

Michele Marsonet

# Idealism and Praxis

The Philosophy of 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](mailto: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](mailto: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](http://www.vrin.fr)

©2008 ontos verlag  
P.O. Box 15 41, D-63133 Heusenstamm  
[www.ontosverlag.com](http://www.ontosverlag.com)

ISBN 13: 978-3-938793-99-2

2008

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in retrieval systems or transmitted  
in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, microfilming, recording or otherwise  
without written permission from the Publisher, with the exception of any material supplied specifically for the  
purpose of being entered and executed on a computer system, for exclusive use of the purchaser of the work

Printed on acid-free paper  
This hardcover binding meets the International Library standard

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

# CONTENTS

Foreword by Nicholas Rescher	i
Preface	iii
Abbreviations for Rescher's Main Works	vii
Chapter 1: The Historical Background	
1. The Significance of Pragmatism for Contemporary Philosophy.....	1
2. Logical Positivism and Analytic Philosophy.....	7
3. The Decline of Pragmatism and Its Resurgence.....	11
Chapter 2: Between Pragmatism and Analysis	
1. Nicholas Rescher's Life and Work.....	21
2. The Rise and Fall of Analytic Philosophy.....	25
3. Objective vs. Subjective Pragmatism.....	36
Chapter 3: The Primacy of Practice	
1. The Path to Ontological Objectivity.....	45
2. The Theory of Rationality.....	52
3. The Coherence Theory of Truth.....	58
Chapter 4: The Idealistic Stance	
1. Whose Theory of Knowledge?.....	69
2. Biological and Cultural Evolution.....	75
3. Naturalism and Metaphysics.....	82
4. Conceptual Idealism.....	89
Chapter 5: Science and Its Limits	
1. Ontology and Epistemology.....	99
2. The Problem of Scientific Realism.....	107

3. The Limits of Science .....	114
Chapter 6: Social and Natural Reality	
1. A Pragmatic Philosophy of Logic .....	123
2. The Defence of Conceptual Schemes .....	130
3. Metaphilosophical Issues .....	140
Chapter 7: Social and Political Philosophy	
1. Philosophical Anthropology .....	151
2. Political Pluralism .....	157
3. Justice and Fairness .....	162
4. What Is Morality? .....	165
5. Morality and Rationality .....	170
6. Relativism and Absolutism .....	173
Chapter 8: The Contemporary Debate	
1. Rescher, Quine, and Sellars .....	181
2. Rescher and Today Neopragmatism .....	192
3. Final Overview .....	201
Chapter 9: Bibliographical Sources: Chronological List of Rescher's Books	
1. Books by Nicholas Rescher .....	209
2. Writings About Nicholas Rescher's Philosophy .....	222
3. Other Sources .....	223
Index of Names .....	239

# FOREWORD

By Nicholas Rescher

Over the years I have written a good many books on a considerable variety of philosophical topics. In my own mind, they combine to tell a coherent story, so that something of an integrated overall system emerges among varied details of more specialized studies. But this circumstance may not be apparent to the casual reader, and the very proliferation cries out for synthesis. Here I see Michele Marsonet's book as a tour de force. For it manages to present in one single volume a cogent and informative overview of my position in theoretical philosophy. In accomplishing this task, Marsonet has succeeded admirably in making my philosophical theses and theories accessible to colleagues who have neither the time nor the patience to pursue them across many diverse books. Moreover, his work provides an ample apparatus of references to the relevant literature produced by myself and by my critics to enable the reader whose interest is piqued by a particular idea to find the way to further details.

A particularly valuable feature of Marsonet's book lies in its provision of context. His wide ranging and deeply informed knowledge of American philosophy enables him to position my work in the wider setting of its relationships with various contemporary American and other colleagues. For the fact is that my philosophical views have often been stimulated by reaction to and opposition against the writings of others. I have had bones to pick with Davidson on conceptual schemes, with Feyerabend on rational inquiry, with Habermas on consensus, with Popper on objectivity, with Putnam on evolutionary epistemology, with Kripke on possible worlds, with Rorty on the task of philosophy and the nature of pragmatism, and so on. Marsonet throws an instructive and interesting light upon most of these conflicts and controversies. Highly interesting, too, is his analysis of my views as a launching-pad for a telling critique of analytic philosophy in its traditional guise.

If this book induces its readers to look directly into some of my own—as I expect it will—there is one aspect of my writing that they should be aware of, namely that it has unfolded over the years in an essentially exfoliative way. A few chapters—or even paragraphs—in ear-

lier books have provided the ideational basis from which an entire subsequent book developed. This process has made for an element of redundancy which (as it seems to me) is in any case inevitable in a writer whose ideas are systemically interconnected across diverse topics. Repetition across different books is the price that a systematic expositor must pay to secure the interdependent readability of his works.

In science things are not simple, nor yet in life. And so we cannot expect simplicity in philosophy either. Philosophers are always struggling to manage complexity. They strive—not always successfully—to do justice to complicated issues in language that is accessible and easily understood. In this regard, I think that Michele Marsonet has succeeded admirably and I am greatly in his debt. I heartily recommend his book as offering readable, accurate, and highly informative introduction to my philosophy.

Nicholas Rescher  
Pittsburgh PA  
April 2008

## PREFACE

This volume is meant to be a natural continuation of my book *The Primacy of Practical Reason: an essay on Nicholas Rescher's Philosophy*, published in 1996. In that context I dealt with almost all aspects of Rescher's thought, with the exception of ethics and value theory. I then felt that this was a serious lack and decided to write a new volume in order to provide the reader with a more complete account. The reader will then find, in the seventh chapter, three new paragraphs on Rescher's ethical views: "What Is Morality?", "Morality and Rationality", and "Relativism and Absolutism"

I heard first about Nicholas Rescher while writing my dissertation on many-valued logics at the University of Genoa in the 1970's. The literature on the subject was then—as it is now—rather fragmentary, and a teacher from another university pointed out to me that Rescher had actually written a comprehensive survey—just what I badly needed. However, getting an American book in Italy in those years was no easy task, and I remember being rather desperate because of the long delay (after all, my graduation was at stake). Subsequently I met Rescher personally, the first time when I was a graduate student in the Philosophy Department of the University of Pittsburgh, and then as a Visiting Fellow at the Pittsburgh Center for Philosophy of Science. Given his kindness and generosity, it comes now to my mind that it would have been better to write directly to him explaining my situation: for I would surely have received the volume in a much shorter time. So *Many-Valued Logic* was the first book by him that I read, and it is thus even too natural that I keep a sort of special "affection" for it.

Rescher is certainly different from the average American philosopher, who is (or at least was, until quite recently) usually interested only in technical issues. One undoubtedly detects a "continental" flavor in his writings, which display a great concern for wholeness and system. In this respect, he reminds me of Wilfrid Sellars, a great philosopher whose lectures I had the good fortune to attend in Pittsburgh. It seems to me that Rescher's system provides an interesting way out from the crisis of analytic philosophy (a crisis that really exists, despite many colleagues' firm denials in this regard).

In my opinion, the evolutionary-pragmatic type of explanation has acquired in the more recent phase of his thought a prominent role, and this is why his latest writings differ to a certain extent from the previous ones. A development, which is both historical and theoretical, can thus be clearly

detected in Rescher's speculative evolution, where the importance of the pragmatist elements (especially related to C.S. Peirce and C.I. Lewis) has continued to grow with the passing of time. This explains why, in my book, the quotations from Rescher's latest works are more numerous than those drawn from the former ones. For Rescher has of late both put forward various new insights and addressed objections that were previously raised against his theses. In writing the book, it frequently happened to me to find that objections raised in the 1970's or early 80's were addressed and satisfactorily answered in subsequent works of his.

It should be clear from the onset that this is not meant to be a "critical" essay on Rescher but, rather, an introduction to his philosophical system. The readers interested in deepening its knowledge will find in the present book all the bibliographical references necessary for carrying this job out at best. The three miscellaneous anthologies that have been published, respectively, in the late 1970's, in the early 80's and in 1998, provide already such a critical account<sup>1</sup>. What is still missing, however, is an introductory book to Rescher's philosophy, i.e. a volume that could lead the reader to understand what our author really claims by giving a schematic—but comprehensive—account of his views on the various philosophical topics. Naturally Rescher published *A System of Pragmatic Idealism*,<sup>2</sup> but this work is made up by three distinct (and large) volumes, and so I thought that a much shorter book was needed in order to achieve the objective stated above.

The most common objection raised against Rescher is the following: "He writes too much" (it is, indeed, a leitmotiv of all those unwilling to discuss his ideas). But is it a serious *philosophical* objection? After all, it was analytic philosophy that set up the paradigm according to which philosophers must write as little as possible. Whoever knows history of philosophy understands that, up to the beginning of past century, things were quite different, and we have plenty of philosophers of the past who wrote more extensively than Rescher himself. The fact is that the analytic paradigm is not going to be eternal. Nothing is eternal in human affairs, not even philosophical paradigms (let alone the scientific ones), and we can certainly expect that it will be replaced as well at some point. As a matter of fact, many philosophers—including several who had held an analytic position early on in their careers—claim that it has already been replaced to a certain extent. Richard Rorty is perhaps the best known among them, but we have other cases like Richard Nozick and even Hilary Putnam, whose attitude towards analytic philosophy and the linguistic turn has

changed a great deal in the last two decades.<sup>3</sup> Many others, however, manifest bewilderment or even indignation if someone starts talking about the crisis of analytic philosophy. They seem to be living and working in a sort of Kuhnian paradigm, albeit in philosophy and not in science. A philosopher of this kind totally lives *inside* a paradigm, and the thought that there might be something else outside does not even come to his mind.

I repeat here the amusing story about Rescher that Ernest Sosa and Robert Almeder have already reported in the anthologies they edited: behind the name of Nicholas Rescher there is no single person, but a whole committee of philosophers, similar to the committee of French mathematicians behind the name of Bourbaki. But this is not true, of course, and Rescher himself explains how he can manage to write so much in his autobiography. However, most of the authors contributing to Sosa's anthology, and some of those included in Almeder's, deal with Rescher as if he were a full-fledged analytic philosopher. But this is not correct, as I hope this book will show. Rescher maintains—to a certain extent—the analytic style of writing and addressing the issues, but is at the same time very far away from what he defines as the “analytic ideology.” This simply means that, if one approaches his philosophy by using an exclusively analytic viewpoint, he will not be likely to get a good comprehension of the whole picture.

This is a book on Rescher's philosophy, and so I tried to be as neutral and objective as possible. But “absolute” objectivity, as Rescher himself teaches, is not something which we humans can attain, so that some personal opinions clearly transpire from the text. In particular, I regard his pragmatism and naturalism as more important than his idealism. His idealism is mild because his pragmatist outlook is so strong, and the “primacy of practice” is the motto that, in my view, best captures the essence of his thought. The tradition where he really belongs is the American pragmatism of Charles S. Peirce, William James, John Dewey and Clarence I. Lewis, which of course does not mean to deny that other traditions, like the idealistic one of Hegel and Bradley, have had a strong influence on him. If the book will succeed in convincing its readers that this is really the case, what I take to be its basic task will be accomplished.

Genoa  
April 2008

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> E. Sosa (ed.), *The Philosophy of Nicholas Rescher: Discussion and Replies*, Reidel, Dordrecht-Boston, 1979; R. Almeder (ed.), *Praxis and Reason: Studies in the Philosophy of Nicholas Rescher*, University Press of America, Washington, D.C., 1982; Axel Wüsthube, Michael Quante (eds.), *Pragmatic Idealism. Critical Essays on Nicholas Rescher's System of Pragmatic Idealism*, Rodopi, Amsterdam-Atlanta, 1998.
- <sup>2</sup> N. Rescher, *SPI.1*, 2 & 3, 1992-4.
- <sup>3</sup> See G. Borradori (ed.), *The American Philosopher. Conversations with Quine, Davidson, Putnam, Nozick, Danto, Rorty, Cavell, MacIntyre, and Kuhn*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago-London, 1994. The interviews with Putnam and Nozick run from p. 55 to p. 85.

# Chapter 1

## THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### 1. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PRAGMATISM FOR CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY

Traditionally, pragmatism deems the quest for *absolute* truth or certainty meaningless. It takes into serious account, instead, the question of objectivity, i.e. the possibility of finding a method for ascertaining which, out of many plausible solutions to a particular problem, is *objectively* the best one. Think, for example, of the very way in which we acquire our beliefs. Our convictions about the structure of reality and, consequently, our representations, perceptions and theories, form a complex and articulate system. How do we behave, however, when a new belief enters our cognitive horizon, especially if it cannot be easily reconciled with other—and older—beliefs? Pragmatism's traditional answer is *Darwinian* in character, and is based on the concept of the "fight for survival."<sup>1</sup> In other words, when a new belief arises we try to accommodate it into *our* system. If the attempt is successful everything looks fine. Sometimes, however, radical changes take place, and we prefer to keep the new belief even though this move is likely to cause the abandonment of many beliefs previously held. We have, thus, an endless war for survival among theories, ideas and worldviews, and this war will eventually be won by the most suitable theories (that is to say, by those theories that give us a better explanation and comprehension of the surrounding reality).

And why are certain beliefs thought to be more decisive than others? Why is it that some levels of reality are commonly held to be important, while others are not? The reply is provided, once again, by the theory of natural selection. For instance, those people claiming that the phenomena of magic and witchcraft are "more real" than scientific ones are inevitably likely to have *practical* problems in the course of their daily life. *Utility* on the one side, and *practice* on the other are thus the two key-concepts on which the speculative building of pragmatism is founded. An interesting and controversial fact regarding primarily the social sciences may at this point be noted. A consistent pragmatist would say that even in the political-social domain an endless fight for survival takes place, so that a politi-

cal, economic or social theory's validity relies only on its explanatory power and practical utility. In the economic sphere, for instance, the fall of the Berlin's Wall shows that the free market theories, notwithstanding their many limits, give rise to social and political structures that *work*, while the theories based on the so-called collective property of productive means do not (and this despite the permanent fascination such theories continue to exert on many intellectuals).

It can hardly be denied, however, that the pure free-market process is not able to run, just by itself, highly complex societies such as the ones in which we live today. This would show, according to some detractors of the free market theories (and of pragmatism as well), that the two key-concepts mentioned above—*utility* and *practice*—cannot be the only foundations of human social and political life. An obvious answer to these criticisms is: It all depends on what you take utility and practice to be, and on how you choose to connect them to the primary human interests. We shall examine in a successive chapter the reply that Rescher's particular brand of pragmatism gives to objections of this kind.<sup>2</sup>

The pragmatists assume that all men *qua* men share a certain portion of reality, that is to say a common set of perceptions and representations; this common set in turn produces shared beliefs which form a reasonably objective basis to implement action. Naturally we have here an objectivity that is quite different from the classical one, conceived of as faithful representation of a reality independent from the knowing subject. But this "weak" objectivity is, according to the pragmatists, all that we have at our disposal, and this means that it must be our starting premise.<sup>3</sup> What is, then, the *best theory* of which the representatives of the pragmatist tradition keep talking? It is nothing but the theory that allows us to organize in the best possible way the sensory perceptions that all men *qua* men share, and which give in turn rise to beliefs that are both firm and difficult to be abandoned.

The relatively recent rediscovery of the pragmatist tradition in the United States has given new strength to the aforementioned theses, which are—at least to a certain extent—compatible with the general views maintained by analytic philosophy. The decline of the analytic tradition<sup>4</sup> might thus be contrasted just by intensifying its dialogue with pragmatism, as Rescher has proceeded to do starting from the late 1960's. There is undoubtedly some truth in the vision—indebted to T.S. Kuhn's theses—of analysis conceived of as a philosophical *paradigm* which, following a quite long blooming period, is bound to be replaced by other and newer paradigms.

The process of replacement, however, need not be total and violent. Rescher's own work shows that analytic philosophy can protect its precious methodological heritage by interacting with other—and substantially compatible—trends of thought. Rescher has in fact consistently developed insights contained in some papers of Quine published in the 1950's and 60's<sup>5</sup>, combining a pragmatist background with analytic methodology. Other authors—like Putnam, Rorty and, within certain limits, Davidson—have subsequently followed the same path, even though the common label “neopragmatism” hides more often than not deep disagreements.<sup>6</sup>

One of the main reasons why analytic philosophers in general maintain a suspicious attitude towards pragmatism is the alleged pragmatist undervaluation of modern formal logic. Of course, this argument does not apply to Charles S. Peirce, whose contributions to modern logic are undeniable<sup>7</sup>; but Peirce is somehow distant in time, and the memory is more likely to go to John Dewey. As a matter of fact, it must be recognized that a contemporary formal logician may find many—and, from his point of view, unpleasant—surprises by reading Dewey's masterpiece *Logic: the Theory of Inquiry*<sup>8</sup>. This work in fact criticizes the basic assumptions of modern symbolic logic as it developed from Boole on, and which found an explicit and precise formulation in the Vienna Circle's manifesto. Since the meaning of any scientific statement must be ultimately specifiable by having recourse to assertions concerning empirical data, even the meaning of scientific concepts, no matter what scientific field they belong to, must be ultimately reduced to concepts of the lowest possible level, i.e. concepts related to elementary empirical data themselves. In this full-fledged reductionist approach logical analysis plays a fundamental role, because it is geared to the neopositivist scientific world-view.

Dewey's *Logic* is a forerunner of the criticisms that post-empiricist thinkers subsequently addressed to this kind of scientific world-view. If this vision is seen from an historical perspective it soon turns out to be a *style of reasoning* among others, and its philosophical roots can be easily traced back to Ernst Mach's theses and to the logical atomism endorsed by Bertrand Russell and by the early Ludwig Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*. This means that even logic lives *in* history. Neither is its formulation established once and forever, nor can it be superimposed as a paradigm that must be accepted without discussion. Contrary to neopositivism and the majority of the analytic tradition, Dewey—like all pragmatists—does not draw a clear and rigid boundary line between subject on the one side, and object on the other. Such a line is a *functional* distinction that we adopt in