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Replies to Nicholas Rescher

Uwe MEIXNER (Augsburg)

1. Rescher on collective and distributive explanations

Contrary to Rescher, I still hold the following: Given a comprehensive fact q which is the conjunction of less comprehensive facts p , one has explained *why* q is the case if one has explained *why* p is the case, for every fact p in the conjunction. Such a piecemeal explanation of q may not be the best explanation of q (we do prefer explanations “at one fell stroke”), but it certainly does explain *why* q is the case. What Rescher’s integer-example and elephant-example show is that a *demonstration that* something is the case is not (not always) an *explanation of why* it is the case. What those examples, however, do not show is what Rescher wants them to show: that collective explanation via the conjunction of all relevant distributive explanations is not – is never or at least not always – a *why-explanation*. Thus, practical obstacles aside, one can indeed *explain why* every elephant has a trunk by *explaining* for each elephant *why* it has a trunk. This remains true although, doubtless, neither a collective nor a distributive explanation of elephantine trunk-having is achievable by merely pointing out for each elephant (for Jumbo, Dumbo, etc.) *that* it has a trunk; in that way, one merely achieves a *demonstration* for each elephant *that* it has a trunk (*not* an explanation of why this is so), and therefore merely a *demonstration that* every elephant has a trunk (*not* an explanation of why this is so). I entirely agree with Rescher that no (why-)explanation of the fact that every elephant has a trunk is forthcoming in the “demonstrative” way; but the point he makes is quite beside the point at issue. Similarly, by *demonstrating* for every integer *that* 1.5 is different from it, one *demonstrates that* 1.5 is not on the list of integers; one does not automatically *explain* in this way *why* this is so. Nevertheless, if one *explains* for every integer *why* 1.5 is different from it, then one has certainly *explained why* 1.5 is not on the list of integers.

2. Rescher’s attack on traditional metaphysics

I have, I believe, already very well explained (in my first critique, 535) what I mean by Rescher’s “(implicit) attack on traditional metaphysics (including Leibniz)”.

I will try to make it yet clearer. First, I quote myself: “The traditional answer to the Leibnizian Question [the answer given by both Thomas Aquinas and Leibniz himself] [...] is this: Contingent existence [...] finds its ultimate and complete explanation *in the causal agency of an extramundanelly necessarily existing supersubstantial being.*” (535) Now, Rescher thinks that *this traditional answer* is more or less wrong-headed; at least, this is what the words of his “Initiativartikel” imply. In this negative opinion of his, and not in anything else, Rescher’s attack on traditional metaphysics consists: it is an attack precisely *on the contents* of that metaphysics. Contrary to what Rescher surmises, I did not say and did not imply that he is attacking metaphysics as a subject or discipline; after all, he is himself doing metaphysics by attacking traditional metaphysics. And contrary to what Rescher surmises, I did not say and did not imply that one cannot do metaphysics in the way Rescher does. Doubtless he *is doing metaphysics*: the same thing that Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, or Leibniz were doing; but in doing metaphysics the way *he* does – regarding contents (tenets, positions) – Rescher is attacking *traditional* metaphysics (decidedly less implicitly in his “Replies to Commentators” than in his “Initiativartikel”): the metaphysics of Aquinas and Leibniz and other Christian theists.¹ Regarding the ultimate explanation of contingent existence, he thinks that he has a better answer than they have.²

3. The central point of controversy

Rescher thinks that “what Aristotle called *efficient* causation” is a “productively through materials naturally lawful *modus operandi*”. He adds: “Such efficient causation is a matter of world-internal operations and (as Leibniz also has it) cannot be deployed to account for the contingent natural world itself.” (99) True, *such* efficient causation cannot be deployed to account for the contingent natural world itself. But Rescher’s definition of efficient causation (inspired by Kant, not by Aristotle) is far from compelling; it is very much *ad hoc*. The far better (and quite Aristotelian) straightforward conception of efficient causation is this: to *efficiently cause something* is – simply – to *make it be*, is to *make it exist*, is to *actualize it*, is to *realize it* (in one sense of the verb “realize”). *Making something exist* need not be “a matter of world-internal operations”, and it is certainly no such thing when it comes to making “the contingent natural world itself” exist. In order to avoid quarrelling merely over words, one might avoid the expressions “cause” and “causation” altogether, and then ask: Is it not a legitimate metaphysical position to hold that God made the contingent natural world exist, in other words: *created* it (as Leibniz certainly believed)? It seems that Rescher allows that such a position is a legitimate metaphysical position, a position sufficiently rational for metaphysical considera-

¹ By “traditional metaphysics” I mean traditional metaphysics *in its mainstream*. I am well aware that there are aspects of the history of Western metaphysics that do not fall within that mainstream, for example: Neoplatonism, Spinozism, Lucretian materialism, and Schopenhauerism.

² Rescher’s metaphysical views are not as close to Neoplatonism as they may seem: the Neoplatonic *One* is not an idea and it is not a principle (not in the sense in which philosophers today, including Rescher, use the word “principle”).

tion – alongside his own position.³ But if I understand Rescher correctly, he is also asserting that it is a still better explanation of the natural world's existence to make laws and principles responsible for it rather than God (though the latter is okay if you just cannot be as rational as others are). Coming from a philosopher whom I thought to be a Christian, this is somewhat disappointing, at least to me. But matters of personal faith aside: *laws and principles* – whether self-subsistent or not⁴ – cannot make anything exist, least of all the contingent natural world, *because they are abstract objects*.⁵ Since Rescher puts so much stock in contrasting *elimination* and *production*, it must be added: laws and principles – being abstract objects, – cannot *eliminate* anything, either. They cannot (literally) actualize the best possibility, and they cannot (literally) eliminate the inferior possibilities from actualization. And if they could, it would not automatically follow that the remaining best possibility is actual (Rescher's appeal to the logical authority of Sherlock Holmes notwithstanding): after all, it seems possible that *no* possible world is actual. All that laws and principles can “do” is to be true or not true, is to describe things as they are, or not as they are. And Rescher's Law or Principle of Optimality just isn't true; it does not describe things as they are. “The road not taken” (99) by Leibniz is – not only theologically but also philosophically – *not* the better road.

4. Rescher on how this world can be the best of all possible worlds

Like Leibniz in his time, Rescher is confronted with a widespread and deeply entrenched belief that this (actual) world is not the best of all possible worlds. I wonder how he himself can believe that this world *is* the best of all possible worlds. For dispelling the rather strong impression that this world *is not* the best of all possible worlds, he offers the standard, well-known considerations:

- (I) What you think is best or good, need not be what really is best or good.
- (II) What is best or good for a part (you and your environment) need not be best for the whole (the cosmos).

³ I am not quite sure that he does allow *that much*. For at one point he contrasts “the essentially theistic stratagem of grounding contingency in the machinations of a contingency-external self-engendered *being*” with “the essentially metaphysical stratagem of grounding it in the machinations of a self-subsisting *potency or principle*” (Rescher [2017], 69). This suggests that the “theistic stratagem” is for him not a metaphysical and, therefore, *not a legitimate metaphysical* position. It seems to me much more reasonable to hold that every theistic position is a metaphysical position (but not vice versa, of course). Why exclude theism from metaphysics?

⁴ Rescher (2017), 73, prefers a “self-subsisting principle” to a “self-subsistent being” in explaining contingent existence. It is unclear to me what the self-subsistence of a principle consists in. Is the proposition that $2 + 2 = 4$ a self-subsistent principle? In a (harmless) sense it is “self-subsistent”: it is necessarily true. But this does not seem to be the sense Rescher has in mind.

⁵ Rescher himself writes: “[C]onceptualization is [...] something abstract that cannot for that very reason account for something as concrete and substantial [as] contingent existence is bound to be.” Now, not only conceptualization but also concepts and principles are something abstract. And for “that very reason” they cannot account for “concrete and substantial contingent existence” (78).

(III) Look at the overall picture, not at this or that local detail: overall bestness is bought (and must be bought) by local imperfection;⁶ it is not possible to maximize to the highest possible degree every good thing at once.

If one already believes that this world is the best of all possible worlds, then these considerations may help one to maintain this belief. But if one does not already believe that this world is the best of all possible worlds, then considerations (I)–(III) will be of no help for coming to this belief; for appearances are to such an extent and degree contrary to it that even if one takes (I)–(III) into account it will still seem (and rationally so) that this world is far from being the best of all possible worlds. Leibniz believed that this world is (rather, must be) the best of all possible worlds because he believed that a perfect being (an almighty, all-knowing, and perfectly good being) created this world: the perfect being can only make the best world. Leibniz's reason for believing that this world is the best of all possible worlds is a respectable reason, which, nevertheless, can hardly hold out when it comes under fire (even if (I)–(III) are taken into account). Rescher, in contrast, believes that this world is the best of all possible worlds because *that this world is the best of all possible ones* follows from a principle he believes in. But why should we believe in that principle? The problem is this: if B follows from A and B does not seem to be true, then, in reason, A does not seem to be true, either. Why should we nevertheless believe in A? Vis-à-vis the fact that this world *does utterly not seem* to be the best of all possible worlds, Rescher's Optimality Principle seems yet worse off than Leibniz's God.

5. Lamenting the badness of what (its badness notwithstanding) just has to be the best?

Rescher seriously suggests that we should accept that this world is the best of all possible worlds “with the sorrowful lamentation that so imperfect a realm is the best on offer” (101). But if it is really “the best on offer”, then there is no objectively rational motive for lamentation (for then things, everything considered, simply cannot be better than they are), although, of course, someone who is about to have his head cut off (for example) might still – but objectively quite irrationally: *egocentrically* – complain. The more important rationality problem, of course, is that this imperfect world – this *crucified and dying* world, without worldly (non-religious) hope of resurrection – is far from even seeming to be “the best on offer”. I am rather sure that it does not seem to be “the best” to Rescher, and that it did not seem to be “the best” to Leibniz. Yet Leibniz believed, and Rescher believes, that it is “the best”, contrary to appearances. How can they do this? They can do this because it is in this case, as in so many other cases, possible to adopt a position which is logically stronger than B (B being one's favourite *counter-phenomenal assertion*), a position

⁶ Rescher writes: “But of course Leibniz himself acknowledges that even the best possible world will be imperfect.” (86)

which will allow one – indeed, “force” one (not against one’s will) – *to believe that B*, although it *seems* to one – even seems to one strongly, uniformly, unequivocally – *that non-B*. Philosophers are especially expert in availing themselves of this “escapist” option (Parmenides, it seems, discovered the method). And one thing must be conceded: although philosophers by acting in this peculiarly irrational manner are certainly not putting on display – for the outside observer – *respect for the truth*, acting in that manner may actually prove to be in the service of (belief in) the truth. After all, the truth may sometimes be quite contrary to what reason on the basis of appearances suggests or requires. This may be so. I just cannot believe (or as Rescher would put it: “Uwe Meixner cannot bring himself to take seriously the situation” [86]) that it is so *in the case at hand*: that contrary to appearances and appearance-assessing reason this world is the best of all possible worlds.

6. Every world, if it is the actual world, is the best of all possible worlds?

Rescher writes: “The idea that things could be better than they are in this regard [i. e., the supply of intelligence] is irresistibly tempting but – as optimalists see it – ultimately untenable.” (95) But surely Rescher is not denying that instead of this world, W_0 , another possible world, might have been the actual world (for otherwise he is denying contingency, and the whole point of the Optimality Principle vanishes). Suppose it had really been so: another possible world, W_1 , not W_0 , is the actual world; and suppose Leibniz and Rescher exist in W_1 and are just as intelligent in W_1 as they are in W_0 . One can count on it: as long as W_1 is not a downright hell (but perhaps even then), Leibniz and Rescher would duly conclude that W_1 is the best of all possible worlds, with *no* serious gauging of its good points and bad points in comparison to those of other possible worlds having been done on their parts *at all*. For they reason like this: Given the truth of the Optimality Principle or, alternatively, the existence of God qua perfect being, *how otherwise* could it be the case that W_1 is *actual* (and actual it is, according to supposition) if not in virtue of W_1 ’s being the best of all possible worlds? Leaving the author of the Optimality Principle and his illustrious philosophical ancestor out of the picture (they were put in merely for the sake of picturesqueness), we see: the Optimality Principle has the consequence that whatever possible world is actual is also optimal. What more do we need for being at peace with the universe? Or saying it without sarcasm: the Optimality Principle is either vacuously true – or non-vacuously false.

7. How to explain why something exists contingently

Consider the following argument:

Suppose (for *reductio*) that nothing exists contingently, but that it is not necessary that nothing exists contingently. It is, therefore, a fact that nothing exists contingently, and it follows, moreover, that *that fact* exists contingently. Something, therefore, exists contingently – contradicting the initial assumption. Thus I have

shown via *reductio ad absurdum* of the opposite proposition: *if nothing exists contingently, then it is necessary that nothing exists contingently*. Now, it rather seems (it seems so overwhelmingly) that *it is not necessary that nothing exists contingently*. Therefore (by *modus tollens*): *something exists contingently*.

To this explanation by logical demonstration,⁷ Rescher, in order to cut the line of argumentation, might conceivably object that *all facts exist necessarily* (it seems to me that he actually believes this). But his objection would have no bite, since by “existence” I (entirely legitimately) mean *actuality*, and by “fact” *actual* (or *obtaining*) *state of affairs*. It is not true that all *actual states of affairs* (“facts”) are *necessarily actual* (“exist necessarily”); for example, that Donald Trump is President of the US in 2017 is an actual but not necessarily actual state of affairs.

A final word: although it is according to the above argument quite unavoidable that something exists contingently, there is still enough work to do for metaphysics (including theistic metaphysics: theism). I exist, no doubt, contingently – and I still have *no ultimate explanation of why* I exist. Of one thing, however, I am fairly certain: the ultimate explanation of my and of this world’s contingent existence has nothing to do with this world’s being the best of all possible worlds – because this world just isn’t the best of all possible worlds.

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⁷ In what sense do certain demonstrations (certain *proofs*) also explain what they demonstrate? – In the same sense in which a standard demonstration of the Pythagorean Theorem also explains what it demonstrates.