

Nicholas Rescher
Studies in Philosophical Anthropology

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Nicholas Rescher

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PREFACE

The place of humans in nature's scheme of things and the conditions and circumstances of our existence have been at the forefront of philosophical deliberation since the very dawn of the subject. Over the past three decades I from time to time ventured into discussions of some of the key themes that crop up in this domain. A representative sampling of such papers are assembled in the present volume. I trust that this collection will give some indication of the tenor of thought that characterizes my approach to these philosophically crucial concerns.

Nicholas Rescher
Pittsburgh PA
January 2006

Chapter 1

HOMO OPTANS: ON THE HUMAN CONDITION AND THE BURDEN OF CHOICE

1. THE UNREALIZABILITY OF PERFECTION

“Go and design a perfect car.” “Go and arrange a perfect vacation.” These are instructions no one can possibly fulfill. For cars and vacations, like other goods in general, are inherently complex and *multidesideratal*, since it is a key fact of axiology that every evaluation-admitting object combines a *plurality* of evaluative features and every good a plurality of desiderata. And this circumstance makes perfection unattainable. For it lies in the nature of things that desirable features are in general competitively interactive. A conflict or competition among desiderata is an unavoidable fact of life. They cannot all be enhanced at once since more of the one can only be realized at the expense of less of the other. Take a car—an automobile. Here the relevant parameters of merit clearly include such factors as speed, reliability, repair, infrequency, safety, operating economy, aesthetic appearance, road-handling ability. But in actual practice such features are interrelated. It is unavoidable that some will trade off against others. And it would be ridiculous to have a supersafe car with a maximum speed of two miles per hour or to have a car that is very inexpensive to operate but spends most of its time in a repair shop. And similarly throughout the range of the desirable we encounter inherent conflicts among the relevant desiderata. There is no avoiding the fact that we cannot concurrently maximize all of the parameters of merit of any object of desire.

For what is at issue here is something very general and very fundamental. Alike in ordinary and in philosophical usage, *perfection* is a matter of freedom from any and all limitations and deficiencies.¹ On this basis, a perfect object of some inherently valuable sort would be one that realizes every mode of relevant mode of merit to the highest possible degree. And this is simply infeasible. In sharpening the pencil point we render it more

breakable; in enlarging the book's small print we render it more cumbersome. Every concretely realizable good is imperfect, because, as the medieval schoolmen rightly said, imperfection (*imperfectio*) is coordinate with privation (*privatio*) and the competitive interaction of desiderata means that such a shortfall in some positive respect or other is unavoidable.

This circumstance can also be regarded from another point of view. For the same result is reached when perfection is viewed in Aristotle's manner that on something is perfect (*teleios*)² when it achieves all of its positive potentialities. Taken overall, positive potentialities will also be mutually exclusive. In tightening the string of a bow or musical instrument we bring it nearer to the breaking point. And quite generally enhancing one positive potentiality can be achieved only at the cost of lessening the extent to which we can cultivate other potentialities in other directions. So in this respect too, it transpires that perfection is unachievable.

Perfection—maximum realization of every value dimension all-at-once—is simply unrealizable. And of course it makes no sense to ask for the impossible.

2. TRADE-OFFS AND OPPORTUNITY COSTS

Whenever we deal with objects of value where several concurrent desiderata are competitively involved—and thus effectively always—we face a situation where synoptic across-the-board optimization is impossible in principle because more of the one value can only be achieved at the price of settling for less of the other. Both uniformity and size are merits of emeralds, but an increase of the one can be achieved only at the price of a decrease of the other. We want our discourse to be both pithy and adequate to the facts, but must inevitably sacrifice the one in order to foster the other. The person who wants to be both well-liked and truthfully honest will be forced to make sacrifices one way or the other. We want the library to be both conveniently usable and comprehensive, and yet each desideratum conflicts with the other.

In pursuing objects of multidimensional value, the payment of what economists call opportunity costs becomes unavoidable. All of our efforts to obtain good objects or achieve valued objectives require us to make compromises. Throughout the domain of valued goods it transpires that some among the relevant value-constituting features can be enhanced only at the price of diminishing others.

It thus lies in the nature of things that value realization is always a matter of balance, of trade-offs, of compromise. Different aspects of merit always compete in point of realization. A concurrent maximum in *every* dimension is simply unavailable in this or indeed any other realistically conceivable world. With inherently conflicting desiderata, across-the-board maximization is in principle impossible—in practice and generally in theory as well. All that one can ever reasonably ask for is an auspicious overall *combination* of values.

The irony here is that the person who is intent on seeking absolute perfection is in fact driven to immobilization. For as Voltaire's dictum has it, "The best is the enemy of the good." In refusing to accept something that is less than perfect one condemns oneself to having—nothing at all. In the pursuit of merits and desiderata we simply have to choose among alternatives.

3. THE BURDEN OF CHOICE AND THE INEVITABILITY OF REGRET

The unrealizability of overall perfection in the presence of competing desiderata has far-reaching consequences. It brings the inevitability of choice in its wake.

Consider a simple example. We have a housing budget of a certain fixed size. Two desiderata are foremost in our mind:

1. Transport convenience to our workplace at the center of town.
2. Spaciousness of the accommodation.

Now in investigating the matter we find that a situation of the type pictures in Display 1 obtains (on average). At a work year of 200 days we now realize that we can obtain additional square footage at the cost of 5 feet for 1 hour of additional commuting time yearly. We have to decide: What price (in time) are we prepared to pay for added spaciousness?

Display 1

A COST-BENEFIT EXAMPLE

<i>Round-trip travel time/to and from the town center</i>	<i>Square footage of an accommodation rentable at our budget</i>
0	1,000
½ hour	1,500
1 hour	2,000
2 hours	3,000

The commitment to any object of choice invariably involves such complex trade-offs among the conflicting desiderata involved. And this means that any choice is a matter of compromise—of a negotiation among those conflicting aspects of value.

All choices are accordingly a matter of closing doors, of foregoing opportunities to augment some desiderata. Every choice is a narrowing of horizons, of foregoing possibilities which, in some respect, realize certain desiderata to a greater degree than we presently accept.

In such circumstances we have a situation of the inevitability of regret. For every increase in one of the relevant assets involves some loss in point of another: every gain has its dark side through invoking some sort of loss. There is something of truth on John Gay's couplet in the Beggar's Opera:

How happy could I be with either?
Were t'other dear charmer away!

The exclusionary nature of choice—to opt for more of our desideratum is ipso facto to opt for less of another.

Of course the other side of the coin is also there. While in choosing we always sacrifice certain desiderata, we do not do so without compensation.

For the sacrifices we make we may—or when we choose wisely should—have a more than compensating return by way of benefit in respect of other desiderata. It is just that we cannot have it both ways.

Man is *Homo optans*—Choosing Man, a creature that must make choices. And being a rational creature as well through our status as *Homo sapiens*, this means that those choices have to be made on the basis of rationally configured evaluations. Man is thus *Homo aestimans*, Evaluative Man, as well. Comparative evaluation is also an unavoidable requisite of the human condition. The burden of choice—and thereby of reason-guided evaluation—is one of the definitive features of the human condition.

4. FINITUDE NOT AT FAULT

It should be stressed that the reason why absolute perfection is unachievable in the setting of complex goods has nothing to do with human finitude as such. The reason why I cannot construct a perfect house (one proximate both to my work and to the sea-shore) or build a perfect car (one that is compact for parking but roomy for passengers) has nothing to do with the limitation of my resources but lies in the inherent impossibility of the diverse desiderata at issue.

In the more familiar range of cases we merely have a scarcity of resources. That is we cannot spend the same dollar on each of two desired items or the same hour at two different congenial activities. In such cases we have different goods in view and cannot expend our limited resources upon them all. However, in the cases now at issue there is only one single good at stake but one that has distinct aspects of merit which are so interrelated that we cannot move several directions at once. The problem now at issue is not one of the scarcity of resources on *our* part but one of a limitation that roots deep in the very nature of things.

The fact that a mere augmentation of resources will not mend matters means that there is a deep irony in the condition of “the man who has everything”. For his affluence simply increases the range of desiderata he can satisfy individually while leaving in place the unavailability of a conflict between those he can satisfy conjointly. He can afford to eat the greatest delicacies in unlimited quantity—but only at the expense of his health. He can afford to build his dream-house and to go on his dream vacation—but immediately confronts the need to compromise by sacrificing the enjoyment of one to realize the pleasures of the other. And the difficulty here is not the limited scope of our resources of time and money and power—not

human finitude—but the inherent nature of things, in the natural conflict of coordinate desiderata—the fact that we cannot have our cake and eat it too; that our mechanisms can achieve greater versatility only at the cost of added complexity; and so on. Where diverse desiderata stand in conflict not even an incomplete being could realize absolute perfection. (That is why Leibniz saw God as creating not the perfect world but merely the best possible.)

5. NOT MAXIMALITY BUT OPTIMALITY

Throughout our pursuit of goods we face the situation of a choice of alternative combinations of advantages. And since we cannot pervasively *maximize* we have to *compromise*: we have to *decide* what it is that, given our situation, is the most acceptable compromise for us. We continually confront the problem that in order to realize one desideratum to an acceptable extent we must assess how much are we prepared to pay in terms of the opportunity cost of a lessened realization of its competitors.

The crux is to achieve a satisfactory balance among those competing desiderata: to realize a constellation or profile of desiderata which—taken together and in combination—yields an overall result that is on balance at least as good—and certainly no worse than any realizable alternative. The idea is that if a result that represents not that unrealizable ideal of “the perfect car” or “the perfect vacation”, but a car or a vacation which, while obviously not *perfect* is at least *unsurpassed* by any of the available alternatives.

What the preceding deliberations show is that in the pursuit of positivities we cannot concurrently maximize with respect to all the desiderata at issue and therefore have to optimize in doing the best we can. There are always alternatives. Since categorical perfection is impracticable, compromises must be made throughout the sphere of our pursuit of the good. And the choices at issue here will invariably be such that we can enhance the realization of one desideratum only at the cost of accepting the diminished realization of another.

The unattainability of perfection—the inherent impracticability of concurrently maximizing all of the modes of merit in the goods we seek—means that we are inevitably entrapped in circumstances of choice. And no choice can be made without paying the price of an opportunity cost, so that no alternative we opt for is altogether exempt from regret.

This too is part of what makes for what Miguel de Unamuno called the “tragic sense of life”.³

NOTES

- ¹ Perfection as such is absolute and idealized. To be sure there is also a subsidiary sense of the term as merely meeting the needs of a particular occasion. (“Joan is the perfect wife for John,” “Tom is the perfect man for the post,” “A drill is the perfect instrument for the job.”) But this represents a different use of the term.
- ² Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Δ16, 1021b12-1022a2.
- ³ This chapter is a slightly revised version of an essay published under the same title in *Idealistic Studies*, vol. 29 (2000), pp. 149-53.

Chapter 2

CAUSAL NECESSITATION AND FREE WILL

1. PRELIMINARIES

The present deliberations regarding the classic problem of free will unfold within the framework of process philosophy. The key thesis, put into a nutshell, is that the traditionally envisioned philosophical difficulties of the matter can be averted by the comparatively straightforward device of viewing nature's occurrences as actual processes (which ipso facto occupy intervals of time, albeit perhaps very short ones), while at the same time considering "acts of will" (choices, decisions, resolutions, and the like) as process-conclusions and thus as temporally punctiform eventuations which thereby take on a characteristic life of their own, subject to an agent-causality of freedom distinct from the causality of nature (to use Kantian terminology).

First a word about the will and its decisions. Free will is the capacity of rational agents to make their decisions autonomously in the light of their own self-engendered desires, projects, and intentions as reflected in their view regarding the worth or value of things. An agent who has no stance regarding the value (worth, desirability) of things is unable to act rationally and is thus not really free. Free decisions are, in the final analysis, driven not by nature's causality but by value-geared choices.

A decision is free whenever it is not arrived at under an agent-external constraint such as hypnosis, threat, undue influence, force majeure, or the like. Decision involves choice; where there is a decision there must be a choice between alternatives that are *or merely appear to be* available. The paradigm of an act of free will is the product of an "act of decision or choice" that is the terminus of a course of deliberation. A free decision can accordingly involve either action or inaction either doing or refraining; it need not be geared to overt action. One can decide to do nothing and "let matters take their course." (To be sure, where inaction is concerned there is no visible difference between the unthinking and wise, be it by choice or inattention, inaction looks the same either way.)