1. What is "ultimate reality"?

2. "Ultimate reality" is whatever is real in itself, regardless of what we in some way may or may not take to be real in our life-praxis, even validly. (This is what is left of my earlier distinction between what we are obliged to take account of and whatever else we may or may not have to take account of.) Alternatively, "ultimate reality" is what is disclosed as real, or what presents itself as real, in our own self-understanding, as distinct from our life-praxis. Our life-praxis, including even the theory correlative with it, discloses things in their reality for us, not in their reality in themselves. Our self-understanding, on the other hand, discloses ourselves and the world, or ourselves, others, and the whole, in their reality in themselves.

3. But ultimate reality is one thing, the structure of ultimate reality, something else. Metaphysics properly concerns itself, not with ultimate reality, but with its structure. This means that metaphysics properly concerns itself with the necessary conditions of the possibility of our self-understanding, or, if you will, with what we must somehow understand if we understand ourselves at all, whether authentically or inauthentically. In this sense, one could define metaphysics by generalizing appropriately what Bultmann says about "existentialist analysis," namely, that it is "nothing other than the clear and methodical development of the understanding of existence that is given with existence itself." Mutatis mutandis, metaphysics is nothing other than the clear and methodical development of the understanding of ultimate reality, including our own existence, that is given with existence itself. Of course, in both cases, one would need to keep in mind that "understanding" here means understanding of the structure, or essence, of existence, or of ultimate reality, and, therefore, existentialist or metaphysical understanding, as distinct from the existential understanding, or self-understanding, in which existence itself consists.

4. The contribution of Habermas and Apel to this general account is to have explained that and why our life-praxis as human beings is not exhausted by

what Bultmann calls "the 'work thinking' by which we take possession of the world," as important as such thinking certainly is, and as important as are the nomological science and technology that are its "consistent and methodical development." Our life-praxis comprises not only "work-thinking" in this sense, but also the thinking involved in trying to understand and come to an agreement with our fellow workers, i.e., our fellow human beings, as well as the thinking involved in trying to emancipate ourselves and our fellows from the structural bondage, both internal and external, from which we all suffer. Thus, in addition to the nomological natural and social sciences that are the consistent and methodical development of our work thinking, there are both the hermeneutical sciences, including the hermeneutical social sciences, and the unique science that can be called "critical theory." Of course, there is also the science called "philosophy," insofar as philosophy is, or includes, any science at all. By this I mean the reflective analysis of presuppositions—of all the other sciences and of "the forms of life" with which they are correlative—together with the "minimal ethics" implied by these forms of life and sciences. It is precisely this minimal ethics, indeed, that allows "critical theory" to be "critical" in the full and proper sense of critically evaluating the systematic distortions, individual as well as social, of our life-praxis as we presently conduct it.

5. But beyond all this—all that is disclosed of reality as we become acquainted with it through our life-praxis—is the disclosure of reality that takes place through our existential self-understanding and its clear and methodical development by existentialist analysis and metaphysics. As already indicated, metaphysics as such, just like existentialist analysis, is concerned, not with ultimate reality, or ultimate realities, but with its, or their, essential structure—with the concept of "ultimate reality" in general, in the same way in which the object of existentialist analysis is the concept of "(human) existence" in general. Of course, there is a "lived" metaphysics that is prior to and the basis for (namely, by providing the preunderstanding of) the theoretical understanding of

metaphysics proper. Nevertheless, this "lived" metaphysics can and should be made explicit, in critical discussion with the whole of human history and culture, including the history of metaphysics, analogously to the way in which the nomological sciences, natural and social, make explicit the "lived" science and technology of our work-thinking in critical discussion with the history of science and technology. Metaphysics is like the nomological sciences in that they, too, are concerned, not with individual realities—in this case, those that appear in and through our work thinking—but with their essential structure. But whereas the nomological sciences concern themselves with the "nomos" or structure which our external sense perceptions as interpreted by our life-praxis serve to disclose, metaphysics concerns itself with the structure that our internal, nonsensuous perceptions disclose when they are interpreted by our self-understanding. (Even the hermeneutical sciences may be said to concern themselves with structure rather than with individual realities insofar as they abstract from the question of truth or right to focus on the question of meaning, i.e., of understanding. Whether or not what is communicated in a given instance of communication is true or right, it can and must be understood in its meaning; and just this is the proper concern of the hermeneutical sciences, which, in their own way, seek, as Bultmann says, an "objectifying presentation," this being the goal of the "existential understanding" they involve, as distinct from "a practical way of leading my life," which is the full concrete reality of existential understanding.)