CHAPTER XIV

TOWARD A THEORY OF THE CATEGORIES

I

Kant is clearly not an "empiricist," yet the concept of experience is central to his philosophy. This dissociation of the terms 'empiricism' and 'experience' is an interesting feature of how they have come to be used, not only in the Kantian tradition, but also, for example, in the pragmatic tradition according to John Dewey. The latter, as is well known, equated 'empiricism' with the 'atomistic' sensationalism of Hume and Mill, but used the term 'experience' in the spirit of German idealism and made it the central concept of his naturalistic pragmatism.

Philosophical 'isms' are as difficult to define as their political counterparts, and 'empiricism' is no exception, yet paradigm cases are presented by Hume, Mill and, more recently, by logical positivism. The Wittgenstein of the Tractatus is a particularly interesting case, because although he is clearly, in some respects, in the Humean tradition, he nevertheless conceives of the task of philosophy as that of giving an a priori account of what it is to be an object of empirical knowledge. In this respect he belongs in the tradition of Kant, for whom, as far as theoretical reason is concerned, the task of philosophy is exactly that of explicating the concept of an object of experience. Kant emphasizes that this task does not belong to empirical psychology; like Wittgenstein he conceives of it as a nonempirical enterprise. In effect he is convinced that it is possible to delineate the essential features of anything that could count as an object of empirical knowledge in any possible world, that is, for any finite mind, however different the world it inhabits might be from ours in its generic traits. Notice that these differences between possible worlds would concern not just their histories, but the very qualities, relations, and nomological connections which characterize the objects which make it up. In other words, Kant aimed at delineating the conceptual structure of the most generic features of the concept of an object of experience. Needless to say, however, he was also concerned to understand how these most
generic features take specific form to constitute the concept of an object of an object of human experience.

If we can say, as I think we can, that the pure categories are essential moments in the definition of an object of experience in general, then schemata are to be construed as the differentia which specify these generic moments into the specific categories of a variety of finite mind in its possible world; and the 'schematized categories' described by Kant become the categories involved in the explication of the concept of human experience, or, roughly, the experience of those finite centers of experience which share Space and, particularly, Time as forms of intuition. For, as Kant sees it, the distinctive feature of human experience is that it is experience of a world of spatiotemporal objects. In evaluating this conception, it must be remembered that Kant equates Space and Time with Newtonian Space and Time, and that he would grant that a world of experience might have a structure which, though not in this sense 'spatial' or 'temporal,' has properties which are analogous to the latter in ways which make possible a schematizing of the pure categories and hence which satisfy the abstract requirements of a concept of a world of experience which has been purified of all contingent features.

The points I have been making so far can be summed up in the following statement. Both Kant and Wittgenstein think it possible to give an a priori account of what it is to be an object of empirical knowledge. Obviously the accounts they give differ in interesting ways — ways which reflect the different conceptual resources on which they could draw. For the intervening century saw two intellectual revolutions which have already wrought irreversible changes in the philosopher's environment. Of these revolutions the most important was the impact of evolutionary theory on what are now called "The Life Sciences."

Less important, but by no means insignificant — though its significance has been exaggerated — was the revolution in logical theory which triumphed with the Principia Mathematica of Whitehead and Russell; for both Kant and Wittgenstein took as their point of departure in explicating the concept of an object of empirical knowledge, the forms and operations in terms of which the logical theory of their time interpreted the structure of statements and the validity of inferences.