

Nicholas Rescher
Philosophical Testuality
Studies on Issues of Discourse in Philosophy

For Julian Nida-Rümelin

Nicholas Rescher

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ontos

verlag

Frankfurt | Paris | Lancaster | New Brunswick

Bibliographic information published by Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie;
detailed bibliographic data is available in the Internet at <http://dnb.ddb.de>



North and South America by
Transaction Books
Rutgers University
Piscataway, NJ 08854-8042
trans@transactionpub.com



United Kingdom, Eire, Iceland, Turkey, Malta, Portugal by
Gazelle Books Services Limited
White Cross Mills
Hightown
LANCASTER, LA1 4XS
sales@gazellebooks.co.uk



Livraison pour la France et la Belgique:
Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin
6, place de la Sorbonne; F-75005 PARIS
Tel. +33 (0)1 43 54 03 47; Fax +33 (0)1 43 54 48 18
www.vrin.fr

©2010 ontos verlag
P.O. Box 15 41, D-63133 Heusenstamm
www.ontosverlag.com

ISBN 978-3-86838-078-1

2010

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Printed on acid-free paper
FSC-certified (Forest Stewardship Council)
This hardcover binding meets the International Library standard

Printed in Germany
by buch bücher **dd ag**

PHILOSOPHICAL TEXTUALITY

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PREFACE

Philosophizing is an activity—a process carried on by mind-endowed creatures. But philosophy itself—the product of philosophizing—is an abstraction which, as such, exists in its own way. Like chemistry or poetry, the things it deals with may be ever so real, but it itself exists only in the realm of textuality. However the nature of philosophy's textual domain is seldom studied as such. The present discussion will take one very small step towards filling this gap.

I am grateful to Estelle Burris for her ever-competent help in preparing this material for the press.

Nicholas Rescher
Pittsburgh PA
May 2010

Chapter One

ISSUES OF TEXTUALITY

1. INTELLIGENCE AS AN EVOLUTIONARY PRODUCT

Evolution is nature's innovator. Cosmic, biological, and cultural evolution—all bring massive novelties in their wake. There were no laws of chemistry in the first nanosecond of the universe after the Big Bang—only a boiling soup of subatomic stuff in which chemicals had not yet emerged. And similarly, there were no laws of cellular biology in the first billion years of our universe's existence, nor laws of macroeconomics in its first ten billion. But with the emergence of new modes of process, new sorts of things have continuously come into existence, and new modes of lawfulness arise in their wake. And salient if not paramount among these are intelligent creatures.

Why intelligent beings? What accounts for their existence on the cosmic stage?

The general direction—at any rate—of the answer to this query about intelligence is relatively straightforward. Basically, we intelligent beings are here because that is our assigned place in evolution's scheme of things. Different sorts of creatures have different ecological niches, different specialties that enable them to find their evolutionary way down the corridor of time. Ultimately intelligent beings emerged—presumably because there was a viable niche for creatures whose survival advantage came through intelligence rather than various alternatives. Some are highly prolific, some very hard, some swift of foot, some hard to spot, some extremely shy. *Homo sapiens* is different. For the selective advantage that is the evolutionary mainstay of our species is intelligence with everything that this involves in the way of abilities and versatilities. If intelligence were not of evolutionary advantage, intelligent beings would not occupy the place they have achieved in nature's scheme of things.

The complexities of information management and control pose unrelenting evolutionary demands. To process a large volume of information nature must fit us out with a large brain. A battleship needs more elaborate mechanisms for guidance and governance than a row boat. A department store needs a more elaborate managerial apparatus than a corner grocery.

To operate a sophisticated body you need a sophisticated brain. The evolution of the human brain is the story of nature's struggles to provide the machinery of information management and control needed by creatures of increasing physical versatility. A feedback cycle comes into operation—a complex body requires a larger brain for command and control, and a larger brain requires a larger body. And this body of operational efficiency in its turn places greater demands on that brain for the managerial functions required to provide for survival and the assurance of a posterity.

Of course, a brain that is able to do the necessary things when and as needed to sustain in the life of a complex and versatile creature will mostly remain underutilized. To cope at times of peak demand, it will have a great deal of excess capacity to spare for other issues at slack times. And so, any brain powerful enough to accomplish those occasionally necessary tasks will have the surplus capacity at most normal times to pursue various challenging projects that have nothing whatever to do with survival.

Granted, for evolution to do its work, the survival problems that creatures confront have to be by and large easy for the mechanisms at their disposal. And this fundamental principle holds just as true for cognitive as for biological evolution. If cognitive problem-solving were too difficult for our mental resources, we wouldn't have evolved as problem solving creatures. If we had to go to as great lengths to work out the sum $2 + 2$ as to extract the cube root of a number, or if it took us as long to discriminate 3- from 4-sided figures as it takes to discriminate between 296- and 297-sided ones, then these sorts of issues would simply remain outside our cognitive repertoire. The "average" problems to be solved for survival and thriving that are posed by our lifestyle must be of the right level of difficulty for us—that is, they must be rather easy. And that calls for excess capacity. For if our problem-solving resources were generally strained to the limit, usually groaning under the burden of difficulty of the problems they are called on by nature to resolve in the interests of our lifestyle, then we just wouldn't have those cognitive resources at all.

And so, creatures of our sort owe their presence on the world stage to their intelligence. And once intelligent creatures are there, their presence makes a difference.

2. INTELLIGENCE IS WORLD-TRANSFORMATIVE

Just how does the emergence of higher-order intelligence change the universe? This is a philosophical issue which (perhaps somewhat surprising-

ly) rather few philosophers have addressed. It is a question that can be posed in many ways: What sort of significant novelty has come into existence with the evolutionary emergence of intelligence? What massive operational difference is there between an intelligence-containing universe and its intelligence-lacking variants? Such questions highlight varying aspects of one selfsame problem.

The present question is: What really big phenomena of portentous import and significance that were previously absent does the evolutionary emergence of higher-order intelligence on the cosmic scene bring into being? There are, of course, a great many of them—art and morality included. But prominent among these is certainly cognition: the awareness of facts. After all, a universe without intelligence is one from which *knowledge* as such is absent. Earlier on, there certainly were things to be known, but there was no knowledge of them. Absent intelligence, the world is a cognitive vacuum. But once thinking minds enter upon the scene, there comes to realization something rather different from the bare realities and facts, namely the thought-perspectives at issue with ideas, opinions, and views about them.

And so with the evolution of intelligence and its development a new dimension of being is added. For what we now have is not only the works of Nature but the works of intelligence-contrived Artifice—and in particular of that thought-artifice with respect to the nature of things. And with us humans this thought ultimately expanded from living, active thinking to recorded thought—thought embodied in broadly textual form.

And this development poses the way for a group—and ultimately a contrast of—the ways of nature and the ways of textuality—of language encoded information.

The first and most fundamental fact is that our cognitive hold in nature and its laws is always textually mediated.

In dealing with nature we do not grasp it in a direct and mediated way. We never reach more than our ideas about it—our conception of nature. “Tell me what reality is like apart from and independently of what you think it to be” is an unimplementable injunction.

And the next fundamental fact is that we deem nature to function in ways different from the ways of textuality. For we are committed to the idea that nature is stable in its ways. That the laws of nature are unchanging—no matter how greatly our *ideas* about them may change. And that the fundamental types of things that there are in the physical world can exhibit fixity even when our ideas about them change. And so there is a fun-