

Book Reviews

COGNITIVE HARMONY. By NICHOLAS RESCHER, Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2005. Pp. 1-128. ISBN: 0822942437, pb. US\$25.95.

REALISM AND PRAGMATIC EPISTEMOLOGY. By NICHOLAS RESCHER, Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2005. Pp. 1-144. ISBN: 0822942496, pb. US\$25.95.

EPISTEMIC LOGIC. By NICHOLAS RESCHER, Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2005. Pp. 1-152. ISBN: 0822942461, pb. US\$25.95.

Nicholas Rescher has written extensively and eloquently on the coherence theory of truth, as well as, it seems, on most of the important topics in philosophy! The virtues of systemic harmony are manifest, but there are special challenges that make coherence a difficult topic to keep in sight: so much of a system's coherence is largely in the eye of the beholder—but so much of what makes a system coherent is larger than the eye can behold. Coherentism needs a roving eye with the broadest possible perspective. The philosophical vision presented in these three short books—not exactly a trilogy since they are an unordered set rather than a series—is both coherent and coherentist. As Rescher himself argues, coherentist considerations pragmatically license, and perhaps even pragmatically mandate, assumptions, commitments, and postulates that go far beyond the given. There is more to these books than meets the eye. What this means in practice is that while the books are independent and self-contained, there are places where, if one were to read them in isolation, important questions would appear to be begged.

There is an uneasy combination of robustly realist inclinations and cautiously fallibilist coherentism on display throughout these books. Perhaps that is an inevitable outcome when respect is given to both the exigencies of abstract metaphysical theory and the more pragmatic imperatives of applied epistemology. The systematicity of knowledge—and of the world—is front and center in *Cognitive Harmony (CH)*: the realist part of the equation is addressed more fully in *Realism and Pragmatic Epistemology (RPE)*. *Epistemic Logic (EL)* distills and formally presents the conceptual and inferential structure implicit in the other discussions. That there is a single coherent story to be told about the universe is assumed from what he calls the “systematic harmony of facts.” Mightn't there be a network of incommensurable theories covering the world in an over-lapping patchwork? After all, we were able to live as scientists with both wave and particle theories of light. It may have been uncomfortable in our more reflective moments, but Rescher offers the kind of meta-reflection—that is to say, *philosophical* reflection—that mitigates the tension between practice and theory.

In the case of the physics of light, Rescher could point to our implicit faith that there would be some reconciliation eventually, but that sort of faith is more sorely tested by free will and determinist stories about human behavior than by wave and

particle theories of light. Can we assume there is a single vocabulary up to this task? Can we assume there is a vocabulary up to all our tasks? The supporting argument, like the thesis itself, glosses over the difference between truth and fact. One line of argument leading to the conclusion that there must, in the end, be harmony rests on the idea that there would have to be changes pervading the entire system of facts were any single one of those facts to be changed because of the resultant changes to the various disjunctions and conjunctions that cover the original change. Rescher's argument here would inspire more confidence if the metaphysical status of disjunctive facts were as secure as the logical status of disjunctive propositions.

A prominent motif throughout the exploration and valorization of the concepts of coherence, harmony, and systematization is Rescher's recurring recourse to economic metaphors. This is most prominent in *CH*, where the rhetorical theme generates philosophical theses: economic metaphors are used not merely to explain epistemological ideas and principles but to justify them as well. Rather than being argument by analogy, however, Rescher's employment of economic metaphors is profitably read as a set of heuristic devices to help bring about a large-scale reconceptualization in epistemology.

Rescher presents the business of epistemology as a matter of belief-management. Belief acquisition is only part of the job. He approaches the project like the manager of a mutual fund: make sure the holdings work together, judiciously balance acquisitions with existing holdings, fill in the gaps, weight the potential gains against calculated risks, and so on. Communication is sometimes cashed out in terms of transactions (especially in *RPE*). It does provide a pretty good hook for hanging some of his main theses, and it is organically consonant with the generally pragmatic provenance, tenor, and directions of the discussion. For example, it provides a new take on the justification of induction—as a practice for epistemological management, not as a metaphysical thesis about the world (although there are arguments leading to the rationality of our commitment to induction, and from there to the rationality of the belief, considered now as content rather than act, principle, or policy). Induction seeks simple answers, at least initially, and the cognitive “costs” of seeking and testing complex rather than simple hypotheses counts against other schemes.

So what is the problem with economics as a dominant metaphor, a lens for looking at the phenomena in question? As either a pedagogical tool for explaining one's ideas or, for that matter, a heuristic vehicle for exploring and developing those ideas originally, it makes invaluable contributions. As a governing paradigm, its very success creates the possibility for metaphoric distortions, either in the form of blinders to features that don't fit into its template or Procrustean accommodations forcing a fit. Some of that is present here. Is the pursuit of knowledge like the pursuit of wealth? Can it become an obsession? Are there truths that are too expensive to keep in one's portfolio? In epistemology, as in economics, it is all too easy to lose sight of ethical constraints.

What does this mean for argumentation theory? Should we start thinking of arguments as the commercial negotiations of our epistemic lives? While the economic metaphor serves Rescher well in bringing some important features of managing our beliefs into clearer relief, such as the costs involved in revision and

the potential gains from certain strategies, it breaks down when it comes to arguments for the simple reason that knowledge (for the most part!) is not best understood as a quantifiable commodity. I can give whatever knowledge I may possess to you without in any way diminishing my own “holdings.” Argumentation is not a transaction regarding knowledge. That way of thinking leads back to one of the most obnoxious features of the adversarial war model, viz., that someone who learns something through convincing argumentation is the “loser” in the argument! There are, of course, cases of proprietary knowledge; and, manifestly, there are arguments that are conducted as if they really were win/lose—or profit/loss—situations. But there are also arguments that exemplify the ideal of rational persuasion, and to have to think of them as give-aways, or some sort of charity, distorts our understanding of argumentation just as much as having to think of effective teachers as victorious and successful students as defeated. The important dialogical and social dimension to argumentation is missing. Epistemology is rather more than just a matter of gaining truths and avoiding errors. And since understanding is oftentimes an emergent (non-propositional) product of coherent knowledge, coherentists should be in an especially good position to appreciate this bit of knowledge about understanding.

The situation is exacerbated in philosophy. Rescher argues that this is where systematicity is of paramount importance: “Here, as is the case throughout the domain of rational inquiry, if we do not have a doctrine that is consistent and coherent, then we have nothing” (*CH*, p. 104). This all-or-nothing schema is stretched to the breaking point by two competing considerations. On the one hand, reasoning and argumentation are the “lifeblood of philosophy,” the *sine qua non*. On the other, “the parameters of harmonious systematicity—coherence, consistency, uniformity, and the rest—are *regulative ideals* toward whose realization our cognitive endeavors do and should strive. But this drive for systematicity is the operative expression of a governing ideal and not something whose realization can be taken for granted.” That is, putting these together (a bit uncharitably, I’ll admit), we get this picture: argumentation is the engine for moving us in the direction of an ideal whose realization may or may not be possible, but until such time as we do in fact reach it, we have ... *nothing!*? Argumentation is an activity of commerce, but apparently without any commodity. It is, of course, precisely in the absence of a settled doctrine that we have to rely most heavily on argumentation. When we do have a doctrine that is both harmonious in all the right ways and accepted by all the relevant voices, there is no need to argue. (But, thankfully, argumentation can still be justified anyway.)

Ironically, *Epistemic Logic* may be the least relevant of the three books for informal logic and argumentation theory. For that matter, even its contributions to epistemology and philosophy at large are limited. It exhibits all the strengths and all the weaknesses to which purely formal approaches to philosophical topics are prone. On the positive side of the ledger, it is extremely well suited to the task of precisely distinguishing and exhibiting the various subtly different senses of such concepts as group knowledge and unanswerable questions. Since so many of the key epistemological terms are under-defined or ill-defined, this is a significant accomplishment. For example, the formal mechanisms that are developed here are deftly employed in reconstructing a well-defined epistemic (rather than

psychological) concept of conceivability to connect with the (logico-metaphysical) notion of possibility. Those same mechanisms are also ably deployed in the task of disambiguating concepts that are all-too-easily confused in ordinary language, such as the distributive and collective knowledge of generalizations: knowing that all lions are mammals (which is quite possible for finite knowers like us) is not the same as knowing of each lion that it is a mammal (which is not). The *de re* knowledge in the latter case would require knowledge of each and every lion. Discovering and articulating limits to human knowledge comprises the lion's share of the project of *Epistemic Logic*.

The fruits of formalization come with their usual price tag: the formal theory provides a Procrustean Bed for our ordinary concepts and the concepts that emerge can have the feel of awkward constructions. Secrets, for example, become knowledge that is held by only one person—perhaps because that is something the symbolism can easily accommodate—rather than knowledge that is being *withheld* from others (ch. 10). By design, the concept of knowledge in question is not the idealized knowledge of an omniscient being. There is neither completeness nor deductive closure. But the concept is not quite the ordinary one, either: there is closure along conjunction and other “obvious inference” lines, there are necessary but necessarily unknowable truths, and, since knowers know, skepticism is ruled out as a dead option from the start. It can be difficult to connect all the dots of data concerning “knowledge” into a single coherent concept, but that is mostly to the good: the all-or-nothing manifesto at the end of *CH* is wisely left in the theoretician's laboratory.

The volume succeeds, however, in showcasing what epistemic logic is all about and the significant contributions it can make to the discourse of epistemology. Rescher does identify most of the forks in the pathway to the development of a complete logic of epistemic concepts and tries to provide a word or two explaining his choices as well as the paths not taken, all in the interests of fairness. But in the interests of producing a clear, concise, and accessible survey, the controversies are generally settled by fiat, without adequate references to the wider debates in the literature. To be sure, it would have been a mistake for Rescher to try to settle all these questions in this kind of survey text, but it would also be a mistake for readers to assume that there is as much consensus on these issues as the presentation suggests.

There are treatments of some apparently idiosyncratic topics, like “vagrant” predicates, the concept expressed by the locution “for all that anyone knows,” and various forms of unknowability and insolubilia. But even these seemingly patchwork additions to the text do in the end make a contribution to the overall view. The presentation is no mere collection of topics, but more of an integrated collage.

Some small degree of familiarity and level of comfort with predicate and modal logics is needed to appreciate what this book offers. And that fact both grounds and limits what it can do. It would not do well as an introductory text, but it could serve as a good sampler for the curious and interested. It could also act as either a quick refresher or a handy reference tool for anyone in tangential fields with a need for a more grounded familiarity with the subject. Its very short chapters makes it very easy to negotiate. There is a small but definite audience that stands to benefit from this book.

In contrast, *Realism and Pragmatic Epistemology* deserves a wider audience. Its discussion provide the most grist for the philosophical mill, mixing innovative and fertile suggestions into traditional approaches to standard philosophical questions. Rescher begins with a very Cartesian model, and never really escapes the dualism of objective reality and subjective experience that is implicit in representational accounts of cognition: "There is no compelling transit from personal experience to objective fact," he begins, adding, "Experience... is invariably somebody's experience." Thus, the claimed starting point—experience—is implicitly preceded by a subject! There is inaccessibility at the other end, too: "The existence of this latent (hidden, occult) sector [of objects] is a crucial feature of our conception of a real thing." Realism, he argues, is implicit in and integral to our very conception of things and in our communicative practices. However, he takes great pains to make it clear that mind-independent reality is not *deduced* from the evidence of the senses but postulated. It is a "stipulative commitment that is ultimately retrojustified" as the way to make sense of, among other things, sense itself—and in both senses of "sense": meaning and sensation. Realism is rationally justified but it cannot be *evidentially based* because the concept of evidence presupposes it.

The nature of our commitment to realism becomes clear in the implicit assumptions behind our communicative practice. First, realism is implicated by our intentions to refer, but a corollary to that is that we can never hope to exhaust the implied content of our referring words! We are always talking about more than we can know. Our own conceptions of things cannot, on pain of incoherence, ever be supposed to be the whole and final story. But neither can they be supposed to be the subject of discourse: it cannot be assumed that we share a conception, but it must be assumed that we share a world. The burden of proof is on would-be skeptics.

In short, realism is characterized as cognitively "cost effective," thereby reopening the floodgates for the economic metaphor: "we proceed in cognitive contexts in much the same manner that banks proceed in financial contexts. We extend credit ... amortize ... trust ... risk ... venture... much to be gained The fact is that our cognitive practices have a fundamentally economic rationale" (pp. 32-3).

Rescher complements the procedural rationale for realism with a second argument with a novel twist. Rather than pointing to the convergence of substantial scientific achievements as evidence for a reality grounding objective truth, he argues from our *ignorance*! The fact of our cognitive limitations is taken as grounds for realism precisely because our descriptions inevitably fail to do justice to the world. That is, thinking of the world—the concept of real things—implies their inexhaustiveness by any description, which implies a depth beyond our comprehension, which implies some mind-independence—which is presupposed by all communication. Thinking and communicating converge on the postulate of a mind-independent, knowledge-transcending reality. Ironically, the only reality worth having is a knowable one, so there is a permanent tension in our epistemic lives.

The justification for the economic metaphors and conception of epistemic management is pragmatic: practical reason is basic while theoretical reason is ancillary. Such givenness as is to be found in experience is not so much in the experience itself, but in the consequences of our actions, the gains from successes and the

costs of disappointments. Actions arise from beliefs, but the upshots of those actions are in no way psychogenetic. The “quality control” for our beliefs comes not from initial, given experiences of the world, but from the interactive transactions we have with the world through our actions.

The theoretical upshot of this pragmatic turn is what Rescher calls “the principle of specificity precedence.” It is a blanket license for preferring the specific to the general, the observational to the theoretical, and the theoretical to the meta-theoretical. As a further corollary, “in any conflict between philosophy and everyday commonsense beliefs it is the latter that must prevail.” (*RPE*, p. 70, discussing, with approval, Thomas Reid). The logical-epistemological justification is: “As a rule, generalities are more vulnerable than specificities” (*RPE*, p. 71). But couldn’t more thoroughgoing pragmatists also ask whether generalization aren’t more *valuable*, too? What happened to asset management?

Rescher recognizes a noteworthy exception to the principle of specificity precedence that may in the end re-valorize theory: counterfactuals. Counterfactuals are the substance of hypothetical and speculative reasoning. In all such reasoning, generality precedence must come into play. Counterfactual situations are understood not as given specifics but instantiations constructed from false (or unknown) specifics in conjunction with generalizations. The empiricist in Rescher remains a bit queasy when it comes to counterfactuals as candidates for genuine knowledge because he is still operating within a representationalist model for cognitive states, and counterfactuals are not easily cast as representations of facts in the world. His inner pragmatist, however, is more accommodating, and rightly so. Knowing is not the only epistemic game in town. There is also understanding to be achieved. He would do well, then, to bring into the foreground just how essential such speculative reasoning is to understanding, if not to knowledge *per se*. Rescher invokes the concept of “systemic informativeness” to explain the different values of generalizations and specificities in the enterprises of “factual inquiry” and “counterfactual speculation,” enterprises that, he says, occupy “different sectors of the cognitive terrain.” I would add that the boundary between them is less like a river dividing two countries than a marshy wetlands dividing land and sea. I believe there is an important lesson to be learned from all this for argumentation theory and the practice of argumentation. Rescher may not yet have reached it, but he has blazed a path in the right direction and he has left us a map of where he has gone.