

Nicolas RESCHER, *Pragmatism. The Restoration of Its
Scientific Roots; The Pragmatic Vision. Themes in
Philosophical Pragmatis*

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In *Pragmatism. The Restoration of Its Scientific Roots* (P) and *The Pragmatic Vision. Themes in Philosophical Pragmatism* (PV) Rescher continues the work of analysis and assessment of the pragmatist tradition that he started more than thirty years ago with the publication of his *The Primacy of Practice* (1973). The thirty essays that compose the two books (some of them already published elsewhere) deal with a large number of issues, ranging from axiology to epistemology, from art to religion. They contribute therefore to expand Rescher's epistemological pragmatism into a richer and more articulated philosophy of "experience", broad enough and wide enough to encompass almost all the aspects of the human life.

Rescher is well known for his major contribution to the renaissance of pragmatism in the 1970s and 1980s. In contrast to the post-modernist interpretations of pragmatism, he has always been very critical of any attempt aiming at conceiving the pragmatist maxim as a proto-deconstructionist theory of truth. In his texts Rescher has convincingly shown that pragmatism does not necessarily lead to such an extreme position. Certainly, it is possible to read James' individualistic pragmatism as entailing the conclusion that what is useful for me is true, but it is impossible to accommodate Peirce's (and even Dewey's) understanding of the pragmatic maxim into that scheme without betraying the significance that that maxim actually had for him. There is a pragmatism of the left and a pragmatism of the right, Rescher remarks. The former, held by James and Rorty, views "our scientific knowledge as a mere human contrivance, and unfettered invention devised for practical purposes...but without any claims to actual or approximate truth"; the latter, which he and Peirce advocate, "rejects such negativism and in its place substitutes a fallibilism that takes our scientific knowledge to represent *the best currently available estimate* of the actual truth of things" (P: 11).

The preference for the Peircean strain of pragmatism is a permanent feature of Rescher's thought. The subtitle *The Restoration of Its Scientific Roots* shows that he has not changed his mind on this point. His is a scientific pragmatism, centered on the notions of method, success, and evolution, in which no room is left for the slightest doubt on the possibility of achieving a sound knowledge of reality. The key concept here is that of praxis: Rescher argues that the pragmatist insistence on the centrality of praxis in knowledge leads to a substantial transformation of the epistemological landscape. Traditional problems – the nature of induction, the relation between truth and evidence, the justification of normativity, the choice between alternative logics, etc. – change their shape as a result of the change of the overall theoretical framework. Since the language in which epistemological problems are formulated is changed, we cannot be any longer satisfied with the answers that have been previously given to them.

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In this spirit, Rescher devotes two long essays to formulate his pragmatist conception of induction – “A Pragmatic Justification of Induction” (P) and “Induction as Pragmatic Resource” (PV). When knowledge is conceived of as a form of praxis, he states, induction comes to be seen as “a tool for use by finite intelligences intended to secure not the best *possible* answer...but the best *available* answer” (PV: 52). Through induction a finite human being tries to bridge the gap between the partial data that are available to him and the objective knowledge which he aims at. An inquirer has some information about the world: for instance, he sees smoke. Then he searches for an enthymematic premise – that is, for a possible, plausible premise – which enables him to provide meaning to the available information in the easiest and smoothest way. He may assume, say, that the case under consideration is to be subsumed under the rule “this smoke is being caused by a fire” instead of under the rule “this smoke is being released from a storage container”. He can choose whatever rule he prefers, provided that the rule he chooses is in accordance with the background information available (PV: 55). Therefore, the conclusion he draws – “there is a fire there” instead of “there is a smoke-discharging storage container there” – is an estimation suggested from the data at hand, which is tenable insofar as it is sensible and defensible.

This does not mean, however, that since it is tenable, the conclusion is true: as Rescher writes, “[a]ny step beyond the information securely at hand involves the risk of error” (PV: 58). Rescher’s point is precisely that inductive reasoning is not a matter of inference, but rather of plausible conjecture (PV: 54). Practical reasoning is different from purely logical inference since while the latter descends from the premises to the conclusion, the former jumps from a set of data to a conclusion that is never guaranteed. The practical turn that Rescher wants to take comes here to the fore, and reveals its theoretical significance. Pragmatist epistemology shifts the attention from the justification of a particular factual thesis to the validation of a practical course of action. “On the methodological perspective”, Rescher remarks, “the pivotal issue is not the *factual* one of establishing an empirical generalization, but rather that of legitimating an operational program of action” (P: 138). What is important, therefore, is to account for the validity of a practice, that is, for a general course of action that has proven to be reliable in the past. Such a justification can be provided only by reference to the evolutionary conditions that have regulated, and still regulate, the development of our methods of inquiry. When one realizes that our cognitive capacities are tools or instruments, the question of evaluation turns into the problem of assessing their pragmatic validity. “In the Western intellectual tradition”, Rescher concludes, “the ultimate standards of rationality are defined by a very basic concept of knowledge-wed-to-practice, and their ultimate validation lies in the combination of theoretical and practical success: i.e., success of theory in the effective guidance of action” (P: 147).

It is impossible – and it would be probably not very interesting – to discuss in detail all the arguments outlined in the numerous essays collected in the two books. The essence of Rescher’s reflections on pragmatism is well known among pragmatist scholars. Therefore, I think it is more convenient to focus on those that show a higher degree of originality with respect to the standard pragmatist views. The reason why

I have devoted so much space to the discussion of Rescher's account of induction is precisely because it makes apparent some of the distinctive features of his pragmatism. The traits of novelty of Rescher's pragmatist philosophy can be approached from many different points of view; however, my suggestion is that the easiest way to grasp their real import is to understand the implications of Rescher's philosophical commitment to Peirce. Rescher explicitly acknowledges his debt to the founder of pragmatism: three of the thirty essays which make up the two books are dedicated to locating Peirce within the pragmatic movement – "Pragmatism at the Crossroads", "Pragmatism's Historical Development in Pragmatism", and "The Pragmatic Vision" (the latter is contained in the book of the same name). As has already been noted, Rescher praises Peirce for his evidential and methodological interpretation of the pragmatic maxim, and sides with him against the excesses of James and Rorty. However, more important than the common conclusion which they reach is the common standpoint from which they approach the problems of justification, knowledge, meaning, and so on.

What is crucial for Rescher is Peirce's realism, in all its different forms – metaphysical, epistemological, moral. Rescher articulates this insight through his notion of purposeful action. The idea of purposeful action – in terms of which he purports to provide an account of all human practices, insofar as they are meaningful (see on this point "Pragmatism and Purpose", the first essay of P) – is intended to highlight the realistic and objective character of human behavior. It is true that "[v]irtually everything that we do has a purpose to it"; Rescher is aware of this fact (P: 38). Nonetheless, that statement goes hand in hand with the assumption that not all purposes are equally good: some purposes are preferable, and are therefore to be pursued without hesitation. Insofar as they are objective ends that should be aimed at by every human being, they can be accounted for in realistic terms.

Rescher's argument rests on the distinction between interests and needs, on the one side, and wants and preferences, on the other. Some of our purposes, Rescher writes, "are mandatory in that they relate to outright *needs*"; others are "merely relate[d] to the satisfaction of our *wants*" (P: 30). So, while it is mandatory for us to meet our needs for food and shelter, it is merely optional to meet our wants for amusement. Wants and desires are purely subjective, and their acceptance is a mere expression of preference. On the contrary, interests and needs are rational; they can be made the object of an assessment of preferability depending on an intersubjective standard of validity. It follows therefore that rationality is not just a matter of "rational consonance with what we believe or do or value"; it is, first and foremost, a matter of objective evaluation of ends (P: 33).

The breadth and import of Rescher's realism is particularly evident here – and the clarity with which it is formulated brings to the fore all its problematicity. Rescher's willingness to avoid any relapse into relativism or subjectivism leads him to stress the importance of a rational, realistic assessment of the ends of conduct. "A pragmatism that is consistent, coherent, and self-sustaining", Rescher writes, "will not just proceed pragmatically with respect to achieving unvaluated ends and purposes, but must also apply its pragmatic perspective to the issue of validating ends and purposes themselves" (P: 36). Rationality is therefore composed of two related, yet independent

processes: on the one hand, the choice of means that are judged appropriate to reach a specific goal; on the other hand, the selection and evaluation of the ends that have to be pursued in the course of action. As the former process is objective, so is the latter: in both cases Rescher believes it possible to provide an instrumental justification of rationality. Ends and purposes, Rescher says, can be evaluated “in terms of their capacity to facilitate the realization of those conditions whose beneficial realization is, for us humans simply a “fact of life” (P: 36). Indeed, values are “functional objects”, their function being that of “helping us to lead lives that are personally satisfying... and communally productive” (P: 36). Consequently, far from being the expression of subjective preferences, values are to be acknowledged as objective traits of reality. In the essay “The Pragmatism of Ideals” Rescher goes as far as to speak of “man’s unique dual citizenship in the worlds of the real and the ideal – a realm of facts and a realm of values” (P: 196). Thus, it is not surprising that Rescher expressly recognizes the existence of evaluative facts. In “Morality, Pragmatism, and the Obligations of Personhood”, referring to that particular type of evaluative values which are the moral values, he writes: “[w]e do not choose or make moral values, but learn about them by thinking through what it is that is required for safeguarding the best interest of people [...]. The capacity of certain modes of personal conduct to meet, or fail to meet, the requirements of morality...is clearly not a matter of ‘decision’ or ‘perspective’, but one of impersonal fact” (P: 187)¹.

Rescher concludes his argument by saying that “[o]n this ontological perspective, the ultimate basis of moral duty arises from the obligation we have as rational agents (toward ourselves and the world at large) to make the most and best of our opportunities for self-development” (P: 192). And then he clarifies that “[w]hat is at issue here is a pragmatic approach to deontology that is geared to a teleology of value commitment that ultimately grounds the obligatoriness of moral injunctions in considerations of axiology” (P: 192).

Rescher’s point is that “[a] pragmatism that looks to the cultivation of positive human goals and benefits” can set the stage for the development of a normative philosophical anthropology (P: 183). All these statements of allegiance to pragmatism notwithstanding, however, it is difficult for me to avoid the impression that there is something strange – something unpragmatist, one would be tempted to say – in Rescher’s realistic approach to axiology. In this sense, it can be said that the most original aspects of his thought are also the most problematic ones. To put it clearly, it is as if Rescher’s search for a realistic foundation of axiology led him astray from

1. The ontology of values sketched in “Fact and Value in Pragmatic Perspective” is truly pragmatist in that values are not conceived as properties independent from human activity. In the Deweyan terminology that Rescher here adopts, values are tertiary properties that “represent cognitively discernible features”; they are specific aspects of reality that “only a suitably informed and intelligent thinker can recognize” (PV: 73). The type of realism that Rescher has in mind is therefore not metaphysical; it is rather a critical (in the Kantian sense) realism grounded on the concept of supervenience. Pragmatist supervenience is the idea that new and original properties arise from the transactions between human beings and their world.

his original purpose of grounding pragmatist epistemology (taken at large) on the principle of fallibilism.

The distinctive character of Rescher's Peirce-inspired scientific pragmatism is the idea that knowledge is, in principle, always revisable. Since there is an epistemic gap between subjectivity and objectivity – as a consequence of which we are compelled to admit that “what we generally claim as knowledge is no more...than our best available estimate of how matters actually stand” (PV: 25) – it is logically impossible to provide an absolute foundation for our knowledge. Nonetheless, Rescher argues, human beings can attain a kind of absolute security “at the price of decreased accuracy” (P: 97). “With any sort of estimate”, he writes, “there is always a characteristic trade-off relationship between the evidential *security* of the estimate on the one hand...and its contentual *definiteness* (exactness, detail, precision, etc.) on the other” (P: 97; see also PV: 27). While “[w]e *estimate* the height of the tree at around twenty-five feet”, “[w]e are *quite sure* that the tree is twenty-five feet, plus or minus five feet”. However, “[w]e are *completely and absolutely sure* that its height is between one inch and one hundred yards” (P: 97; see also PV: 27).

According to this epistemological view, pragmatic security stands in an inverse proportion to contentual definiteness. It is up to the knower to choose whether to privilege security over definiteness, or vice-versa. If he privileges security, he remains at the level of common sense knowledge. Common sense claims are sure because they are “rules of thumb, a matter of practical lore rather than scientific rigor” (PV: 28). The real import of the common sense claim “peaches are delicious”, Rescher says, is something like “most people will find the eating of suitably grown and duly matured peaches a relatively pleasurable experience” (PV: 28). On the contrary, if the knower looks for definiteness of information, he cannot rest satisfied with common sense knowledge. It is science that provides an explanation of natural phenomena “in terms of high generality and strict universality” (PV: 28). The vulnerability of scientific claims is a direct consequence of their search of definiteness. As Rescher writes, “[t]he fact that the theoretical claims of science are ‘mere estimates’ that are always cognitively at risk and enjoy only a modest life span has its roots in science’s inherent commitment to the pursuit of maximal definiteness” (PV: 28).

With all these epistemological considerations in mind, we would expect to find the same approach applied in the study of value. We would expect to read that the process of evaluation is always fallible; that every act of evaluation entails a leap in the dark; that even in the case of evaluation there is a gap between subjectivity and objectivity. Instead, when Rescher turns his attention to axiological issues, the epistemological landscape partially changes².

2. In the last paragraph of “Fact and Value in Pragmatic Perspective”, significantly entitled “A Crucial Analogy: The Experiential Parallelism of Description and Valuation” Rescher argues that descriptive facts and normative ones “share a common epistemology” (PV: 75). Indeed, in both cases what is at stake is the “rational systematization of experience”. Rescher writes: “[e]ssentially the same standard applies throughout: a judgment is valid if it belongs to the most cogent systematization of the whole range of our relevant, alethically fact-oriented experience on the one side, and that of our relevant, axiologically value-oriented

In order to highlight this point, we will focus on Rescher's account of morality as is formulated in "Morality, Pragmatism, and the Obligations of Personhood". In this essay Rescher introduces a strange – from a pragmatist point of view – distinction between morals and mores. "Mores", he writes, "are variable with context – they are matter of place and time, of social custom" (P: 182). They are conventional modes of behavior accepted and practiced by a particular group at a particular time. "Morals, by contrast, are stable and culture-invariant", and they are "categorical and absolute". So, "the person who violates morals does something actually wrong, something that he ought not to do" (P: 182). It is clear *what* Rescher wants to achieve with that distinction: he wants to defend the objectivity of the moral discourse against those attempts directed at denying its autonomy. But it is not equally clear if he is entitled to draw such a strong distinction between what is socially accepted and what is morally correct.

What is particularly problematic here is the epistemological status of "those universal and 'absolute' standards in whose terms the adequacy of any code, our own included, must be appraised" (P: 189). According to Rescher's fallibilist epistemology, the universality and absoluteness of moral standards can be interpreted in two different ways. On the one hand, it can be said that moral values are universal and absolute in the sense that they purport to provide a universal explanation of morality. Taken in this sense, morals are scientific claims, whose universality is attained at the price of security. On the other hand, it can be said that their absoluteness stems from the decision to privilege security over contentual definiteness. Taken in this sense, morals are common sense claims which are absolutely valid because almost devoid of content.

I think that Rescher is not perfectly clear on this point. However, I will be inclined to think that he would probably embrace the second alternative because of what he says about the possibility of "deriving" values from facts in "Fact and Value in Pragmatic Perspective" (the identification of morals and values is *mine*). Here Rescher speaks of "evaluative premises that are essentially trivial and truistic", and that are always unproblematically available to the agent (PV: 69). What he has in mind is something as follows: if you know that to act in a certain way will cause unnecessary pain (factual knowledge), then you can easily conclude that an action that has caused unnecessary pain to a person was morally wrong *because* you can always have recourse to the unproblematic premise that "it is morally wrong to hurt people's feelings when doing so has no compensating positivities in other respect" (PV: 69).

If that reading is correct, Rescher's moral theory would turn out to be grounded on the recognition of the relatively unproblematic character of moral life. It is as if he were saying that in most cases moral deliberations are a matter of unreflective application of moral norms. I do not think it is possible to disagree with Rescher on this point. It is true that we can always have recourse to unproblematic moral principle as the ones which he describes – "it is wrong to do something that causes people

experience on the other" (PV: 76). However, I do not think that this important qualification sheds much light on the issue under consideration here, that is, the epistemological nature of the absolute and universal moral norms.

needless (pointless, unnecessary) pain” or “when a person jabs another to cause him pain simply and solely because he doesn’t like his looks, then this person does something wrong/wicked” (PV: 70-72). The problem is that of understanding if *all* our moral judgments can be traced back to this kind of unreflective and unproblematic evaluations. I think that such a conclusion is difficult to accept: indeed, it is difficult to understand how it is possible for morality to rest on a basis which is undoubtedly firm and secure, but which is, by definition, devoid of any content.

Part of the difficulty stems from Rescher’s ambivalent attitude towards moral philosophy. Rescher’s main concern when discussing moral issues is that of overcoming the threat of subjectivism and relativism. The need to distance himself from those who deny the objectivity of moral discourse leads him to overemphasize the aspects that support a realistic reading of our moral evaluations, to the detriment of those that show the personal creativity of moral life. However, there is something more substantial in Rescher’s insistence on the shared and undisputed objectivity of morality, and has to do with his conception of human nature.

As has been remarked above, Rescher’s analysis of moral discourse is part of a broader reflection on the nature of values. The latter is in turn dependent on a normative theory of human nature – what Rescher calls “a normative philosophical anthropology” (P: 182). Every person, Rescher writes, can choose to “become a saint or a sinner”; that is, it is up to him to decide whether or not to realize his potentialities. For this reason, it is important not simply to have “a knowledge of human nature as such”, but also to have a “view of the good of the mankind” (P: 182). Such knowledge is accessible to everybody since it concerns the most general principles of human life: “achieving and diffusing happiness”, “using one’s intelligence as a guide”, “enjoying the good things of life”, and so on (P: 183). The absoluteness and universality of moral values (and of values in general, if my reading is correct) derives from here, from the assumption that we can easily know which, among the potentialities of human life, are to be realized. Rescher is explicit on this point: “[i]t is all too clear that, other things being like equal, it is better to be healthy, to be happy, to understand what goes on, and the like” (P: 182). This is part of what Rescher means with “realistic epistemology”. It is because the “beneficial realization” of some particular conditions is “a fact of life” that, according to Rescher, a “pragmatically based epistemology” can be truly realistic (P: 36).

In the light of what has been said, it seems possible to conclude that it is a specific metaphysical theory of human nature that lies at the ground of Rescher’s axiological thought, and that this theory somehow interferes with his epistemological views. Rescher seems committed to a static and immutable conception of human nature which is at odds with the fluxive idea of reality developed by pragmatists as well as with their critical and reflexive account of knowledge. After reading Rescher’s impressive books *Pragmatism* and *The Pragmatic Vision* one is left with the doubt whether a consistent pragmatist epistemology has to rest on that metaphysical account of human nature.