I am happy that Daniel Royer has given me the opportunity to clarify two points I may have made badly. First of all, I certainly did not mean to imply that James Hikens is a foundationalist. As Royer points out, he is not. I thought I was merely suggesting that Hikens’ form of realism exemplifies a philosophical position not represented in the epistemological arguments we have had in Composition/Rhetoric.

Secondly, I realize that the various positions of Pierce, William James, Bergson, Whitehead, and Hartshorne are more complex and distinct from one another than David Ray Griffin implies. I appreciate Royer’s reminding us of that. Although I do not claim to be a specialist in these philosophers, I still think that Griffin’s generalization has some merit, but Royer’s qualification is important: these philosophers also offer “vigorous metaphysical theories that support realism against extreme antifoundationalism while still not making infallible or foundationalist claims.”

About Royer’s larger concern for the role of philosophy in Composition/Rhetoric—to say nothing of its role in our lives—I can only say that we may have radically different notions of philosophy and what it can do. I assume that all philosophy, like all discourse, is personal and rhetorical. We use philosophy in its many forms for a variety of purposes, all of them dependent on our particular circumstances. We may appreciate a large comprehensive philosophical system such as Plato’s because it is aesthetically satisfying, or because it clarifies certain philosophical issues to our satisfaction, or because it seems to fit some intuitive sense we have of the way the world is—or for a host of other personal, psychological, social, and historical reasons. And we may appreciate a more limited philosophy which attacks very particular problems in, say, epistemology or ethics for similar reasons.

We all privilege the philosophy that meets our needs and circumstances, and we all use philosophy for our own particular purposes—to satisfy our personal questions about the world, to advance various agendas in the public sphere, to promote our own power and influence or the power and influence of our own point of view.

But I take it that in any case philosophy deals with what has been called “perennial problems” or “disputed concepts,” and for this reason no comprehensive system and no more limited philosophical analysis of a particular issue will be attractive to everyone, at least not in the same way, and that our individual responses to various philosophies will be complex, depending on
our unique personalities and historically conditioned circumstances. For example, for a number of reasons I find Plato's idealism enormously appealing, at least aesthetically, but as an epistemology I find it inadequate, even silly.

Royer seems to believe that to be important philosophy should be "systematic" and "coherent" and "speculative," that it should support a "particular metaphysical hypothesis" with a "general scheme adequate to all experience." Lurking behind his point of view seems to be the desire for a philosophy that will transcend the rhetorical, a philosophy that will overwhelm the great majority of us with its persuasive power, a philosophy that will be adequate to almost everyone's experience. Royer seems to want a philosophy that can be judged superior by some transcendent a-rhetorical criteria "about what makes one theory better than another." I think such a philosophy is impossible. Our experiences, our circumstances, are too different. One quick survey of the history of philosophy is a strong argument in favor of just how local and historically conditioned philosophy is. And I certainly don't believe in any criteria which would be equally acceptable to people in all times and places that would help us judge the superiority of one philosophical system over another.

As a result of his own love of systematically metaphysical philosophy, Royer thinks that Davidson's philosophy—and I presume the philosophy of other post-Wittgensteinian philosophers—runs the risk of being "piecemeal," of being merely linguistic finesse, "a shallow and diminished concept of philosophy."

All I can say is that I once wanted a logical and comprehensive metaphysical system, but I found all of the ones I studied to be in the end unsatisfactory in their totality, and I found myself scraping together a philosophy of my own, stealing what I could from every source I could. I wound up wanting a philosophy I could live and live with, a philosophy that accounted for my experience, a philosophy that helped me deal with the everyday issues of my life. I have learned to settle for more local and immediate goals; good reasons for my beliefs in particular contexts. I am willing to sacrifice comprehensiveness and coherence for the sake of more satisfactory answers to smaller questions. If that makes my philosophy shallow and piecemeal, so be it.

What I appreciate about Davidson's philosophy is that it deals with how we understand, which is certainly relevant to my life because I claim to teach people in some small way how to understand, particularly how to understand writing. It seems to me that Davidson has very carefully and thoughtfully called into question our notions of conceptual schemes and conventions. If we find his arguments convincing, then his position on triangulation is a reasonable one to take, despite all of its drawbacks. Whether we accept Davidson's notion of triangulation will depend of course on whether we find his earlier arguments convincing, and whether we can live with the vague and uncertain aspects of triangulation.
What I appreciate most about the notion of triangulation is that it is true to my own experience: in general I do not question the objectivity of much of the material world for precisely those reasons Davidson gives. I learned my language in conjunction with others, and I can use that language to get work done. If then all I need is the concept of salience and the concept of other minds in order to account for language acquisition and language use, why should I fret if I do not have an accurate and coherent theory of how language correlates with reality or of how that reality is conceived mentally? In my everyday life, the problem of whether my language is accurately correlated with reality and the problem of whether I have mental concepts which mediate my sense of reality do not generally arise, and if they do, I have some commonly accepted procedures of dealing with them. Perhaps in the abstract, these notions will always be disputed. In twenty-five hundred years of speculation and analysis, we have come only marginally closer to solving such problems. In the meantime, I have the useful concept of salience with which I can get on with my life, one that does real work, especially in my job, which is teaching writing.

In the last analysis, I have come to believe that we will never be able to explain why common sense is common sense rather than nonsense, except in some tautological way. Most of what we believe is given, what Wittgenstein calls the inherited background against which we think in the first place. There is no explanation for why we accept this background; it is the basis on which we understand at all. All that philosophy can help us do is clarify issues which we foreground against this inherited background. Or in rare instances it can help us lift the veil and see behind that background only to discover another background, one that had been taking the place of the first background without our knowing it before.

Royer asks the big question: why then do philosophy? I believe we do philosophy because it helps us clarify issues, it helps give us good reasons for why we do what we do, it helps us persuade others of appropriate thought and action. That is all it can do. Philosophers with grander goals have not had much success in offering a more comprehensive, a more accurate, or a more helpful way to conciliate "philosophical conceptions of a real world with the world of daily experience" (Whitehead, quoted by Royer)—at least beyond a limited following. Perhaps it is time to give up grand schemes and get on with our lives. Perhaps it is time to accept the possibility that providing metaphors for instruction is a worthwhile, even noble, calling for philosophy.

Kansas State University
Manhattan, Kansas