

3 Rational Theory Building: Beyond Modern Enthusiasm and Postmodern Refusal (A Pragmatist Philosophical Offering)

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The Quest for a Theory of Rationality

J. Wentzel van Huyssteen's most important contribution to the science-religion dialogue may be his relentless insistence that a theory of rationality logically precedes and is implicitly presumed in any proposal for how science and religion relate to one another. This has been a prominent theme in his writings from the time of his first English publications. I have not attempted to read his earlier writings, but, judging from the titles alone, he has been fascinated with the question of rationality since the beginning of his career.

Van Huyssteen is completely correct, of course. There has been an immense amount of premature speculation and hand-waving suggestions about science-religion relations. But the theory of rationality needed to make sense of and evaluate the strategic proposals and methodological suggestions has usually been absent. So he has devoted himself to constructing a theory of rationality against which it is possible to articulate a model of science-religion relations and to evaluate competing proposals.

The first major English work of van Huyssteen in which this interest appears is *Theology and the Justification of Faith: Constructing Theories in Systematic Theology*. This book was written in Afrikaans, published in 1986, and then translated by Henry Snijders into English for publication in 1989.¹ The

1. J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Theology and the Justification of Faith: Constructing Theories in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989). English translation by Henry F. Snijders from Afrikaans, *Teologie as Kritiese Geloofsverantwoording: Teorievorming in die Sistematiese Teologie* (Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council, 1986). Page numbers given parenthetically in the text refer to the English edition.

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aim of the book is to establish the possibility of a critical-realist approach to theory-building in theology. For this purpose, van Huyssteen takes philosophy of science to be an indispensable dialogue partner because it is there, he believes, that the question of human rationality is most sharply and usefully posed in our time: “Accounting critically for their faith presupposes that theologians must be prepared to reflect on their own thought processes, and this places upon them the fundamental task of relating the essence of their faith to the question of the very nature of rationality, as posed in contemporary philosophy of science” (xii).

Closely associated with his commitment to interdisciplinary conversation is a strong aversion to forms of theology that withdraw from such conversation, retreating into an isolated rational ghetto where, “totally ignorant of the process of theory formation,” they “lay claim to an indisputable scriptural theology or theology of revelation. The attempts of theologians to describe the nature of theology and theological knowledge without taking into account the problems implicit in this thematics in terms of philosophy of science will therefore have to be exposed as illusory” (xvii). Both convictions — the importance of interdisciplinary engagement and the self-deceptive character of theology that takes refuge in a private world of supernatural authority — run throughout his writings. They are complemented by an intense refusal to reduce the theological task to just what science can recognize as rational. Van Huyssteen does affirm that science is “our best example of the cognitive dimension of rationality at work,”² but never to the exclusion of the rational character of theology. In later writings, he appears to affirm a greater parity between the rationality of theology and the rationality of science. His most developed view is that theology shares rational resources with the sciences and every other kind of reflective human activity, while maintaining distinctive subject matter and purposes.

In *Theology and the Justification of Faith*, van Huyssteen lays out his understanding of a critical-realist model of rationality that pertains to systematic theology, understood as a theory-building activity that furnishes a critical account of the Christian faith. He draws the criteria for such a model of rationality especially from what the philosophy of science has taught us about rationality. The three key criteria are the “reality depiction,” the “critical and problem-solving ability,” and the “constructive and progressive nature” of theological statements (146). Of course, van Huyssteen carefully interprets each criterion against the background of prominent debates in the philosophy

2. J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 255-256.

of science. For example, his review of critical realism in philosophy of science leads him to stress the elements of theoretical fertility and explanatory success over an extended period of time as the fundamental justification for claiming that theoretical terms refer in science and theology alike. Van Huyssteen also frames each criterion in a way that is sensitive to the special character of the theological task. For example, he argues that reality depiction includes faithful reflection on the many social forms of Christian faith, thereby building contextual sensitivity into his model of theological rationality.

After he settled at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1992, van Huyssteen's sensitivity to theological context took a fascinating turn as he began to engage Postmodernity. His goal was still to articulate a theory of rationality that makes sense of both theological and scientific activity. But now he aimed to split the difference between two disastrous distortions of human rational activity. On the one hand, modernist foundationalism mistakenly supposes that certainty, objectivity, and universality are the marks of rationality, after which theology appears to be a thoroughly irrational activity. On the other hand, extreme forms of postmodern anti-foundationalism are skeptical of every universal claim, including criteria for distinguishing better from worse in any domain of rational activity, after which theology is cast into the outer darkness of utter relativism. Between these two extremes lies a third option, according to van Huyssteen: postfoundationalism. His postfoundationalist account of rationality shares the sensitivity of postmodernism to the terrible way certainty, objectivity, and universality can function as powerful clubs to suppress unwanted and awkward viewpoints, particularly those of socially and economically oppressed portions of humanity that tend to challenge the political and economic status quo. It also shares modernism's interest in taking account of the success of the natural sciences. Yet it does this without supposing rationality is either a matter of epistemic certainty and universality or a self-deceptive struggle against the strangulation of unlimited relativism.

This theme appears prominently in van Huyssteen's *Duet or Duel: Theology and Science in a Postmodern World* (1998), and also in his contributions to *Rethinking Theology and Science: Six Models for the Current Dialogue* (1998).³ Can there be a theory of rationality that encompasses theological and scientific activity while avoiding the extremes of foundationalism and relativism? Can a theory of rationality have the kind of generality van Huyssteen seeks

3. J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Duet or Duel: Theology and Science in a Postmodern World*, The 1998 Diocese of British Columbia John Albert Hall Lectures at the Center for Studies in Religion and Society in the University of Victoria (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998); J. Wentzel van Huyssteen and Niels Henrik Gregersen, eds., *Rethinking Theology and Science: Six Models for the Current Dialogue* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

for it without falling prey to the postmodernist critique of universality and of the oppressive metanarratives that universal discourses promote? Can van Huyssteen articulate such a theory without venturing into the realm of metaphysics, which is off-limits for post-Kantian foundationalism in both philosophy and theology, as well as taboo for postmodernism's anti-logocentric, anti-ontotheologic, anti-metanarrativistic, skeptical, relativistic micro-culture?

The clearest and most comprehensive statement to date of van Huyssteen's theory of rationality, as well as its greatest test, is *The Shaping of Rationality: Toward Interdisciplinarity in Theology and Science*.⁴ It is this definitive statement that I shall engage in the remainder of this essay. It is extraordinarily rich, however, so I will only be picking up on a few aspects of it: van Huyssteen's positioning of his proposal between or beyond Modernity and Postmodernity, his treatment of generality in theory building, and his metaphysically restrained approach to the themes of truth and reality.

I shall point out that Van Huyssteen's epistemological project is similar to the epistemological project of the early pragmatists Charles Peirce and John Dewey in important respects. This is surprising in view of the fact that van Huyssteen does not deal with these intellectual forebears at all. He discusses the neo-Pragmatist Richard Rorty in *The Shaping of Rationality* but Rorty's project is as different from the early pragmatists' perspective as it is from van Huyssteen's point of view. He mentions Robert Neville's *The Highroad around Modernism*, a work in the Peirce-Dewey tradition, but does not discuss its proposal for understanding rationality, which in many respects harmonizes with van Huyssteen's work. These similarities ramify van Huyssteen's labors, but they also show that his project has neglected roots at least a century old. While van Huyssteen's appreciation for the complexities of science and theology as social phenomena is more sophisticated than these pragmatist forerunners, they may still offer some insights into van Huyssteen's project.

The most important similarity is that van Huyssteen and the early pragmatists all have fully postfoundationalist (in van Huyssteen's terminology) conceptions of human rationality, rooted firmly in the biology and sociality of the human species. The most notable difference is that the early pragmatists offer a clearer answer than van Huyssteen to the question of how personal convictions and local contexts combine with universal features of experience through intersubjective conversation to produce theories of aspects of

4. J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *The Shaping of Rationality: Toward Interdisciplinarity in Theology and Science* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). Page numbers are given parenthetically in the text.

reality that not only work pragmatically but also are true and refer to a reality to some degree independent of human minds. Achieving clear answers to such questions demands, now as always, metaphysical reflection — in the sense of a maximally general form of thinking that is intensely sensitive to the contours of experience. The early pragmatists' hypothetical, fallibilist approach to metaphysics shows that a highly generalized form of thinking is possible within van Huyssteen's understanding of rationality. Their theoretical work shows that metaphysics can help to diagnose the contrast between the universal and local aspects of reason as well as its different ways of working in science, the humanities, and the arts. So van Huyssteen's implicit refusal to offer metaphysical accounts of key features of human rationality is a puzzling interruption of a natural trajectory within his thought, along which he has already traveled a considerable distance.

The early pragmatists, and I with them, would urge van Huyssteen onwards. The apparent need for this urging suggests that van Huyssteen's project may be in thrall to postmodern suspicion of metaphysics, silently refusing metaphysical theory building even when his insights invite and demand it, and when nothing he says prevents it. The early pragmatists offer hypothetical, fallibilist, experientially based, and contextually sensitive forms of metaphysical theorizing that are every bit as hostile to modernist totalizing discourses as van Huyssteen's project is, and assimilate the relativizing force of postmodern critiques of human theorizing every bit as successfully as van Huyssteen's project does.

The Successes and Failures of Foundationalist Epistemology, Revisited

Early Modernity and especially the Enlightenment marked an exciting period in the perennial western philosophical search for an understanding of rationality. It is too easy, however correct, to attack this excitement for naïve hubris. Indeed, many cheap philosophical points have been scored in just this way. But it is important also to notice the reasons modern philosophers believed it had become possible for them to advance beyond medieval philosophy's view of rationality as artful judgment within an overarching theological framework that rooted human reason in the logos structure of divinely created reality.

Certainty is always desirable for creatures prone to worry, with the capacity to imagine alternative scenarios, who constantly confront conflicting opinions on issues that profoundly affect happiness and safety. But certainty

was not the overriding goal in the Middle Ages that it was to become in the seventeenth century. In the medieval context, the pervasive assumptions about human rationality were that even its most confident product was dependent on divine creation, which established harmony between human thought and the knowable world, and subject to divine revelation, which established knowledge of the otherwise unknowable world and trumped speculation about this world. Ideally reason harmonizes perfectly with revelation. How was this harmony conceived? Human reason can range broadly across many questions and subject matters, in principle, yet not with equal confidence or competence. When reason is strongest, producing agreement among experts, revealed truth is in perfect harmony. When reason struggles to produce consensus, revelation lights the way with its dispute-resolving power. In theological matters, particularly, the speculative exercise of human rationality was always a kind of incursion into territory where revelation had the final word, through the divinely established authority of the Christian church.

This was a sensible and practical arrangement. It defined basic rules for understanding how human rational activity both connected and failed to connect with the created world. For example, mathematicians could produce proofs in geometry, thus disclosing the basic logos structure of reality that always lay beneath the surface of ordinary reality just waiting for reason to discover it. But theologians could only prove the existence of God; they could not deduce from nature or reason unaided by revelation much of importance about the divine nature. This arrangement also provided basic rules for supporting reasonably clear distinctions among social institutions and activities. For example, human rationality could not penetrate politics and economics to any great degree so it needed to defer to, and operate within, the divinely ordained social arrangements of Christendom, with its class hierarchies and significant merging of political and religious authority.

Early modern science and the mathematics that facilitated it appeared to change the rules about the proper domains of operation of human reason. René Descartes famously dreamed of a metaphysics that would extend the apodictic certainty of mathematics to knowledge of natural, human, and divine realities. The new possibility of such certain knowledge may still depend on God, in some remotely ultimate sense, but proximately reason could operate sure-footedly in domains that, until this time, had been subject to the confusions of endless speculation and intractable disagreement. The key was to find in physics, psychology, and metaphysics the correlates of the axioms of mathematics. Descartes called these “clear and distinct ideas” and believed they could be discovered through a kind of disciplined meditative process that attempted to doubt everything. When in this process the corrosive pow-

ers of doubt fail, the metaphysician will have discovered an idea that possesses the same shining certainty that Euclid's axioms of geometry inspire in the mathematician. Once the metaphysician assembled enough clear and distinct ideas, they could function as axioms in a deductive system of knowledge that reaches far beyond mathematics to account for human reason itself, for the reality of a world outside the human mind, and even for the existence and goodness of God. Indeed, this was the purpose of Descartes' *Meditations* and, in his judgment and in the judgment of many others, its achievement.

This bathtub-eureka approach to metaphysics was incredibly compelling at the time and only a bloody-minded refusal to appreciate contextual factors in philosophy would harp on its shortcomings. It would turn out that identifying clear and distinct ideas was much more difficult than Descartes suspected, that the logical import of axioms for metaphysical systems was unremittingly vague, and that even the mathematical-axiomatic model for the whole enterprise was fatally flawed. Yet modernity's epistemological infatuation with certainty, with foundationalism, and with the universal relevance of decontextualized philosophical argumentation was born in this grand adventure. Of course, these epistemological virtues (or vices) were not new in themselves. It was the infatuation with them and the optimistic faith in their capacity to bring new knowledge that was new. This infatuation lasted a long time and, in many ways, persists even today, which is to say even after the rediscovery of rationality as an act of judgment that expresses a particular perspective and inherent interests, that has political and economic contexts and effects, and that helps human beings dynamically adjust to a complex natural and social environment. In fact, it was surely in part the political promise of loosening the authoritarian grip of religious institutions that made strong claims for reason's autonomy so compelling, even among profoundly religious philosophers.

The overthrow of medieval assumptions about rationality was a civilization-transforming event, entangled with the birth of nation states and partially managed economies, the birth of new social institutions that brought widespread education and made democracy thinkable, the birth of modern science with its technological fruits, and the birth of modern medicine with its astonishing efficacy. There are several hallowed iconic stories of this change whose repetition serves to legitimate it, such as Galileo's fight with the Catholic Church over the organization of the solar system, Newton's apple and the invention of the theory of gravity, and the key axiom of Descartes' metaphysics: "I think therefore I am." Each symbol is an historical caricature, of course, and this testifies to the importance both of the change and of our struggle to understand it.

The change is impressive. Whatever causes or enables or makes use of

this transformation will have the cultural prestige in modern societies that was reserved for the Christian Church in the medieval world. The most prominent recipient of the prestigious mantle of cultural authority is modern science, and especially the natural sciences, which epitomize the rational in Modernity. Science is a cooperative venture that produces theories capable of winning unprecedented cross-cultural agreement, that seeks out its mistakes and corrects its theories as needed, that makes exciting discoveries about the natural and human worlds, that inspires life-changing technological marvels from electricity to blood transfusions, and that effectively resists the arbitrary imposition of political and religious authority. It turns out, of course, that philosophers and scientists alike overreached in their claims for modern science. We have discovered through the philosophy of science and through experience that theory choice in the sciences is a prodigiously complex social feat with uncertain rational standing, that the boundaries between science and other rational enterprises are quite blurred, and that the technological products of science are sometimes pernicious. Yet none of that overturns the significance of Modernity for understanding rationality.

Modernity has delivered on its claims for rationality in science, and in a host of other areas, in a stunning way. We should pay attention to its lessons. Modernity teaches us that medieval philosophy greatly underestimated the power of human reason and seriously misjudged the power of religious authority to trump it through divine revelation. It teaches us that carefully delimited inquiries that win cross-cultural agreement are possible, though only in some domains, and to that extent there is great value in seeking general formulations of our theories about nature and human beings, including cross-cultural and trans-historical formulations. It teaches us that, despite its foundational and universal aspirations, even the best theories — in science as in other forms of inquiry — are always subject to revision and must seek out their own flaws in a ceaseless quest for refinement. It teaches us that we are wise to be suspicious of the arbitrary imposition of religious and political authority and that nothing can extinguish the simple candle of truth no matter how violent the attack. Just as Modernity could not completely overthrow the best insights of the Middle Ages, so must Postmodernity accept these lessons and strive to account for the best insights of Modernity about human rationality.

Beyond Modernity and Postmodernity

I think van Huyssteen would agree with this formulation of the successes and failures of the Modern project in epistemology. Doubtless he would trim here

and stretch there. But I intend this quick summary to help diagnose a double bias against Modernity and Postmodernity that I think I notice in van Huyssteen's writings on postfoundationalism. On the one hand, van Huyssteen's exposition of the modern epistemological project emphasizes the postmodern critique of Modernity's grandiose self-assessment while spending less time and energy than is warranted on the real achievements of Modernity in substantiating its claims for universal and trans-cultural aspects of human rationality through scientific and other forms of organized intellectual inquiry. He certainly resists extreme postmodernism's thoughtless plunge into "sheer relativism" but the grounds for this resistance, which I have just sketched, are disproportionately muted relative to the recounting of Modernity's failures of self-understanding, which I have also sketched. On the other hand, van Huyssteen proposes a theory of rationality that is more universal in its implications that he appears ready to admit. It is a courteously presented theory, whose rhetorical framing appears designed to win the hearts of mainstream postmodern thinkers, along with the mainstream of anti-imperialist scientists and culture-engaging theologians. Van Huyssteen reserves his severe criticisms for extreme postmodernists, imperialist scientists, and ghetto-dwelling theologians — easy targets relative to the mainstream of thinking about human rationality. But there is more conflict among his moderate audiences than van Huyssteen allows. Just as he understates the real grounds for supporting universal elements in any theory of human rationality, so he overstates the harmony between his theory, which implies such universal elements, and the postmodern refusal of universality even within its mainstream.

Another way of making this point is to reflect on van Huyssteen's central category for diagnosing the conflict between Modernism and Postmodernism: epistemic foundationalism. He claims Modernism affirms it and Postmodernism rejects it. His postfoundationalism is neither fish nor fowl and thus is a welcome relief from a fruitless fight between impossible alternatives. It is easy to appreciate the overcoming of a futile debate. But van Huyssteen remains silent about the very important fact that postfoundationalism was an early-modern discovery. In fact, foundationalism was quickly recognized as a tempting but impossible dream by a steady stream of thoughtful philosophers almost as soon as it was conceived. The early modern philosopher David Hume was already a postfoundationalist in something like van Huyssteen's sense, rejecting the possibility or value of definite foundations for human knowledge, speaking freely of habits of association and interpretation and judgment, and situating human rationality in a biological, historical, cultural framework. The late nineteenth-century American Pragmatists Charles

Peirce and John Dewey were explicitly postfoundationalist in their epistemology, expounding a biological, historical, and cultural framework for understanding rationality that incorporated evolutionary theory, affirmed the fallible and hypothetical character of all theorizing, and prized correction of hypotheses in processes of inquiry. This stream of postfoundationalist philosophers was inspired by solid ancient and medieval wisdom about human rationality, in relation to which Modernist enthusiasm for certainty always seemed, well, enthusiastic. In the final analysis, just as van Huyssteen's postfoundationalism is already an old response to Modernist pretensions, so reading the Modern-Postmodern debate in terms of foundationalism does not reach deeply enough into the disagreement.

The disagreement between Modernity and Postmodernity has been the object of a thousand characterizations, most of them fascinating, including van Huyssteen's unusually sensitive offering. In relation to the epistemological corner of the civilizational battle that van Huyssteen's *The Shaping of Rationality* engages, I consider it a multifaceted fight over generality and justice, driven by awareness of cultural and religious pluralism, on the one hand, and the need for security and identity, on the other. To be secure and to know oneself and one's people is, in part, to understand the world around us as far as possible in a particular way, namely, through theoretical interpretations of natural and social reality that take in as much as possible while faithfully accounting for variations and differences. But this is all very complex and something simpler is often more immediately useful. In practice, the quest for security and identity demands a narrative interpretation of reality that minimizes complexities for the sake of maximizing its orienting and action-supporting power. The awareness of cultural and religious pluralism confronts this need with another need, to register details of difference and disagreement faithfully, refusing to ignore complexities. Every time theory building aims for generality, it risks delivering on the need for security and identity at the cost of fidelity to details. And whenever theory building aims to do justice to the details of variation, the chances of a satisfying general interpretation are greatly reduced. The modern epistemological project, whether foundationalist or postfoundationalist, stresses the possibility and value of generality in theory building. The postmodern epistemological project is primarily a watchdog enterprise, pointing out in the name of justice and honesty the failures of the quest for general theories, and especially their disastrous moral and social ramifications.

The disagreement between Modernity and Postmodernity is haunted by shame — over colonialism, over paternalism, over expansionist political and economic ideologies, over the ill effects of consumption and consumerism,

over the ecological and social disasters of technology, and over the ongoing failure to transform the world into the disease-free and hunger-free Shangri-La that the modern west pictured. The haunting will end, but not when we get our philosophy of human rationality straight, not when the Western world pays reparations for its colonialist adventures in slavery and exploitation, not when religion either goes away or reclaims its former control over human societies, not when the western world finally imparts its life-transforming wisdom to the rest of the world, and certainly not when the western world humbly withdraws into its own territory and leaves the rest of the world alone. Rather, the haunting will end when we listen to the non-western world closely enough to realize not only that we have a lot to learn from other cultures but also that we actually strongly disagree with an enormous amount of what non-Western people do and believe, from worldviews to religion, from medical treatments to child-rearing practices, from politics to economics. Shame abates in this case when the West notices its particularity, overcomes its embarrassment (as if it must hide the fact that most of its people actually prefer living the way they do), becomes comfortable with being what it is and can be, and articulates that respectfully in relation to real knowledge of the Other with which it remains in dialogue.

Shame is a powerful force in western consciousness at the present time, particularly among the well-informed intelligentsia. Liberalism in politics has lost its way because it is guilt-ridden and does not know how to assert itself without multiplying its sins. Conservatism in politics is dangerous because it is in denial about being guilt-ridden and asserts itself with populist bluster as if there were never much to feel guilty about in the first place. Even philosophical debates in epistemology can be haunted by shame, to the point that we might understate the intellectual weaknesses of a postmodern perspective, lest we find ourselves attacking our own conscience. There is a lot to be ashamed about, to be sure. But we overlook at our peril Postmodernity's double role as the raiser of consciousness about past western sins and also as the conveyor of paralyzing, even if well-earned, guilt and shame.

I appreciate van Huyssteen's courteous entertaining of the postmodern critique of modern understandings of rationality, and I sympathize to a considerable degree. But I think Postmodernity is deeply mistaken, in its own guilt-ridden way, about the possibility and value of generality in theory building. I think that van Huyssteen only truly opposes extreme postmodernists whose universal relativism is already self-defeating, and that he meekly overlooks the deep error of mainstream postmodern thought on rationality. It is every bit as large an error and every bit as morally disastrous as the modern overconfidence in generality that neglects fidelity to details and contexts.

Van Huyssteen should attack Postmodernity at its very guilt-ridden heart, just as he accepts its attack on the ignorant enthusiasm that haunts the house of much modern epistemology.

Generality, Abstraction, and Universality

“Generalizations are empirically flat footed, low energy, center-confirming, periphery delegitimizing, abuses of power.” I shall call this the “Generality Critique.” If the Generality Critique is correct, then it is a victim of its own acuity. The self-referential deconstruction of generalized critiques of generalization is the first reason why intellectuals perpetually suspicious of generalization have to move carefully. I once attended a meeting of the Pacific Coast Theological Society in which a memorable exchange occurred. Someone made a remark about the need for balance between generalizations and details in historical work and noted historian John Dillenberger quietly replied that “Details are everything in history!” — a remark with sufficient weight to close off that phase of the discussion. In context, Dillenberger was pushing back against a perceived rush to generalization, and so the comment was warranted. But, as a matter of fact, while historical scholarship is nothing without attentiveness to details, it is also useless unless it contains generalizations that create understanding of patterns, trends, forces, movements, and styles, and also their failures and exceptions. To rush to pattern recognition is to commit Hegel’s error in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* all over again, whereby details are coerced into the rational pattern, with the more recalcitrant among them simply neglected or deliberately marginalized. But to stay only with details is to produce a meaningless list of events, a kind of senseless recording of what happened. And even a list requires generally applicable categories for its organization. Evidently, the person to whom Dillenberger responded was formally correct: good historical work does indeed balance generalizations and details.

Some people affirming the Generality Critique unconditionally may be taking an extreme point of view for the sake of some larger social and political purpose. Perhaps van Huyssteen would classify them in his “extreme postmodern” camp. But the danger with this is that rhetoric opposed to generality cannot come clean about its own biases and agendas; generality and systematic analysis are required to diagnose them. Others affirming the Generality Critique do so more moderately because they simultaneously make the “Generality Affirmation,” which asserts that “Generalizations are inevitable for human thought and life and thus are valuable when they are formu-

lated artfully.” We might appreciate the moral and political agendas of extremists who blindly critique the very generality they rely on for their moral analyses but most of us prefer the artfulness of the moderates who accept the risk of generalization because of its inevitability and thus seek to generalize skillfully. Van Huyssteen is a moderate in this sense, as are the early pragmatists Peirce, James, and Dewey. Their unapologetic embrace of generality in a characteristically fallibilist form is not present in van Huyssteen, however, and I find this puzzling.

For example, after approving Calvin Schrag’s pragmatic and praxis-oriented approach to rationality, van Huyssteen states that the significance of this is (a) “the complete impossibility to think of rationality in abstract, highly theoretical terms” because (b) “rationality is present and operative in and through the dynamics of our words and deeds, and it is alive and well in our discourses and action” (118; my labels). I think this is misleading, if not inconsistent. I am happy to grant (b), as the early pragmatists did, and as van Huyssteen does. But neither this nor Schrag’s version of pragmatism entails (a). Whether it is possible to think of rationality in abstract, highly theoretical terms must be an empirical matter, on van Huyssteen’s own account. Indeed, whether abstract generalization and highly theoretical constructions are ever possible must be an empirical matter: we have to try and see. A deeply puzzling feature of van Huyssteen’s approach to rationality is his simultaneous embrace of fallibilism in inquiry and yet definitive rejection of abstract generality, high theory, comprehensiveness, and universality. I consider this to prejudge a crucial issue about human rationality and the world in which it arises and seek to know van Huyssteen’s reasons for preemptively settling on the position he takes. As far as I can see, van Huyssteen’s reasons extend only as far as the “(b) entails (a)” reasoning above, which I think is flawed. Van Huyssteen might be correct about (a), and the associated impossibility of abstract generality, high theory, comprehensiveness, and universality. But if he is correct, it is not because it follows from (b) or similar premises. To go further, I would say that van Huyssteen’s own theory of rationality challenges the impossibility expressed in (a): it is a coordinated, systematic series of abstract and highly theoretical generalizations, comprehensive in scope and universal in intent. Merely noticing the biological, historical, and cultural embedding of all human rationality does nothing to interfere either with the possibility of such discourse or with its appearance in van Huyssteen’s own writings.

A more consistent conjunction of the Generality Critique and the Generality Affirmation does not reject abstract generalization or high theory from the outset, as if somehow we just knew what was possible with human rationality in advance of any experience. Rather, alert to the moral and political

and intellectual dangers of generalization but also intrigued by the common features in reality across cultures and eras, we should embrace epistemological fallibilism and also venture both to advance and to correct hypotheses about the rational structures of reality. When we do this, we find that we can generalize in some domains of reality more successfully than in others. For example, generalizing about human nature at the level of emotional dynamics and psychological formation is extremely hazardous while it is more straightforward at the level of the basic glucose-ATP biochemical energy mechanism, which all human beings have in common with most living beings. Generalizing about the right place to put rocks in a garden is not likely to win consensus, no matter how strong the enclosing aesthetic tradition, whereas generalizing about the physical theories that explain why rocks stay put when laid in a garden is an adventure in inquiry that has won massive consensus. Generalizing about moral values across times and eras has been notoriously ineffective and yet more recent anthropological work has discovered some very basic and widespread moral institutions and evolutionary psychology has disclosed a partial basis for them.

Abstractions, generalizations, theories, and systems are not ruled out by a postfoundationalist epistemology, whether van Huyssteen's or the early pragmatists. Postfoundationalism problematizes them and rightly warns their purveyors about lurking moral and political dangers. But it also challenges their detractors to say how they can know what is possible and impossible, in advance, in a theory of rationality or on any other topic. Post-foundationalist epistemology, or in my terminology a pragmatic theory of inquiry,⁵ is more than merely a set of warnings. It is a bracing invitation to allow curiosity a full rein, to formulate hypotheses freely and test them as carefully as the realities of social organization and individual ingenuity permit. It overturns the skeptical rule mongering of philosophers from Kant to Comte to Ayer and situates in a proper context the grave concerns of philosophers from Derrida to Foucault to Lyotard. We can no more stop hypotheses about universal features of reality in this new epistemological world than we can ignore warnings about ideological bias lurking in our abstract theoretical constructions. Whether we can produce any useful generalized theories is an empirical question. And I think it is a question we are entitled to answer in the affirmative, even if it means citing as evidence van Huyssteen's abstract, highly theoretical

5. See Wesley J. Wildman, "The Resilience of Religion in Secular Social Environments: A Pragmatic Analysis," in *Scientific Explanation and Religious Belief: Science and Religion in Philosophical and Public Discourse*, ed. Thomas M. Schmidt and Michael G. Parker (Frankfurt: Mohr-Siebeck, 2005).

theory of rationality that paradoxically dismisses “abstract, highly theoretical” discourse about human reason as impossible.

Truth, Reality, and Empirical Fidelity

The postfoundationalist epistemology of van Huyssteen, and the pragmatic theories of inquiry of the early pragmatists, promote a freedom of fallibilist, hypothetical investigation that makes foundationalists feel queasy for lack of anything solid to stand on and postmodern skeptics indignant because of the embrace of abstract generality and high theory. But pragmatic theories of inquiry are far from unconstrained. Inquiries only produce warranted belief if their hypotheses can be corrected. Problem recognition, hypothesis formation, and theory correction are enormously complex phenomena and require social settings, traditions that stabilize shared values, and cultural resources to create the leisure and materials for inquiry. But with all of this social and psychological fabric in place, there is still no guarantee that even a single hypothesis in a single inquiry is capable of correction. Just as we cannot rule out in advance the possibility of abstract, generalized theories of anything, so we cannot take for granted that the hypothetical process of theory building will find the traction needed to decide that one hypothesis is better than another.

In some inquiries we never do seem to gain the traction required. Yet in others, strangely enough, we do: hypotheses in such domains produce consensus decisions about their adequacy because they can be corrected relatively quickly. Some inquiries encounter the corrective “feedback mechanism” as a booming voice that exercises a decisive and rapid influence on inquiry whereas others hear only a whisper or nothing at all, after which broad consensus is not possible without arbitrariness or coercion. Any serious test of the hypothesis that I can plunge my head through a metal girder using brute force alone will produce serious injury along with decisive results and probably universal consensus that my hypothesis needs modification. Perhaps I first need to meditate, for instance, or eat something special, or at least pray for special powers before trying again, assuming a successful convalescence. But there is no question that something caused all of the qualified observers to conclude that my hypothesis was false and to modify whatever dangerous process of inquiry led to this incident, accordingly.

The idea of correctability — which I call a feedback mechanism to stress its reflexive operation and to register the possibility of its varying in strength — is amply present in the early pragmatists but seems strangely absent in van Huyssteen. This idea is necessary to make sense of truth and reality in science

and theology alike, indeed in all forms of rational inquiry, but it requires metaphysical articulation. This van Huyssteen seems singularly unwilling to provide. This leaves us with an awkward question. We know from van Huyssteen, as he follows Schrag, that “reason is operative in the transversal play of thought and action in the guise of three interrelated moments/phases of communicative praxis, i.e., evaluative critique, engaged articulation, and incursive disclosure” (248).⁶ So we know what reason does. But we do not know from van Huyssteen why reason works. His characterizations of reason’s function are laced through with normative hints about better and worse evaluative critiques, more and less engaged articulation, stronger and weaker forms of incursive disclosure. He readily invokes ideas such as long-term fruitfulness, responsible judgment, intelligibility, optimal understanding, experiential adequacy, and theoretical adequacy (for example, see 115, but these value phrases are richly present in the book). The basis for these norms remains hidden, however, while the entire collection of such normative ideas seems to function as the rhetorical basis for the usage of any one of them. This leaves the careful reader longing for a direct answer to the question, “why does reason work?”

The early pragmatists centralized the idea of correctability in response to their own version of this difficulty. They had a deficient understanding of the social requirements and implications of inquiry but they recognized that variation in this mysterious feedback mechanism accounts for why some inquiries are more effective than others. Any pragmatic argument for realism turns on the fact that a feedback mechanism sometimes corrects some of our hypotheses with enough force to create consensus among qualified experts in the process of carrying out extended, tradition-borne, socially contextualized inquiries. For the pragmatist, in fact, this is the very meaning of reality: the whence of correctability in rational inquiry. This way of thinking recovers the Pythagorean recognition of happy consonance between the logos of human reason and the Logos of reality but in a decidedly more tentative way. The mystery of correctability may be the pragmatist’s basis for speaking of a public, shared reality but the feedback mechanism’s variations in strength make reality seem (pragmatically) fuzzy. This is nowhere more true than in religion but there are elements of it even in fundamental physics, or wherever the feedback mechanism is weak or non-existent.

It is this variability in the experienced strength of the feedback mecha-

6. Van Huyssteen here refers to Calvin O. Schrag, “Transversal Rationality,” in *The Question of Hermeneutics*, ed. T. J. Stapleton (The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), pp. 69ff.

nism that finally and fundamentally explains different disciplinary styles. In fact, for the pragmatic theory of inquiry, science is defined not in the first instance as the study of particular subject matters using particular methods but by conformation of inquiry to the strongest regions of the feedback mechanism. Science is that correlation of social organization and topics of inquiry that is optimized to produce consensus based on clear and strong correctability. This, in turn, helps to nail down what we think of as physical reality in ontology and functional naturalism in methodology. In other words, the pragmatic theory of inquiry recognizes the dependence of inquiry upon this feedback mechanism and makes it the fundamental metaphysical hypothesis in any theory of rationality. After being centralized in this way, the feedback-mechanism hypothesis serves as the fundamental explanation of disciplinary differences, from different forms of social organization to different ways of producing consensus, and from different topics to different methods. This is a metaphysical hypothesis that connects truth and reality, on the one hand, to the function of norms in human traditions of inquiry, on the other.

It follows that there is an answer, compatible with van Huyssteen's post-foundationalist epistemology, to the question of why rationality works. But it is an answer that cannot be articulated without venturing metaphysical hypotheses that are capable of connecting reality to experience and truth to consensus, hypotheses on the order of the feedback-mechanism hypotheses that I have described. Van Huyssteen seems singularly unwilling to entertain such hypotheses (the absence of "truth" in the index of *The Shaping of Rationality* is a mere symbol of this pervasive unwillingness). The result is a significant gap in his theory of human rationality. I have conjectured that van Huyssteen may be unduly swayed by postmodern detractors of general metaphysical theories, and that this is the cause of his paradoxical pronouncement of the impossibility of abstract, highly theoretical accounts of human rationality. I have argued that he should attack postmodernity's preemptive policing of possibilities as urgently as he attacks the naive epistemological enthusiasm of modernity. In other words, he should more completely move beyond the limitations of both, which is simultaneously to recover the insights of each, always present as shadowy reflections within its opposite. Despite positioning his postfoundationalist epistemology between and beyond modernity and postmodernity, I suspect that the epistemology leans perceptibly, but without due reason, toward the postmodern side.