

Nicholas J. Moutafakis
Rescher on Rationality, Values, and Social Responsibility

READING RESCHER

Volume 1

Nicholas J. Moutafakis

Rescher on Rationality, Values, and Social Responsibility

A Philosophical Portrait

Foreword by Nicholas Rescher



ontos

verlag

Frankfurt | Paris | Ebikon | Lancaster | New Brunswick

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie;
detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.



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



United Kingdom, Ireland, 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

©2007 ontos verlag
P.O. Box 15 41, D-63133 Heusenstamm
www.ontosverlag.com

ISBN 13: 978-3-938793-63-3

2007

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For Nicholas Rescher

“...Only an honest book can live; only absolute sincerity can stand the test of time....”

“Literary Values” by John Burroughs

Rescher on Rationality, Values, and Social Responsibility

Foreword (by Nicholas Rescher)

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Foreword

In my long philosophical career, now extending well over fifty years, I have worked out a systematic body of philosophical thought. But the extensive and diffuse nature of my publications—attested by the bibliography at the end of this volume—make it difficult to see the forest for the trees. The ideas very much need to be coordinated and rendered synoptically perspicuous. In producing this overview of my work on rationality, values, and social responsibility, Nicholas Moutafakis has rendered a substantial contribution to my cause, making it easier to see how various scattered pieces fit together to form a combined body of thought. I am much indebted and deeply grateful for the excellent job he has done in producing this accessible and comprehensive account.

Nicholas Rescher

PREFACE

I embarked on this book in 1997, in the wake of my failing to find a substantive synoptic study of Nicholas Rescher's significant contributions to philosophy. The literature then as now is wanting, in that though many critical articles and notes have been published on specific facets of Rescher's work, no one has attempted a careful synthesis of his position across the many decades in which it has evolved. Ernest Sosa's fine anthology of critical essays, *The Philosophy of Nicholas Rescher*, while providing critical assessments of some of Rescher's ideas and includes Rescher's reaction to these studies, provides no synthesis of where Rescher stands in terms of the history of philosophy and the significance of his brand of pragmatic idealism. Moreover, in far too many of these essays the scholarship is on some single point or thesis in one of Rescher's works, without any extended consideration of other discussions regarding the broader implications of what he is saying. What has been lacking for far too long is a study that would offer the academic community an independent and responsible overview of at least a major component of Rescher's philosophy, and how it relates to other philosophical traditions. The task is surely daunting for anyone to undertake. This is the case not simply from the viewpoint of the volume of published material, but also from the standpoint of the variety of the areas of inquiry requiring special expertise; the latter ranges from traditional epistemology and metaphysics to contemporary discussions on axiology, decision theory, and the philosophy of science.

In listening to conversations about Rescher's impact on contemporary philosophy, the common refrain seems always to turn on the point that there is "yet another book" to appear, and that it is thus impossible to capture a full statement of his work as long as things are being produced. It seemed to me, however, that this was hardly a reason to defer action, but a stimulus to pursue avenues whereby a picture could be produced of an already amazing and still on-going legacy. A dynamic resonance continues in his work, which from the outset has crossed over to many different fields of philosophical discussion. The challenge was in coming up with

some motif that would bring together as many themes as possible into a coherent account, while preserving the natural energy and integrity of Rescher's work overall. A strictly serial approach would have collapsed from the sheer volume and variety of his publications, leaving the reader no better off than before. Trying to do everything would just be too much! What seemed to be needed was a strategy that begins with a central focal point, a starburst of sorts that could be explored and followed along as it illuminates a cluster of interesting themes emerging throughout the corpus of his work. This I found when I carefully considered his early rendition of the notion of "Rationality." The latter, as a concept that involves both the deliberative and the evaluative dimensions of consciousness, forms the nexus for other discussions in many of his later works. It is involved in his explanations of how human intelligence emerges, what constitutes the basis for the justification of moral decision making, how we define the notions of person and value, and what comprises the rationale for social responsibility. It is also at the basis of his critique of various philosophical positions, such as Scepticism, Utilitarianism, Positivism, Moral Relativism, and Existentialism.

Having come upon a strategy for bringing certain strands of his thought together systematically, the next step was to make certain that the end result did not distort the integrity of the original. This is to say that the overarching design, as proposed, had to be appropriate and fair to the content of Rescher's own thinking, while allowing this author the liberty of inserting his assessment of the material at certain points. Moreover, if this was to be a work about Nicholas Rescher's philosophy, then it had to present him as his is, a philosopher reacting to the philosophical ideas and traditions surrounding him in a manner that reveals his personal creative take over a long and historically significant period. A pervasive theme in his work speaks to support the ancient belief that philosophy is not to be closeted away in an ivory tower, but belongs in the life of a community as a vibrant and liberating force. Hence it is appropriate to regard this present effort as a philosophical portrait, since portraits are of living subjects. They are intended to capture for posterity some nuance of the essence and character of an individual, involved in the enterprise of life. Analogously, Rescher's philosophical portrait presents the philosophical overviews of a thinker who has sought to see lived experience in terms of the grandeur of ideas

and the nobility of the human spirit. This, therefore, had to be more than a book that deals exclusively with technical philosophical details. It has to present Rescher in the arena of what had come to be contemporary western philosophy in the last half of the twentieth century. The book needed to provide a portrait of someone who has never shunned defending the centrality of philosophy in public affairs. Thus though not a personal portrait, the book is intended to be about Rescher's professional life as a philosopher. This meant working with Professor Rescher in the course of planning this material, and determining whether the course I had chosen was indeed suitable for what was desired. In this regard I wish to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Nicholas Rescher for reviewing the draft of my final manuscript and providing useful comments toward its expansion and improvement. Throughout this process I enjoyed the benefits of his patience, understanding, and encouragement, which have sustained me in completing this task.

I would also like to thank the Director of the Cleveland State University Library, Dr. Glenda Thornton and the staff of the interlibrary Loan Service, especially Ms. Debra L. Durica, for their wonderful work in facilitating my research efforts.

Nicholas J. Moutafakis
Cleveland State University
September 2006

Introduction

Nicholas Rescher's contribution to philosophical inquiry is as profound in its intellectual depth as it is broadly encompassing in the breadth of its scope, embracing a vast panorama of human experience. His professional activity, ranging over half a century, has resulted in an enduring legacy of unique philosophical discussion, one that speaks to the pressing need of contemporary civilization to comprehend moral decision making in terms of the universal and uniquely human requirements of rationality, one that involves both reason and compassion. The twentieth century has seen within the halls of America's academia the periodic domination and quiet passing of several philosophical schools. In the early part of that century it was Idealism, Phenomenology, Pragmatism, and Logical Positivism. Somewhat later on came Existentialism, and the great number of things that are included beneath the banner of "Ordinary Language Philosophy." More recently, Post Modernism has endeavored to assume the rights to empire. Towards all of this Rescher's work manifests a refreshing aloofness, refusing a narrow commitment to any one of these philosophical movements and classifications.

There is in what he says a studious and creative eclecticism which centers consistently on the idea that at its best philosophy must never lose sight of the fact that it is meant to address life's *real* challenges, in their varied turns, vivid hues, and vexing complexities. His focus is steadily trained on the broader picture of lived experience, while creating a self-corrective philosophical system that provides a rational framework for clarifying the far-reaching ramifications of any philosophical issue, in its uniquely human experiential context.

Thus it cannot be said that his interest is in a detached academic exercise that is bent upon examining merely the meaning of words or in identifying a possible range of interpretations in some over-worked text. Though such pursuits surely have their place in the details of the enterprise of philosophical inquiry, Rescher's efforts go further to illustrate how the doing of philosophy must relate to our lives as intelligent and thriving human beings, interacting within a civilized social context. Numerous passages can be cited illustrating Rescher's commitment to the basic human dimension

of the philosophical enterprise. One is perhaps most telling in capturing succinctly the communal essence of his approach. It is found in one of his earliest works, *Introduction to Value Theory*, where he notes that in pursuing an understanding of the overt role of values in the rationalization of action, one finds that: "... the *language of value* must be part of the language of common life."¹

Rescher's commitment to the pivotal role that lived experience has in articulating philosophical ideas is perhaps no more clearly illustrated than in the manner with which he argues for his unique interpretation of Idealism. He takes care to avoid the traditional vagaries of this position by dealing creatively with concepts developed by philosophers in the past. By recasting these concepts in new forms and blending them with contemporary innovations, he produces a more powerful explanatory framework for understanding the world as it manifests itself in our times. For example, in *Conceptual Idealism* he presents his theory of *transactional cognition* that masterfully combines elements of Kant, Phenomenology, Pragmatism, evolutionary theory, and Leibniz.² What is striking here is how he critiques each of these ingredients individually while taking something useful from them to create a new synthesis. Thus he rejects Kant's idea of the "*Ding an sich*," as well as Bradley's "Absolute." Both, he argues, are examples of advocating an "empty idealization", since these concepts lead to lines of reasoning that are unworkable.³ They require our speaking of mind-independent particulars, which though patently unknowable, are taken by their advocates as somehow corresponding to objects that should be familiar and intelligible to us. This mode of discourse, however, in the final analysis, does not convey meaningfully any relation of "correspondence" at all. In such contexts, the realm of the mind-independent is and *always must* be cognitively vacuous to us, and none of the categories that are applicable to particulars of mind-manifest objects can be employed to describe a "mind-independent reality" so-called, without confounding different conceptual schemes.⁴ However, this does not mean that Rescher totally rejects Kant's theory of the understanding. He grants that Kant had it partly right in recognizing the formative power of reason upon experience, and that without the latter knowledge would be impossible. His own view of nature, Rescher observes, is mind conditioned, not in a spiritualistic or transcendentalist sense, but in the sense of being conceptually mind-involving, or "*noomorphic*" (mind structured).⁵ Reality-as-we-think-about-it, Rescher notes, is "a mental construct *in whose construction mentalesque* elements play a substantial role."⁶ Here, however, he again backs away

from going too far with Kant in that he denies that this structuring is transcendently necessary. Rather he sees it as generated within the constitution of our ordinary conceptual scheme. Moreover, this scheme is not in itself uniquely subjective, as concepts such as the Bradlean Cosmic Mind or Absolute Spirit require, rather it is rooted in “the generic, public, interpersonal capacities of mind”.⁷ The latter develop the “conceptual scaffolding” which helps make sense of the world in terms of patterns of order, taxonomic organization of experience, explanatory frameworks, social categories and roles, intentionality and purpose, evaluative categories, etc.⁸

This is the innovative “transactional” character of his theory of cognition, which renders his brand of idealism so profoundly creative. He surely has no use for Husserl’s indefensible “suspension” of the natural viewpoint, i.e. the *ἐποχή*, just as he has no use for Kant’s “*an sich*”. These ideas introduce a fiction into the discussion, namely that of mind as spectator, fully detached from some “intrinsically unknowable” independent reality, and yet as somehow making the process of understanding possible. Rescher’s transactionism requires that mind be seen primarily as a contributing agent along with extra-experiential reality, so that the resulting phenomenon is an *irreducible* synthesis of both. As the outcome of the transaction, that is the end result, cannot be said to be a solely mind-independent reality which becomes mind-involving, since that would disown the mind’s own unique contribution when summoned by experience. Neither can it be said, without again violating the transforming role of transactionism, that there is a fully formed self, with an innately prefigured conceptual scheme, that operates on automatic pilot, so to speak, inwardly surveying experience as raw data and mechanically generating understanding. For the self’s varied capacities to synthesize knowledge are themselves dependent on the outcome of the transaction itself. Our knowledge of the world is thus one that has a Leibnizian veridicality, in that it is consistent with our “warranted theorizing”.⁹ In this he aims at clinching the personally transcending objectivity of our knowledge of particulars, since it is ultimately a knowledge that is causally dependent upon both the novelty and surprise of extra-experiential experience, as well as on the mind’s interpretive role. In this respect, a correspondence theory of truth is in principle seen to be unsupportable, where this is interpreted as a strictly referential relation between knowledge claim and “*Ding an sich*”. Rescher prefers, as the more reasonable theory, a coherence theory of truth, when endeavoring to explain the truth-value of propositions about the world. In the latter case, truth is seen as a judgment emerging at the end of an

evaluative process, where a proposition is judged true or false with respect to how it coheres within an established and rationally ordered system of knowledge claims.

Rescher also reaches further into Philosophy's rich past to assimilate from Hegel the useful concept of a communitarian self. In the latter he sees a valuable component for his pivotal concept of *personhood*, an absolutely indispensable ingredient for his theory of values. In this respect he borrows the Hegelian view that persons are defined partly by the position they share in relation to others, within a just social order. To this he adds an element of personal independence and individuality by incorporating elements of Nietzsche's notion of a personal self. In the latter he finds much that is of value in the assertion of one's independence, and in the insistence upon the privacy of our inward state. The delicate balancing of these two factors create Rescher's uniquely holistic conception of what it is to be a person, i.e. a rationally independent agent who by participating with others in the shared life of a just community evolves into a morally responsible human being.

Again, as is characteristic of his eclectic approach, he spurns Hegel's belief in the inexorable logic of historical change as the key and determinative factor in defining a person. For this tends to eradicate all vestiges of individuality. He replaces Hegel's restrictive logic with the spontaneous and pervasive influence of nature's evolutionary process in shaping the conceptual schemes we have discovered and employed successfully. Rescher spurns the extremes of Nietzsche's view of self as well, noting that: "...someone who exists only unto himself, without relationships of community and interrelationships with others, is enmeshed in a delusional detachment from the world's course of things that makes him a freak rather than a person".¹⁰ Neither does he find anything useful in Nietzsche's focal concept that life itself is nothing more than the unforgiving "will to power." This attitude of thought only serves to dehumanize others by depriving them of their sense of self-worth and therefore of their personhood.

It is in this respect that he finds Pragmatism to be a key influence in his philosophical overview, in that the latter harbors an understanding of the world that is founded upon beliefs that are both nurtured and challenged by experience as actually lived. In going in this direction he discovers that he can be consistent in preserving the important idea of the formative function of mind, which though itself subject to an evolving process, nonetheless serves to synthesize our knowledge of things in a systematic manner.

The astute eclecticism underlying his approach also requires noting how

he steers clear of Husserl and phenomenological reductionists generally. For their methods posit an indefensible conceptual divide between mind per se and phenomenal world as “bracketed,” in their parlance. However he still finds much that is useful in the works of Franz Brentano and Alex Meinong. Surely within the general tenor of his arguments against the rationally unsupportable exclusivity that a Cartesian subject/object split engenders one discerns a derivation from its original source in Brentano, as is seen as well in Rescher’s emphasis upon beginning his inquiries by considering phenomena from a “presentational mode”.¹¹ The latter is especially important to Rescher since his entire philosophical approach is predicated upon the “irreducible” presentational immediacy of experience. Also, in Alexis Meinong he finds much that is useful in the idea that cognition itself is an evaluative activity. For in saying that something is true or false about any thing, one is in essence doing nothing less than “judging the value” of a single proposition.¹²

Moreover, it should be noted as well how Rescher’s belief that philosophy, in its truest sense, must be sensitive to the circumstances human beings actually find themselves in, is not open ended. He knows where to draw the line in recognizing the legitimacy of the philosophical enterprise. This is exemplified in his *American Philosophy Today*, where he cites the present day perversion of pragmatism by some contemporary American writers who have “turned their backs on” the traditional pragmatic standard for testing objective adequacy, i.e. they have disregarded the “... individual-transcending reality principle ...[that] offsets the vagaries of personal reactions,...”¹³ Labeling them “pseudo-pragmatists,” Rescher notes that they have substituted pragmatism’s communal concern for “what works *for us*” with their egocentric concern of “what works *for me*.” This trend has shamefully laid by the wayside “the classical pragmatic approach that saw the rational validity of intellectual artifacts to reside in the success of our conduct of our extra-theoretical affairs....”¹⁴ These latter day pragmatist, so-called, and their “murky subjectivism,” are neither pragmatists nor philosophers. For in denigrating the communal dimension of truth they have forsaken the basis of rationality itself.

Interestingly, there is in what Rescher says about the centrality of life and its dynamic effect on the pursuit of philosophical understanding a hint of what John Herman Randall had attempted to explain much earlier, regarding the very nature of the philosophical enterprise. In a superbly incisive definition Randall states “...Philosophy is the criticism of the fundamental beliefs in any of man’s great cultural enterprises, science, art, relig-

ion, the moral life, social and practical activity, when some new idea or altered experience has impinged upon them and generates intellectual tensions and maladjustments....¹⁵ Randall observes, for example, that for all of its innovative brilliance, Cartesianism was still very much like any other emergent philosophical movement, in that it reflected the ever-recurring traditional concerns inherent in humanity's relentless attempt at comprehending the universe it is a part of. This eternal quest, according to Randall, is generally as old as the Ancient Greeks.¹⁶ There are always, he observes, certain persistent distinctions in the history of philosophy, certain logical antitheses, which receive attention in every age, though with different words and different emphases. These distinctions are at the heart of all philosophical disputes: the one and the many, permanence and change, the real and the ideal, reason and experience, form and matter, structure and process. Though some have looked upon these conceptual structures as problems to be solved once and for all, for Randall they have become conceptual tools with which philosophers endeavor to make sense of our continuous experience of the intelligible world. They are, Randall adds, weapons to be used in fighting. The fight itself, the quest, the enemy forever evolves as ever new in every generation and epoch, but the fighting and the weapons used, these, Randall says, are as ancient as the Greeks.¹⁷

The most radical thinkers, Randall continues, are soaked in tradition, and in the case noted, Descartes was surely no exception. For he also sought to champion the belief in an underlying mathematical structure to the world, not unlike Plato's in its essential perfection. He rejected the vacuous and seemingly endless distinctions of the Scholastics, and advocated the pre-eminence of mathematical truth over common sense experience in understanding and explaining the real world. In all of this he was armed with the arsenal of the past (Pythagoreanism and Platonism)—though expanded to include the descriptive power of his invention: analytical geometry, and his battleground was the decayed thinking of his temporal present, i.e., Scholasticism.¹⁸

Analogously, Rescher employs the tools of his times, i.e., the history of philosophy, evolutionary theory, propositional logic, decision theory, probability theory, etc., to define in formal and conceptual terms the character of possible actions in the uninhibited expression of our rationality. He illustrates how one can define and quantify the value of action within a contemporary context of real life situations. His overarching goal is to preserve and justify the inherent moral core of rationality in decision-making. A goal generally consistent with certain moral theories of the past yet set

within a contemporary dialogue relating to humanity's evolutionary nature. Moreover, his aim is to address the pressing needs of our contemporary world, needs that are evidenced by a pervasive corrosion of standards of honesty, decency, and integrity at the highest levels of our civil, religious, commercial, and political institutions. The present day indifference toward the rights of others, toward respecting and furthering the well being of our fellows, toward cherishing the role reason plays in guiding our choices, etc. is an ominous factor that threatens an unsettling future for the survival of our freedoms.

Significantly, in Randall's view, the history of ideas is both cumulative and original. Ideas that satisfy the particular needs of people at a specific time in their history have a structure of their own. Old ideas are abandoned for new ones when elements of a culture develop the possibilities of new experiences. Invariably, the tendency always is to abandon an idea before it is well understood and to replace it with a new and more serviceable one. Ideas triumph for only a short time. They speak to the immediate need of the philosopher to satisfy his desire to explain what is before him. The history of philosophy manifests not an orderly development of thought through the ages, but a series of "lootings", wherein no great philosophy has ever been thoroughly and rationally refuted. There are a lot of discards in the wake of the history of philosophy. It is littered with ideas that have been abandoned because they are no longer useful in explaining new experience. Logical disproof is not what displaces one philosophical movement for another, the culprit, rather, is irrelevance. For Randall, the history of philosophy may thus be seen as a series of episodes in which philosophers attempt to explain the world in terms of concepts first defined by the Greeks. Each episode reflects both its own misunderstanding of these fundamental conceptual tools, and its creative embellishment of them.

Rescher echoes some of Randall's basic sentiment on this score in *The Strife of Systems*, where he reflects upon how the philosophical enterprise never lends itself to the total rational refutation of a philosophical interpretation. However, he is cautious in backing away from Randall's central claim that philosophical developments are basically spontaneous and lack completely any orderly progression. Philosophers, Rescher notes in partially agreeing with Randall, clearly do have their own feel for what is right, and their sense of what is right is not ever subject to evidential proof or disputation. "...The central role of *cognitive values* in philosophizing means that learning philosophy is not only a matter of mastering facts but it is also one of acquiring a "point of view", of forming cognitive attitudes,

of acquiring affinities and allegiances in matters of exploiting data.”¹⁹ No amount of reasoning ever manages to dislodge the acquired point of view. It persists and uses reasoning to interpret the facts of the world as it sees it. This is why value diversity is inevitable. Philosophical conversions, Rescher notes, are not matters of altered courses of reasoning, but of quantum jumps to a different value outlook.

Having said this, however, Rescher also sees a pressing need to bring forward something very important that Randall evidently misses in his discussion of how progress occurs in philosophical inquiry. For there is a distinction to be drawn between the philosopher’s “gut” reaction to the world on the one hand, and the evolution of philosophical inquiry on the other. Whereas the former is something both Randall and Rescher agree plays a key motivational role in generating a philosophically unique point of view, the latter, as a process of discourse leading to a fully developed philosophical system, is clearly recognized only by Rescher. Surely without the presence of critical dialogue the “strife of systems” could not be what it is, namely philosophical dialogue. This, Rescher says, constitutes the essential nature of the evolution of philosophical systems. It is only through the discussion and criticism of other philosophical theories that philosophers transform their “gut reaction” to the world into new systems of philosophical explanation. Their work is not nurtured in a vacuum, as Randall appears to suggest in several passages. Various philosophies, Rescher is keen to observe, emerge as rival solutions to shared problems.²⁰ One should also note here how for Rescher the human element, as one’s “gut” response to the world of values mentioned above, is something that remains at the heart of the enterprise, it both guides and challenges the activity of philosophizing.

This insight aligns itself quite nicely with the popular and philosophically profound message Lewis Carroll conveys through his story of Achilles and the tortoise.²¹ Despite the efforts of Achilles to convince Tortoise that given any argument of the form having premises: “if p then q”, and “p”, one must always rationally conclude: “q”, Tortoise stubbornly insists upon having just one further justification for taking the “actual” step to the conclusion: “q”. While Achilles patiently and pointlessly supplies the added rule to secure the concluding inference, sly Tortoise continues to insist upon yet another “additional” justification. A rule justifying “making him” arrive at the conclusion, and so on *ad infinitum*. Lewis’ point is clear and very important, it dramatizes the conceptual divide between our pure formal reasoning and one’s inner motivation for action, an insight we will

see Rescher holding as central to his philosophical outlook. For it is the “gut” reason of everyday life that motivates us to see the world in a certain way, philosophically, and to act on what seems to us to be right. The cathedrals in the pristine formalisms of logic are lacking in conveying such motivational power.

Some of the flavor of Rescher’s general approach concerning what the doing of philosophy involves can also be found to have parallelisms with Richard Rorty’s views involving the role of rationality in the pursuit of philosophical truth. The latter’s critique of the belief in a universal rationality has him saying that he would much prefer replacing the notion expressed by “the force of the better argument” with something like “the force of the better vocabulary”. By this Rorty means to emphasize the importance of securing “the argument that works best for a given audience,” as opposed to seeking to find a single argument that somehow is “universally valid” for everyone at any time.²² The reason for this is that universal validity is prefaced upon the fictional idea of a universal or ideal audience. In Rorty’s view it is more realistic to think of doing philosophy in terms of a given group of listeners, instead of prejudging your audience as being intrinsically better than another. He claims that one must separate rationality from absolute truth, so that rationality is seen as dealing with notions like curiosity, persuasion, and tolerance. When a culture comes to adopt this more expansive view of the rational it can see itself in more secure terms; as one that is involved in the adventure of changing its moral identity, “...it can find its identity precisely in its willingness to enlarge its imagination and merge with other groups, other human possibilities, so as to form the barely imaginable, cosmopolitan society of the future....”²³

Somewhat in line with Rescher, Rorty is pointing to the human dimension of philosophical activity, where one’s view of the world must fit comfortably with their evolving philosophical awareness of that world. It will be seen in the discussions that are to unfold that Rescher also believes that the “universality of rationality” is not to be construed in some transcendent platonic sense, nor is it to be regarded relativistically as simply consensus. Rather it is to be taken in the beneficial and objective sense of that which *ought to be* adhered to by every intelligent human being that interacts with the world at large.

However, one should also be quick to note the profound differences in their overall view of philosophy, as expounded by Rorty and Rescher. Though both welcome the need to see human experience within the context of a presently evolving process, each differs profoundly as to what this

means for the discipline itself. The former advocates a skeptical stance, i.e. the total abandonment of doing philosophy in any of its traditional ways. As a contemporary hermeneuticist he advises renouncing the centrally philosophic quest for alternative cognitive methods, preferring to concede to the natural sciences the general notion of "cognition." The idea is to *dissolve* rather than to *resolve* philosophical issues. The goal of philosophy, Rorty insists, should not be an inquiry into matters of fact, but a conversation into matters of interest. Philosophy's usefulness, were one to pursue its study seriously, is to demonstrate its futility as a productive discipline, and to illustrate the broad cultural base of the history of ideas.

Rescher's reaction is clearly quite the opposite of Rorty's. His own critique of Rorty is to note how the latter is perhaps too willing to sacrifice comprehension for a supposed liberation from philosophical discussion and inquiry. One of philosophy's major concerns, Rescher observes, is to resolve issues dealing with the coherence of our beliefs concerning life and the world we live in. To abandon philosophy in the manner Rorty suggests is to decide to be content with ignorance and incoherence. It takes away the possibility of making things better, which, in Rescher's view, is a loss of great consequence.

Moreover, knowing the history of philosophy is liberating in itself in the sense that it enables us to understand how and why ideas emerged and how to avoid their unnecessary if not tyrannical control upon our present day thinking. Thus the many twentieth century "isms" are not unsatisfying because they have been rationally refuted, rather their relevance has been brought into question because of changes in our needs in understanding things. They were articulated on the basis of philosophers needing to interpret the world of their time, to provide a comprehensive view of life as once lived, and surely Positivism and Phenomenology have their earlier counterparts, such as Idealism and Realism, etc. Asking whether we are "better off" for having entertained these philosophies is asking whether intellectual creativity itself has any value. The answer of course is "yes". They and their predecessors, represent one more fight in lived experience, one more quest, one more attempt to make sense of life; and Philosophy was there, as Randall would say, to prepare the combatants, to shout the battle cry, and to point to the possibility of something more serene beyond the tumult.²⁴

In this context it is of interest to note Rescher's selectivity in what he perceives to be the enduring and useful legacy of Philosophy's past. With great care he employs ideas that others have propounded as primary colors

for his pallet. The final result is a creative blend of past and present. The overall effect of his work is that of a new philosophical understanding of life as a vibrant, precious, and delicately fragile experience. It offers interesting insights into how certain philosophical lessons speak over the centuries in genuinely enduring and optimistic terms of the nobility of the human spirit and of our personhood. To understand him, therefore, requires that we know something of the essence of Plato and Aristotle, something more of Kant and Hegel, Peirce and Dewey, and a generous amount of the phenomenology that is found in Brentano and Meinong,—through without the transcendentalist tendencies of some of their followers. In this respect the emphasis of his work reminds us of Socrates' admonishment of Phaedo that we must never permit ourselves to grow weary of or angry at the difficulty of philosophical inquiry because it has not enabled us to achieve a definitive resolution of an issue. For the quest is in itself as important as any solution—if not more so, in that it serves to remind us of the power of our intellect in its search for truth, and of the essential goodness of our nature.²⁵

Even in works where Rescher brings to bear his considerable analytical skills, where the complexity of the mathematical analysis may challenge the general reader's attention, one finds his underlying theme to be steadily targeted at some prominent social concern requiring common sense attention and scrutiny. At virtually every turn in his writings one encounters his gentle reminding of the reader of what philosophical work should be, and how it has a unique and indispensable role to play in our understanding of the function of values and moral decision making in contemporary life. We see in the long history of his works that he argues, often prophetically, that when dealing with values philosophy's role cannot be usurped by Cultural Anthropology, Economics, or defined by "one size fits all" utilitarian theories of ethics. Such studies fail terribly in giving an account of the complex human component that arises when vicarious affects befall an individual who interacts within a social structure. This sentiment is expressed eloquently in *Moral Absolutes*, where Rescher defines the study of morality as being "... in its very nature a functional enterprise cultivated by rational agents for the achievement of certain beneficial results: the protection and advancement of the real interests of people.... At the heart of morality lies *benevolence*—a due care for the interests of people-in-general...."²⁶

Thus in turning our attention to his substantial contribution in the area of values, we encounter Rescher's insistence on the need to respect the centrality of philosophy's place in contemporary life. This is an especially

significant aspect of Rescher's work, one that stands up to those who claim that the entire relevance of Western Philosophy, and of all of Western Culture for that matter, is problematic in today's global environment. Some have argued that it may very well be that Philosophy, as we have known it, has simply outlived its importance and usefulness, if it indeed ever had any. For Rescher, and others, nothing can be further from the truth. The lessons of philosophy that have withstood the test of time and tyrants are those speaking of the uniqueness of human rationality as the essential vehicle with which the great achievements of man have come about. The latter are to be found not only in the natural sciences and the arts, but also in the most humane area of philosophical investigation, the study of morality itself. In this domain, which Rescher is quick to distance from the debilitating influences of relativism, one has the discovery of the universally recognized truth that rational validation is the only true basis of moral action. Moral action,—when seen as totally independent of custom or mores,—is that which cares for, preserves, and enhances the dignity and real interests of persons universally. This insight, first realized by the Greeks and refined by Western thinkers for over two millennia, stands as one of Western Philosophy's greatest and most enduring contributions to world civilization. Thus in terms of its broadest implications, Rescher's work strikes a positive and highly optimistic note on the unique importance of Western thought. His philosophy offers to a world presently demoralized by moral relativism and threatened by fanatical terror, the hope and confidence of an enduring morality. A morality that is rooted in the only thing morality can be based upon the essential and uniquely human attribute of rationality, conceived as a composite of reason and compassion.

II.

Why a book on Nicholas Rescher?

This question can be approached from a variety of perspectives. From one standpoint, Rescher's relevance as an important voice in twentieth century American Philosophy is beyond dispute. This is not simply a matter dictated by the volume and quality of his scholarly achievement. It is substantiated as well by the professional recognition he has received nationally and internationally as one who has labored tirelessly to further the cause of philosophical study here and abroad for over half a century. Through the creation and sponsorship of top tier philosophical journals, the development of indispensable computerized venues for pursuing philosophical re-

search, the mentoring of philosophical associations, internationally renowned scholarly institutes and professional conferences, etc. he has emerged as a prominent leader in supporting the free exchange of ideas worldwide.

Moreover, in reading the many critiques of Rescher's work one finds disturbingly a pervasive failure by commentators to consider the broader ramifications of his contributions. Some think that they can discuss his position by simply looking at one of his books, perhaps a single article or even a book chapter, and that is all the research one needs to do to critique Rescher. The attitude of many commentators is, just take a shot at a fragment of his view and you'll be done with him! What results is shoddy scholarship. It reflects work that fails to do justice to the systemically integrated character of Rescher's position.²⁷ What is needed is a study that alerts us to the fact that such critiques do more harm than good, and that in terms of content one needs to have a more panoramic understanding of Rescher's work so as to appreciate its significance, relevance, and applicability.

Apart from the above is the fact that in reviewing and evaluating Rescher's work, one finds that the contemporary issues he discusses become resuscitated and reinvigorated by the very perspective he chooses to adopt. Cutting edge debates on culture wars, the effects of technology on contemporary culture, the influence of the social sciences in determining values and the nature of moral discourse, etc. acquire a more challenging, lively, urgent, and resonant tone when seen through his prism. In addition, Rescher's work offers an opportunity to once again approach philosophical inquiry from a standpoint that has been lost sight of for far too long. This is that of developing an integrated philosophical system of explanation, one that goes beyond the narrow focus of Analytical Philosophy that dominated the twentieth century in the West, and beyond having to subscribe to the nihilistic pointlessness of life proffered by Existentialism.

Several intimidating assumptions have been allowed to become all too prevalent within philosophy in the last one hundred years. These are that the world has become too complex, the information it holds too vast, the sophistication required for its mastery far too demanding, the unspeakable cruelty of human beings toward each other too universal, too unforgiving, and beyond reasonable redemption for human experience to be subjected to philosophical systematization. Gone forever, some say, are the halcyon days of Aristotle, Descartes, or Kant, where life seemed more manageable and philosophy more capable in providing a consistent and systematic pic-