

Robert Almeder (Ed.)

Rescher Studies

A Collection of Essays on the Philosophical Work
of Nicholas Rescher

Presented to Him on the Occasion of His 80th Birthday



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Preface

Robert Almeder

Over many years Nicholas Rescher has published many books on a wide range of standard philosophical topics, including Greek Thought, Arabic Logic, Formal Logic, Leibniz, Conditional and Hypothetical Reasoning, Semantic and Pragmatics (or Dialectics), Possible World Theory, Epistemology, Evolutionary Epistemology, Explanation and Prediction, The Coherence Theory of Truth, Scientific Progress, Scientific Realism, Idealism and the Limits of Knowledge, Thought Experimentation, Cognitive Economy and Epistemetrics, Pragmatism, Process Thought, Ethics and Moral Philosophy, Social Philosophy, Philosophical Anthropology, Common Sensism, Philosophy of Religion and Metaphilosophy. Scattered over numerous publications, it is only in the present book that these many themes of Rescher's work come between two covers.

In the light of his productivity, it seemed to some of us that it would be a nifty idea if somebody engaged a group of willing and able philosophers to contribute to a collection of critical essays on the development of Nick's systematic work over these last thirty years. More specifically, the plan would be to direct these selected philosophers to critically examine specific sections of Rescher's later works in order that the core of what Nick has written both early and late would be the subject of focused, probing, and critical essays that would hopefully connect, compare, contrast, and generally lend illumination and understanding to the overall vision articulated in both the earlier works and the works in the last thirty years.

Voila! A Festschrift to celebrate and honor Nicholas Rescher on his eightieth birthday for a life of continuing high-order philosophical and human achievement. I won the toss for the honor of being the editor of this volume. The fruits of that plan are here for everybody to see and hopefully to enjoy.

Finally, of course, this collection is dedicated to Nick and Dorothy for whom one can be sure that the authors of the essays in this volume have a deep respect and not infrequently an abiding affection.

The Limits of Science, Realism, and Idealism

Robert Almeder

1. INTRODUCTION

A few years back I published an article on Nicholas Rescher's views on the limits of natural science. [(LNS) 2000.40-59]. That article focused somewhat less on the realism/idealism discussion and more on the cluster of inter-related epistemological theses centering on Rescher's views on the limits of natural science. This essay will concentrate more on Rescher's realism and idealism, as his basic views on the limits of natural science have not changed substantially over the past thirty years although there seems to be a development by way of exfoliation and further clarification on the realism/idealism issue. This latter development coalesces in varying degrees in various publications including: [*Cognitive Pragmatism*, (CP) 2001.; *Realistic Pragmatism*, (RP) 2000.; *Pragmatic Realism*, (PR) 2003.; *Human Knowledge in Idealistic Perspective*, (HKIP) 1991.; *Induction*, (I) 1981; the trilogy, *A System of Pragmatic Idealism*, (SPI) 1992-93.; *Coherence Theory of Truth*, (CTT) 1973.] Before examining Rescher's matured realism and idealism, however, it might prove helpful simply to review his views on the limits of natural science. Most of what follows on Rescher's views on the limits of science is a condensation of things I already described, analyzed, and applauded in greater detail in an earlier piece [(LNS) 2000], and so there is little need to repeat in detail the more scholarly references and analysis in the earlier exposition. Other contributors to this volume, of course, may provide a slightly different and possibly more complete assessment of Rescher's view on the limits of science. So, I will be mercifully brief on the basic position Rescher offers on the limits of natural science. After that, and in the end, I will try to locate where future discussion on realism and idealism might reflect favorably Rescher's basic position as herein described.

As I now see it, incidentally, Rescher's most recent characterization of his realism in terms of a 'myopic' realism puts him on the side of the gods on the general issue. That's the good news. When so understood, however, we may want to urge that his realism more effectively emphasize that

while we have no reliable procedure for determining precisely which propositions in our language are in fact true, rather than fallibly but fully and warrantably assertible (or estimated or approximated) as true, we do and must nevertheless attain to the truth *indirectly* in some myopic fashion by way of justifiably and sincerely accepting all such propositions as items of human knowledge, knowing full well that certainly some of them will disappear, like the proverbial dodo bird, into the dark emptiness of a rejected past. But if human knowledge requires *demonstrable* truth, we must re-construe truth solely in terms of warranted assertibilities relative to the evidential context available and the applicative and adaptive consequences by way of prediction and control that accepting such beliefs will imply. Hopefully, Rescher will not regard this conclusion as an unacceptable offering, as it still thrives on the warrantably assertible belief that some of our fully justified beliefs must in fact instantiate in some way our ordinary alethic and platitudinous conception of truth because, as Rescher himself affirms, we would not otherwise have any way to account for the broad or general success of many of our cognitive endeavors except by appeal to mystery or miracle. But this conclusion also suggests that we need to abandon common sense, at least as an *a priori* or strongly reliable indicator or criterion for determining *which* beliefs are true rather than (like all other empirical and fallible beliefs which can be items of human knowledge) fully warrantably assertible by all the rules of acceptance we are collectively empowered to accept by our own lights. In this we need not fear passing over into a dreadful transcendental idealism or, more specifically, the view that all properties of the world commonly experienced are purely linguistic in nature. We only need to refrain from asserting that what we are fully justified in believing to be so, is demonstrably so; and recognize that human knowledge is in fact simply what we would be fundamentally fully justified in believing to be so. Some of those beliefs will not be true in the alethic or platitudinous sense of 'true, but we will need to treat all of them as true in that alethic sense knowing full well that some of them will not be true in that sense. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. More on this later.

2. RESCHER ON THE LIMITS OF NATURAL SCIENCE

Rescher's core position on the nature and limits of natural science includes the following basic items:

1. There are important empirically answerable questions about the observable world that we cannot answer by appeal to the methods of testing and confirmation proper to the natural sciences. Answers to the questions about the validity of the inductive method itself, or about the basic common sense beliefs upon which natural science rests at any time, for example, we cannot established directly and non-circularly by appeal to either deduction alone or the inductive methodology in natural science.
2. Our methods of induction are also limited in that even when one's *particular* beliefs about the world turn out to be fully warrantedly assertible under the usual methods of testing and confirmation in natural science; such warranted assertibility is evidence neither of their certainty nor of any *strong* guarantee of their truth. They are truth approximations, and sometimes they are not true. In fact, for this reason, all empirical beliefs are fallible, and hence, however well-confirmed, or confirmable, they are defeasible, and subject to revision or rejection in the light of future evidence or future collective decisions on future standards for evaluating the evidence.
3. Moreover, although the products of inductive methodology may be limited in the above ways, the methodology in general is more than justified as a methodology reliably providing knowledge of the external world because in the long run, and on the whole, it leads often enough to truth. Thus, for example, the limits of natural science do not imply a *purely* instrumentalist interpretation of empirical knowledge in general and scientific theories in particular.
4. The number of non-trivial empirically answerable questions that natural science can in principle answer at any given time is inexhaustible, or indefinitely large; and so natural science will never, even unto eternity, answer all the questions that it can in principle answer. There will always be *ignorabimus* questions.
5. Whatever progress natural science will make unto eternity by way of answering more and more non-trivial questions in time, the progress will be increasingly limited by economic forces and an expansion of natural resources so that, under the best of circumstances, there will be a logarithmic retardation in scientific progress as time advances.

This retardation will result from the ever-increasing cost of the technology necessary for doing science in conjunction with ever increasing global demand for both finite and limited resources and the demand for social services outside science.

6. Scientific theories are limited in that while seeking to correctly and completely describe nature, they can never quite achieve as much although, to be sure, they approximate, estimate, or come close to doing as much; and finally,
7. As natural science progresses, it is inevitable that the technology required for solving social problems will become so increasingly complex, along with the complexity of social problems and the answers offered, that science will not be able to deliver the technology or answers necessary to solve the inevitable social problems that will emerge. Natural Science, then, in its applicative function, is limited in that it will not be able to provide adequately and indefinitely for important social progress and welfare because answers provided by technology become ever more complex, and the technology becomes ever more costly and difficult to control in the interest of promoting social welfare.

Let me offer now a brief exposition of the reasoning Rescher offers for the first six of the above listed items. My conclusion shall be that while one might conceivably question some of the finer implications of Rescher's thesis on the eternity of scientific progress, we can nonetheless applaud the impressive answers offered on the general question of the limits and scope of natural science.

Thereafter we can reflect more on his realism and idealism and hopefully offer some clarification on his current position as it has emerged in the last few years.

3. SCIENTISM AND LEGITIMATELY ANSWERABLE QUESTIONS OUTSIDE SCIENCE

For Rescher, it is a mistake to believe that the only legitimately answerable questions about the world of physical objects are those that can be answered by appeal solely to the methods of testing and confirmation in the natural sciences. Nor has he argued by way of a fallback position that