in-multiplicity, how can we explain this appearance? Given rationalism, the appearance of unity-in-multiplicity seemingly shouldn’t obtain, since there is no one to be appeared to, let alone appeared to by ostensible differences. So, for the very appearance of difference to be possible, it seems that there must exist differences somewhere. Anti-rationalism doesn’t fare much better, since it’s not clear how discrete, unity-less atoms (*viz.*, us) could be conscious either of synchronic or diachronic diversity unless there is *something* to unify experience. But, unless we reject the atomistic hypothesis, that unifier can’t be us. Again, for the very appearance of unity to be possible, it seems that there must be unity somewhere.

### 3.3 *A Transcendental Solution?*

At such junctures, a transcendental argument could be handy. Transcendental arguments employ a retorsive anti-skepticism strategy in which something a skeptic doubts is proven to be a necessary precondition for the possibility of that very doubt.<sup>35</sup> Although the effectiveness of such arguments in answering some varieties of skepticism is seriously suspect since it’s often possible to weaken the conclusion of the argument from a claim about reality to a mere claim about what we must believe about reality,<sup>36</sup> a transcendental argument seeking to unearth the possibility conditions for the sheer *appearance* of unity-in-multiplicity would evade this problem. Specifically, performatively self-falsifying statements are a subclass of self-defeating claims which, when asserted, directly and conclusively prove their own falsity (at least given certain background assumptions).<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, despite the prejudice against them, there may still be a

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34. James Conant, “Varieties of Skepticism,” in *Wittgenstein and Scepticism*, ed. Denis McManus (Florence: Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), 99, 101.

35. Cf. Robert Stern, “Introduction,” in *Transcendental Arguments: Problems and Prospects*, ed. Robert Stern (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3.

36. For a survey of the reasons behind this, see Stern, “Introduction,” 5–8. For more involved criticisms, see Barry Stroud, “Transcendental Arguments,” *Journal of Philosophy* 65, no. 9 (May 1968) and Robert Stern, *Transcendental Arguments and Skepticism: Answering the Question of Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 43–65.

37. Adrian Bardon, “Performative Transcendental Arguments,” *Philosophia* 33 (2005): 71–73, 83–88. Bardon’s conclusions are anticipated in the literature. See Stroud, “Transcendental Arguments,” 253–4 and Stern, *Transcendental Arguments*, 56–58.

use for transcendental arguments in metaphysics. And since denying that reality exhibits unity-in-multiplicity entails, as I've remarked, that nobody exists to make that denial, our quandary seems promising matter for a transcendental argument against Kantian skepticism.

But problems remain. Even when a candidate for a transcendental principle is proven by the performative self-falsifying nature of its denial, the trouble is to produce a principle that isn't merely negative but has positive ontological content. When the very question is what grounds unity-in-multiplicity, it is insufficient simply to conclude that reality must exhibit unity-in-multiplicity on the basis that denying that thesis entangles someone in performative self-falsification. This wouldn't offer a ground at all. It would merely point to what phenomenon demands grounding if the appearance of unity-in-multiplicity is to be made theoretically possible. A truly viable answer to our unstable Kantian skepticism would need to *explain* how unity-in-multiplicity is possible, not just assert that it *is* possible.

Further, even when these desiderata are met, there are (at least) two residual problems: the "how" and the "why." First, a transcendental arguer would need to make the intelligible how this ground related to the rest of reality. But this is a tall order. How could alleged principles about an ultimate fact that presumably transcends the multiplicity of finite things be *known* to be a necessary condition for their reality?<sup>38</sup> Second, a transcendental arguer would need to make intelligible why a purported ground is the only admissible ground. Again, given rationalism and PSR, if more than one ground were so much as *possible*, the whole problem that Quine and Davidson pressed would pop up again: there would be no rational basis upon which a decision could be made that would allow us to conclude that a candidate transcendental principle is the *actual* ground, or there might not even be an intelligible basis upon which to distinguish between different possible grounds.<sup>39</sup> Principle Z once more.

Unless and until a unique ground were identified, the possibility of the very appearance of differentiated meaning is imperiled, and philosophy is engulfed in an abyss of mystery. Either no finite perceivers exist to experience the illusion of differentiated meaning and experience, or reality's total absence of unity requires that thinking is impossible. Upon the skeptical scenario I've presented in this paper, it's unclear how to ground not only the possibility of differentiated or unified meaning but of differentiated or unified being. To that extent, our sheer ability to count is left unaccounted for. Unless there's some way to salvage the Last Dogma, the very idea of an *n*th dogma is unintelligible.<sup>40</sup>

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