Introduction: Rescher's Metaphysics

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Rescher's metaphysics is wide-ranging and innovative. The chapters that follow display some of its major themes. These include a commitment to a metaphysics of experience similar to Kant's transcendental idealism – a conceptual idealism that is nevertheless compatible with causal materialism. They also include a *functionalistic pragmatism* which Rescher uses to defend a robust form of metaphysical realism, and which provides him with the resources to articulate a metaphysics of value. The latter provides a basis in turn for a metaphysics of *moral* value with a biological orientation similar in its outlines to Aristotle's ethics. It also provides resources for answering what we might call *the fundamental question of existence*: *Why is there something instead of nothing?* Rescher endorses an *optimalist* answer along Leibnizian lines; although unlike Leibniz, his account is not committed to theism: there is something instead of nothing, it claims, because that is for the best, and the best can be reckoned in purely naturalistic terms. In what follows I will try to provide some orientation to Rescher's rich and detailed discussion of these points by sketching its main contours.

Rescher's metaphysical realism comprises two ideas: the idea that there is an objective, mind-independent world, and the idea that we can have knowledge of that world. To support his realism Rescher employs a broadly Kantian strategy. Where Kant appeals to a notion of experience, however, Rescher appeals to a notion of *practice*. Metaphysical realism, he argues, is a precondition for the existence of cognitive practices such as inquiry, communication, and

evaluation. There can be such a thing as empirical inquiry, for instance, only if there is a mind-independent reality that cooperates in certain ways with our inductive practices. We can make sense of our scientific practice as a process that yields knowledge of the world, for instance, only if we presuppose that there is a world, and that certain "ampliative" modes of inference are legitimate: that subjective phenomena give us some (albeit defeasible) information about objective realities, for instance, or that particular cases give us some (albeit incomplete) information about universal conditions. Scientific practice is made possible by a commitment to metaphysical realism. The same is true, Rescher argues, about intersubjective communication, evaluation, and all the other cognitive practices that depend on the distinction between truth and falsity, the notion of truth as agreement with reality, the distinction between reality and appearance, and the possibility of error. All of these are made possible by a tacit endorsement of metaphysical realism.

According to Rescher, when we examine the ways metaphysical realism is implicated in our cognitive practices, it becomes apparent that it is not something we discover, but something we presuppose and that we must presuppose if we are to engage in the cognitive and communicative practices we do. Moreover, Rescher argues, we have no choice but to engage in such practices. Creatures like us have no other *modus operandi* and can live no life that holds more promise than a life which seeks good *reasons* for thinking and acting in certain ways, and that means a life that involves cognitive practices. Engaging in rational inquiry, communication, and the like is something that is for us unavoidable, and for that reason in the absence of something better we have no choice but to embrace metaphysical realism.

Rescher's approach to metaphysical realism stands opposed to a familiar type of skepticism. Very roughly the skeptic assumes that belief in an objective world can be warranted

only by appeal to some type of rational inquiry, and then argues on broadly Humean grounds that rational inquiry cannot warrant this belief because it already presupposes it. Rescher is free to agree that rational inquiry cannot warrant its own starting points in the way it warrants, say, the acceptance of empirical results by means of induction. But he rejects the idea that the methods of rational inquiry are as limited in scope and variety as the skeptic conceives them to be. When it comes to metaphysical realism, something that is, to use Kant's expression, a condition for the very possibility of engaging in the cognitive practices we do (including, importantly, the practice of formulating skeptical arguments), our endorsement of it is ultimately warranted not by some process internal to the inquiry it enables – at least not a process of the sort the skeptic has in mind such as scientific induction. Our endorsement of it is instead warranted *by the success of the practices it makes possible*.

According to Rescher, metaphysical realism not only enables us to engage in cognitive practices, it is ultimately vindicated by their results. The results in question are both practical and theoretical. On the practical side we develop a picture of the world that enables us to operate effectively in it: we might think here of the technological advances that have accompanied the growth of scientific knowledge. On the theoretical side the picture we develop explains why creatures like us with our particular cognitive resources and *modus operandi* would be able to develop a picture of the world and our place in it that was more or less accurate. Metaphysical realism is thus warranted in a twofold way: first, it *enables* rational inquiry; second, it is *justified* by its success. Rescher refers to this second point as *retrojustification*. The success of an inquiry based on certain assumptions enables us to assert with hindsight that those assumptions were the right ones to make. Hence, the success of our cognitive endeavors – of science, of communication, and the like – vindicates the realist presupposition.

Rescher's approach to metaphysical realism is an expression of his more general commitment to pragmatic criteria of justification and what he calls 'functionalistic pragmatism'. According to Rescher, we are purposive animals. We do things in order to achieve certain ends: We have laws to establish and endorse rules of conduct; we construct ethical systems to guide behavior in ways that are conducive to living well; we engage in inquiry to remove doubt. Theorizing is ultimately something we do, a process that aims among other things at answering certain questions we have. As a result, we can evaluate theorizing according to the same sort of criteria we use to evaluate other goal-directed processes: the criteria of *efficacy* and *efficiency*: whether something achieves its goals and whether (all things being equal) it does so in the most efficient and economical way. According to Rescher these criteria can be brought to bear on the evaluation of an enormous variety of procedures and processes: theoretical, legal, moral, etc.

Functionalistic pragmatism fits hand-in-glove with a theory of rationality since rational beings will prefer (all things being equal) those methods and procedures which are most effective at achieving their ends and which achieve those ends in the most efficient ways. This connection with rationality might suggest a stereotype of pragmatism as a crass utilitarian doctrine that sees reason as a mere tool for calculating means to ends but that pays no heed to the evaluation of ends themselves. Hume endorsed a theory of rationality of this sort. Reason, he said, was the slave of the passions. The latter furnish us with ends, and to those ends reason merely reckons the means. Consequently, Hume claimed, "It is not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger."[1] But Rescher argues against this conception of rationality and articulates an alternative. Reason, he says, has two aspects: an *instrumental* aspect and an *axiological* one. The former aspect concerns the calculation of means as Hume thought, but the latter concerns the evaluation of ends. Clearly if we adopt inappropriate ends; if, for

instance, we pursue an end in a way that outstrips its true worth, we cannot lay claim to being fully rational. In addition, Rescher reminds us, ends often concern *values*, and values are not tastes. Tastes do not admit of rational evaluation; they are unreasoned preferences. Values on the other hand have an instrumental aspect; they serve to guide and direct behavior. As a result they admit of functionalistic evaluation. Values that direct us to pursue ends that are clearly not in our best interests or that do not satisfy our real needs are not values it is rational for us to adopt.

This axiological component of reason provides Rescher with a basis for articulating a metaphysics of moral evaluation. Like Kant's metaphysics of morals, Rescher's is based on the requirements of rationality. But unlike Kant's metaphysics of morals and like Aristotle's, Rescher's account has a biological orientation that grounds evaluation in an account of human flourishing. Rescher talks about the notion of what is in our best interests in a twofold way: in terms of the conditions that are necessary for our *being*, and in terms of the conditions that are necessary for our *well*-being. Human life involves a manifold of processes, he says. Some are chosen; they mark the sorts of behaviors we call 'wants', 'wishes', 'desires', and the like. But some are not chosen; they mark genuine *needs*, ones determined in large part by our biological heritage. Because we are animals with a certain evolutionary provenance there are certain things we need in order to live (air, food, shelter, etc.), and there are certain things we need in order to *live well*: self-respect, companionship, a sense of belonging. These needs provide an important part of the basis for assessing what is or is not in our best interests.

Like Aristotle, then, and unlike Kant, Rescher's metaphysics of moral evaluation has a biological orientation that centers on the notion of specifically *human* agents as opposed to rational agents in general. And again, like Aristotle, Rescher looks to ground evaluation in the requirements end-directed behavior must satisfy if it is to achieve the goal of human flourishing.

Rescher's metaphysics of experience, on the other hand, is very similar to Kant's. He endorses a certain kind of idealism – what he calls *conceptual idealism* in contrast to the ontological idealism associated with philosophers like Berkeley. Conceptual idealism is not the claim that everything is mental, or that the mind generates or constitutes everything that exists. It is not a causal claim. It is instead the claim that our experience of reality is mind-dependent. It claims that the basic categories in terms of which we describe and explain the physical world involve an implicit reference to mental operations. More precisely, it claims that the basic predicates and terms we use to describe the world express relations, and each of those relations has some aspect of the mind as one of its terms.

Consider an analogy. Artifacts cannot be defined apart from the purposive activities in which they are involved, activities which themselves involve mental operations. Books, for instance, cannot be defined apart from activities such as reading and writing – activities involving mental operations. According to Rescher *all* the concepts we use to understand the world are analogous to the concept of a book; *all* of them advert in some way to the operations of mind. Consider, for instance, basic metaphysical notions such as the notion of particularity. It adverts to the activity of *identifying*, a mental operation. Consider likewise basic physical notions such as the notion of spacetime. It involves the operation of *locating*, another mental operation. Mental operations of this sort are built into the very concepts we use to understand the world; they constitute our very idea of physical reality. Conceptual idealism claims, then, not that the mind is the causal source of the world, but that the mind provides part of the basic interpretative mechanisms whereby we experience and understand the world.

Conceptual idealism does not deny that reality is mind-independent in the sense that the basic furniture of the universe might remain *unchanged* if beings with minds had never existed.

The world might be mind-independent in a *causal* sense, Rescher argues, but it is not mind-independent in a *conceptual* sense. Consider: what exactly would remain unchanged in a world without minds. Would, for instance, roses exist? Consider the various features we attribute to roses, especially the ones that categorize something as a rose – its smell, color, size and shape. The concepts of all of these features advert in some way to mental operations such as identifying, classifying, measuring, and the like. Take away those features, and what is left? Nothing that could be classified as a rose surely, for *being a rose* depends on having features of the aforementioned sorts. Without those features, ones defined in part by reference to mental operations, there is no longer any basis for categorizing something as a rose.

Rescher doesn't deny that there might be other ways of conceiving the world that are not mind-involving, but he does argue that there is no way of articulating such a conceptual scheme given that our own *is* mind-involving. Any act of articulation requires the use of conceptual tools already at our disposal, and the only ones currently at our disposal are mind-involving. There is no way of articulating a conceptual scheme that transcends the limits of the scheme we work with in fact, and that means there is no way of articulating a conceptual scheme that is not mind-involving.

Importantly, conceptual idealism is compatible with *causal* materialism. The idea that our concepts of physical processes depend on mental operations is perfectly compatible with the idea that our mental operations depend causally on physical processes. Conceptual idealism is not an *explanatory* theory regarding the causal source of the mind, says Rescher; it is instead an *analytic* or *hermeneutic* theory regarding the basic categories in terms of which we understand the world. Conceptual idealism is thus officially neutral about physicalism, substance dualism,

neutral monism, and other theories forming philosophy of mind's stock in trade – theories that are causal in the relevant sense.

Rescher also sketches a strategy for answering what I called earlier 'the fundamental question of existence': *Why is there something instead of nothing?* In line with his functionalistic pragmatism he defends an axiological approach along Leibnizian lines: There is something instead of nothing, he argues, because that is for the best. An answer along these lines appeals to what Rescher calls the *Law of Optimality*: whatever possibility is for the best is the possibility that is actualized – precisely because it is for the best. Rescher refers to an approach based on this principle as a type of *optimalism*. Optimalism claims that it is in the nature of things that the best possible alternative is realized.

One advantage of optimalism is that the Law of Optimality is *self-substantiating*, a desirable feature in a first principle. A principle that could not be explained except by appeal to some further principle would make a poor candidate for a *first* principle since it could not lay claim to being foundational in its domain. If asked, however, why the Law of Optimality obtains, the optimalist can appeal to the Law itself: it obtains *because that is for the best*. This makes the Law of Optimality as good a candidate for being a first principle as any; it ends up being part of the very world order whose existence it explains.

Applying the Law of Optimality to the prevailing world order requires something of a promissory note which Rescher describes as a "scientifically reputable" set of value parameters that are in some way physically relevant. With such a set of value parameters in hand, the optimalist can explain the existence of the world using the following line of reasoning: (i) whatever possibility is for the best is the possibility that is realized; (ii) the prevailing world order is the best that can be realized; therefore, (iii) the prevailing world order exists.

Rescher defends optimalism against three competing approaches to the fundamental question of existence. First, he defends it against an approach that rejects the question on the grounds that it is ill-posed. Rescher shows that the arguments for this approach fail. Second, he defends optimalism against an approach that insists on a *non-axiological* answer to the question, one that appeals, for instance, to a notion of efficient causation. According to Rescher the question needn't be taken to ask for a productive force or other causal factor. Causal explanation is one type of explanation, but it is not the only type. It is possible to explain the existence of something without identifying a cause that produces it. This is what the optimalist answer does. According to the optimalist, value operates on the range of logical possibilities not as an agent that *produces* the best alternative, but as a factor that *constrains* the range of possibilities so that only the best are available to be realized, and only the uniquely best is realized in fact. A constraint of this sort doesn't require the postulation of a causal agent. By analogy, says Rescher, consider the operation of certain rules for English word formation. English allows double letters but not triple ones. This rule constrains the range of possible English words. It thereby explains why, for instance, 'pussy' is an English word but not 'pusssy', but it surely doesn't *cause* this to be the case in the sense of having *produced* the double letter in 'pussy'. To insist, as non-axiologists do, that an answer to the fundamental question of existence invoke a cause is to insist on a model of explanation the optimalist is not obliged to accept.

Finally, Rescher defends the optimalist answer against what I will call an *axiological supernaturalism* which argues that there can be no value without a valuer – that an axiological answer to the fundamental question of existence must appeal to a supernatural source of value and/or purpose. Supernaturalism poses a serious challenge to Rescher's optimalism because if it is right, the Law of Optimality is not self-substantiating. If value requires a valuer, then the Law

of Optimality would have to be explained by appeal to some further principle positing a valuer such as God. Rescher argues, however, that the major premise of the supernaturalist argument is false. It assumes that values are analogous to purposes. A purpose must be *someone's* purpose, and hence purposive explanations must appeal to the purposes of an agent. But values can be completely impersonal. They are less like purposes in this sense and more like facts. Something's being a fact doesn't depend on someone endorsing it. In the same way, says Rescher, something's being valuable doesn't depend on someone actually valuing it. To be valuable is to *deserve* to be prized, but that doesn't mean anyone actually prizes it. Hence, according to Rescher, the supernaturalist argument fails: a commitment to axiology does not imply commitment to theology.

Rescher's optimalism does, however, imply a commitment to *teleology* since it implies that things tend toward optimality. But teleology in general does not require agents with purposes. In a way that is once again reminiscent of Aristotle, Rescher argues that there are natural end-directed processes that do not require conscious agency: homeostasis and heliotropism are just two examples.[2]

Further, Rescher argues that a naturalistic axiology is superior to the supernaturalist alternative for several reasons. It is, for instance, more economical. The supernaturalist adds a theological component to an account that is capable of standing on its own axiological feet. In addition the supernaturalist view is regressive from the standpoint of the history of science – a history in which God has been invoked with decreasing frequency to do increasingly little explanatory work. Moreover, it seems that supernaturalism inverts the natural order of explanation: it tries to explain what is better understood – the natural world – by appeal to what is not understand at all: God.

As with the other claims he advances, however, Rescher thinks the ultimate warrant for an axiological metaphysics along the lines he endorses is to be found its practical application – in the way it enables us to systematize our knowledge, in particular. This, he thinks, is something that will depend in the long run on the future progress of science.

Rescher's ideas have any lucidity and candor that is refreshing to read. Methodologically he is very much engaged in what Strawson calls *descriptive metaphysics*.[3] He is most profound in articulating ideas that are integral to our intuitive pre-philosophical understanding of the world, but that are for various reasons difficult to articulate systematically. Rescher's work thus strikes one as being highly insightful without being shocking or counterintuitive. It also expresses a broad, systematic vision. In a profession whose practitioners increasingly operate with tight-angle shutters and zoom lenses, a philosopher with a panoramic view of a broad constellation of issues marks a refreshing deviation from the norm.

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[1] *Treatise on Human Nature* Book II, Part iii, Section 3.
[2] Aristotle argues that not all teleology involves deliberation and choice. His examples include web-building in spiders, nest-building in birds, and leaf-growing in plants (*Physics* ii.8: 199b20-33).
[3] Strawson 1959: 10-11.