Critical Comments on Nicholas Rescher's "Why Is There Anything at All? Leibnizian Ruminations on Ultimate Questions"

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My critical comments on Nicholas Rescher's interesting paper simply follow its course of argumentation. I have grouped them together into sections, in such way that section no. *N* of my paper contains my comments on section no. *N* of Rescher's paper. Each section of my paper bears a title that attempts to sum up my main critical point.

1. There is more than one concept of existence – Comments on section 1

Rescher does not distinguish explicitly between the quantifier of existence – "For some *x*: ... *x* ...", "At least one *x* is such that ... *x* ..." – and the (first-order) predicate of existence: "*x* exists", but certainly seems to be aware of the distinction. As is obvious from his paper, a predicate of existence is no absurdity, even *no problem* for Rescher, which fact I applaud. He would, however, have done well to distinguish different senses of "*x* exists." For the following reason: Rescher claims that *numbers* necessarily exist, and that (so-called) *facts* – i.e., states of affairs[1] – necessarily exist. By these claims, he means that *every number* necessarily exists, that *every fact* necessarily exists.[2] This is true in one sense of "*x* exists", but not true in another. Does the state of affairs that the sun revolves around the earth exist? In one sense, *yes* (that state of affairs – like every state of affairs – is certainly *something*); in another sense, *no* (that state of affairs *does not obtain, is not actual*). Does the number 1000 exist in a world in which there are only 100 actual individuals? In one sense, *yes* (the status of the number 1000 as *something* is unscathed by the facts of the envisaged world); in another sense, *no* (1000 is *not actual* in that world, since there is no set of individuals in that world whose cardinality is 1000 and all of whose elements are actual).

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[1] It has become common to use the word "fact" as a synonym of "state of affairs". Formerly, only some states of affairs – obtaining ones – were facts.

[2] Rescher does not merely mean that, necessarily, some numbers – respectively some states of affairs – exist.

Many people have claimed that they are unable to see the predicate "x exists" as ambiguous; that it has only one sense; that, in any case, *it should have only one sense*. Now, which sense does Rescher attach to the predicate "x exists"? He does not tell us, and it is not obvious that there is a sense that fits (i. e., makes true or at least plausible) all the claims he makes by way of using that predicate. Note that "x exists" cannot mean the same as "x is something" for him; for in *this* sense everything – and not just numbers and states of affairs – necessarily exist (for everything is necessarily something, since everything is necessarily identical with something, because everything is necessarily self-identical) and there would be no room at all for the Leibnizian Question, which question Rescher very much values (and so do I). This famous question, as Rescher himself points out, demands an explanation for the (obtaining) *fact* that something *which might have not existed* exists, or in symbols: $(\exists x)(\Diamond\neg E!x \land E!x)$. However, as things stand, "x exists" cannot mean the same as "x is actual" for Rescher, either; for in *this* sense it is simply not true, contrary to Rescher's claim, that every state of affairs necessarily exists (for some states of affairs do not necessarily exist, because they do not even exist, since they are not actual, because they do not obtain).

2. Distributive and collective explanation are not so very different – Comments on section 2

If we followed Rescher, the outcome of section 2 would be that, indeed, *distributive explanation* "does not accomplish the job." Which job? The job of answering the Leibnizian Question, of course, the job of providing an explanation for the Leibnizian Fact, which in its first – but not its last construal – is the fact that $(\exists x)(\Diamond\neg E!x \land E!x)$. Curiously, the entire section is not concerned with the Leibnizian Fact at all. Instead, Rescher distinguishes two universal claims of existence-explanation. The first of these claims is called *"Distributive explanation"* by Rescher: $(\forall x)(E!x \supset (\exists p)(p \ @ \ E!x))$, in other words, "For each and every individual existent there is an explanation to account of its existence." The second of those claims is called *"Collective explanation"* by Rescher: $(\exists p)(\forall x)(E!x \supset p \ @ \ E!x)$, in other words, "There is one single comprehensive explanation that accounts for all existents—the entire totality of them." (224) Rescher assures his readers "that very different questions are at issue and very different matters at stake with distributive and collective explanations." (224) As far as the universal explanation of existence is concerned, that assertion cannot be true. The first thing to note is that *"Distributive explanation"* is a straightforward logical consequence (within two-sorted elementary predicate logic) of *"Collective explanation"*: $(\exists p)(\forall x)(E!x \supset p \ @ \ E!x)$ logically implies $(\forall x)(E!x \supset (\exists p)(p \ @ \ E!x))$. The second thing to note is that *"Collective explanation"* is also a logical consequence of *"Distributive explanation"*: $(\forall x)(E!x \supset (\exists p)(p \ @ \ E!x)$ logically implies $(\exists p)(\forall x)(E!x \supset p \ @ \ E!x)$. How so? Like this: Assume that $(\forall x)(E!x \supset (\exists p)(p \ @ \ E!x))$ is true. Take each proposition that provides a *case-specific* adequate explanation for the existence of an x that exists, and form the conjunction of all these propositions. This conjunction is again a

proposition and – in view of the assumption $(\forall x)(E!x \supset (\exists p)(p @ E!x))$ – it is a *collective* adequate explanation for the existence of every x that exists. Therefore, $(\exists p)(\forall x)(E!x \supset p @ E!x)$. Thus, $(\forall x)(E!x \supset (\exists p)(p @ E!x))$ and $(\exists p)(\forall x)(E!x \supset p @ E!x)$ turn out to be logically equivalent – contrary to Rescher.

The only way to block the reasoning that led to this result is to say that a conjunction of adequate case-specific explanations for instances of existence is not *ipso facto* a collective adequate explanation for those instances of existence. However, precisely the opposite seems to be true, which may well be the basic intuition behind the "Hume-Edwards Thesis". Rescher does not provide good reasons against this intuition. His club-and-maleness example accomplishes nothing in this direction: If one has adequately explained for each club-member individually the fact that he is male, then the conjunction of the explanatory propositions produced in the process *ipso facto* provides a collective adequate explanation for the fact that every club-member is male – although, admittedly, it may not be the most interesting or most deep adequate explanation. I do not know what to make of Rescher's claim, at the end of section 2, that distributive explanations, in contrast to collective explanations, do not address *why*-questions. Of course they do. I do admit, however, that a mere collection (or conjunction) of distributive explanations is in most cases not the best possible collective explanation.

3. Causality is relevant to answering the Leibnizian Question – Comments on section 3

Rescher claims that "[i]t would [...] be absurd to ask for some sort of *causal* [Rescher's emphasis] account for reality-as-a-whole. [...] It [causality] is not the sort of resources that [c]ould possibly be called upon to account for the world itself and to explain the origination of the totality of existents." (225) The first thing to be noted about this is that Rescher's view of *what* has to be explained in answering the Leibnizian Question has rather noticeably changed – without any justification for this change being given to the reader. The Leibnizian Fact is for him no longer the fact that *something*, which might have not existed, exists (in symbols: $(\exists x)(\Diamond \neg E!x \wedge E!x)$); the Leibnizian Fact is now for Rescher the fact that *the (real) world*, which might have not existed, exists (in symbols: $\Diamond \neg E!w^* \wedge E!w^*$).[3] The change, however, is not as drastic as it may look at first sight. For one thing, the second construal of the Leibnizian Fact is certainly as Leibnizian as the first, although it does indeed *not* fit the usual and well-known formulation of the Leibnizian Question (which formulation can be found in Leibniz's works). For another thing, and more importantly, the Leibnizian Fact in the first construal is an obvious logical consequence of the Leibnizian Fact in the second construal; hence every explanation of the latter will also be an explanation of the former.

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[3] "w*" is here taken to be a rigid designator that refers in each possible world to the world which is, *in reality of fact*, the actual world.

If one gives an explanatory account of the fact that $\Diamond\neg E!w^* \wedge E!w^*$ *which involves causality*, then that account will certainly involve *a cause of the world* (more precisely speaking: *a cause of the world's existence*), which must certainly be something existent (since only existing things can be causes). What might be "absurd" about this, as Rescher is happy to express himself? It would not even be absurd if the existent cause of the world could only be a part of the world whose existence is to be explained: if everything that exists in the world were explainable as a necessary effect of its initial event, the Big Bang, then this would go very far in explaining the existence of the world itself, albeit it would, of course, *not* be a *complete* explanation of the world's existence.

Presumably, Rescher is having in mind only a *complete* explanation of the world's existence; nothing less will do for answering the Leibnizian question. I tend to agree. Now, a complete causal explanation of the world's existence can only be given by invoking an extramundane cause of the world, hence something extramundanely existing. Is this "absurd" for Rescher: an extramundane cause, (hence) an extramundane existent? It cannot well be, since it is precisely what Leibniz accepts in the passage from his works which Rescher quotes at the beginning of section 3, a passage which Rescher, it appears, wholeheartedly endorses. Nonetheless, an extramundane cause is indeed "absurd" for Rescher: "Causality, after all, is a world-internal process," (224) he says. Is that so? Rescher provides no reason for this dictum (inimical to all world-transcending metaphysics); Leibniz, certainly, would not have accepted it. Kant, indeed, *would* have accepted it. In fact, it expresses a Kantian doctrine – which property of it, however, constitutes no sufficient reason for accepting it. (Otherwise Rescher would also have had to accept the notorious Kantian dictum that "existence is not a predicate," which Rescher, obviously, did not accept.)

"For if an altogether basic condition of things is to be explained this cannot be done on the basis of the machinations within the realm of existing things," (225) says Rescher. For a believer in extramundane causality this can only be true if "the realm of existing things" comprises the things that exist *in* the (real) world, *and no extramundanely existing things*. For through the causal agency ("the machinations") of extramundanely existing things even an altogether basic condition of things could be explained (my own efforts in this respect can be found in my 1997 book *Ereignis und Substanz*). But Rescher's position is, of course, that there are no extramundane existents that exert world-relevant causality. Leibniz would have disagreed, and so do I. What is much more important: Rescher has not given any good reason for his position.

4. Mere rejection is not enough – Comments on section 4

Whatever it is that Rescher means by "the being of contingent-existence at large" – is it this: $(\exists x)(\Diamond\neg E!x \wedge E!x)$?, or is it this: $\Diamond\neg E!w^* \wedge E!w^*$?, or is it something else yet, perhaps "[t]he existential non-variety of the entire domain [of existence] as a whole": $(\forall x)(E!x \supset E!x)$?? – one should, I think, agree with Rescher that to account

for it "one has to put the burden of explanation on something that is itself entirely outside the realm of contingent existence" (226) (I exclude that Rescher could possibly be looking for an explanation of the truth of $(\forall x)(E!x \supset E!x)$). The traditional answer to the Leibnizian Question – which was already given by St. Thomas Aquinas long before Leibniz so memorably posed the question – is this: Contingent existence – $(\exists x)(\Diamond\neg E!x \wedge E!x)$ – finds its ultimate and complete explanation *in the causal agency of an extramundanely necessarily existing supersubstantial being.*[4] Such a being is certainly "entirely outside the realm of contingent existence" (226), and to this extent Rescher would have no reason to lodge any complaint against traditional metaphysics. However, we have already seen that he rejects extramundane causality, and the rest of section 4 of his paper makes it amply clear that *he will have none of traditional metaphysics. All of a sudden* "the explanatory appeal" in dealing with the Leibnizian Question has to move not only entirely outside the realm of *contingent* existence, it has, according to Rescher, even "to move outside the entire realm of existential fact"(226). Rescher offers no justification for the second, logically stronger assertion. Moreover, the explanation in question "cannot be done within the realm of *things* or *substances* at all", according to Rescher, who offers no justification for this third assertion. Last but not least, he claims that "an adequate explanation of contingent existence is achievable only in terms of reference lying outside the realm of necessity and also outside the realm of concrete existence and contingent fact" (226). Again no justification is offered.

This, it seems, is Rescher's style of doing metaphysics. However, the glaring lack of justification in his (implicit) attack on traditional metaphysics (including Leibniz) should not be held against Rescher's own answer to the Leibnizian Question. His answer may, after all, have great strength in itself, and not merely the strength that accrues to it from the elimination of rival answers (the strength coming from this latter source is certainly not great so far, for the attempted eliminations were entirely unsuccessful so far). What is Rescher's own answer? "Some sort of *principle* [not substance]" is to play a role in it, "the realm of possibility [not the realm of actuality]", and the "*realm of what ought to be* [not *the realm of what is*]" (all emphases in quotations are Rescher's). Let us see. From the start, it is certainly not to the credit of the envisaged "principle of explanation" that, according to Rescher, it "violates the medieval precept *de posse ad esse non valet consequentia*" (226).[5]

5. Massive implausibility – Comments on section 5

The explanatory principle Rescher invokes is the "Optimality Principle": *"Given an exhaustive range of possible alternatives, it is the best of them that is actualized."*

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[4] Aquinas himself applies the term *"supersubstantialis"* to God, who is taken to have all the perfections of a substance in a superlative degree – without being a substance (in the literal sense).

[5] By this Latin precept the medievals meant that $\Diamond A \supset A$ is not a logical law – which is certainly true. Rescher apparently believes that the precept says that there can be no transition from possibility to actuality; the medievals (good Aristotelians that they were) did certainly not believe that. Indeed, if there were no transition from possibility to actuality, how could anything be contingently actual?

(227) And in its vicinity, Rescher lodges two other fundamental statements: one he calls "the fundamental law of metaphysics": *"Inferior alternatives are* ipso facto *unavailable for realization";* the other is supposed to be a corollary of the fundamental law: *"Reality is optimific."* (227) By this latter statement Rescher probably means to assert what, in a less unusual way, is asserted by 'The real world is the best of all possible worlds' – which is a highly implausible assertion; and "the fundamental law of metaphysics" is an assertion which is just as implausible. For the real world simply does not appear to be a world such that there is no better possible world; it seems to be precisely an "inferior alternative" (229) which was nevertheless realized – *in spite of its inferiority.* Leibniz wrote a whole book (the *Theodicy*) in order to persuade us – it is safe to say: *unsuccessfully,* for most of us – that this appearance is a (negative) illusion. And Rescher?

For the time being, I would like to comment on something else. The Optimality Principle is false. Why? {*That no genocide happens in 1915-1917; that some genocide happens in 1915-1917*} is an exhaustive range of possible alternatives; but it is certainly not the best of these alternatives which is actualized – because, undeniably, a genocide happened in 1915-1917.[6] How might Rescher hope to escape this refutation of the Optimality Principle? Certainly not (I hope) by claiming that *some genocide in 1915-1917* is better than *no genocide in 1915-1917.* A promising step is to limit the generality of the Optimality Principle in the following way: '*Given an exhaustive range of* possible worlds, *it is the best of them that is actualized.'* This much weaker optimality principle – call it 'the World Optimality Principle' – would do for Rescher's purposes. But is it *true?* It is easily seen that it is logically equivalent to 'Reality is optimific', that is, to 'The real world is the best of all possible worlds' – which, however, seems to be *not true.*

6. The Optimality Principle is neither self-explaining nor self-sustaining, and it is not helpful – Comments on section 6

Rescher believes that the Optimality Principle – *"Given an exhaustive range of possible alternatives, it is the best of them that is actualized"* – is both "self-explaining" and "self-sustaining" (228). But the Optimality Principle is known to be false (see the previous section). How, then, can it be self-explaining or self-sustaining?

Let us take a closer look at this. A principle is self-explaining/self-sustaining if, and only if, it is true and a satisfactory explanation/justification of its truth can be given by merely appealing to its truth (given the meaning it in fact has). Now, the Optimality Principle is known to be not true (see the previous section). It follows that the Optimality Principle is neither self-explaining nor self-sustaining.

It is, however, not unlikely that Rescher still thinks that the Optimality Principle is true. Would that principle be self-explaining and self-sustaining *if* it were true? Rescher's reasoning seems to be this (he does not present his reasoning to his read-

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[6] I am talking about the genocide committed against the Armenians.

ers): The Optimality Principle is true. Now, *why* is it true? The answer is this: Consider the following exhaustive range of possible alternatives: {*that the Optimality Principle is true, that the Optimality Principle is not true*}. Of these possible alternatives clearly the first one is the best one. Therefore, since the Optimality Principle is true (according to assumption), the possible alternative which is actualized is the *first* alternative in the given range, and obviously the Optimality Principle is made true by the actualization of that alternative. Thus, the truth of the true Optimality Principle can be satisfactorily explained/justified by merely appealing to its truth. It is, therefore, self-explaining and self-sustaining.

This reasoning looks viciously circular, but I agree with Rescher that it is not. If the Optimality Principle were true, it would follow that it is self-explaining and self-sustaining. Unfortunately, the Optimality Principle is *not* true, as we have seen. Even if it were true it would be of no help in answering the Leibnizian Question, no matter whether the Leibnizian Fact – the fact to be explained – is $(\exists x)(\Diamond \neg E!x \wedge E!x)$ or $\Diamond \neg E!w^* \wedge E!w^*$. Consider the following two exhaustive ranges of possible alternatives: $\{(\exists x)(\Diamond \neg E!x \wedge E!x), (\forall x)(E!x \supset \Box E!x)\}$ and $\{\Diamond \neg E!w^* \wedge E!w^*), E!w^* \supset \Box E!w^*\}$. Which of the two possible alternatives in each of the two ranges is the better one, and therefore the best one in the respective range? It is far from clear that, in each range, it is the first alternative. If one is so well-pleased with the quality of the real world – of *this* world – as Rescher is ('Reality is optimific': 'The real world is the best of all possible worlds'), then it certainly seems that the best alternative in the first range is $(\forall x)(E!x \supset \Box E!x)$, and that the best alternative in the second range is $E!w^* \supset \Box E!w^*$ – which implies $\Box E!w^*$ (as does $(\forall x)(E!x \supset \Box E!x)$) because $E!w^*$ is undeniably true. Thus, if the Optimality Principle were true, it would not explain what Rescher would like it to explain, but would explain the very negations of what he would like it to explain.

Does the World Optimality Principle – *"Given an exhaustive range of possible worlds, it is the best of them that is actualized"* – fare any better? The World Optimality Principle is not likely to be true, as we have seen (in the previous section), because w* does not seem to be the best possible world. Aside from the apparently far-from-perfect quality of w*, there is another reason for doubting the truth of that principle: The exhaustive range now under consideration – the set of all possible worlds – is certainly an infinite one, with w* included in it. Rescher just assumes that there is always a *single best one* among the possible alternatives in an exhaustive range of such alternatives. But even in finite exhaustive ranges of possible alternatives ties of optimality may occur, and in an *infinite* exhaustive range, like the set of all possible worlds, there is yet another possible danger: there may be no optimality in it. Might it not be that for every possible world *w* (hence also for w*), there is a possible world *w'* such that *w'* is better than *w*? Has Rescher done anything to make plausible that these possible dangers – optimality tie and optimality failure – are not real? He has done nothing at all. Instead, he talks quasi-mythologically about a process that "is literally a struggle for the survival of the fittest" taking place "in the possibilistic domain until at last only one privileged alternative remains". This extremely Darwinistic dynamic possibilism, for which there is not a shred of plausibility, does not seem very helpful to me metaphysically. What if there is no

fittest possible world for actualization, or several that are fittest,[7] and yet only one possible world is actual: w*, a world that could have been non-actual and which seems in some respects far from *fit*, let alone *fittest*, for actualization? How did *that* come about?

7. Optimalism is not needed –
Comments on section 7

In this section, Rescher rightly distinguishes between 'Necessarily, some [possible] world exists' – in symbols: $\Box(\exists x)(Wx \land E!x)$ – and 'The existence of this particular [possible] world is contingent' – in symbols: $\Diamond\neg E!w^* \land E!w^*$, which latter statement is already familiar (as stating one of two Rescherian construals of the Leibnizian Fact). On the basis of the highly plausible $\Box(\forall x)(Wx \supset \Diamond\neg E!x)$, which Rescher is implicitly assuming, $\Box(\exists x)(Wx \land E!x)$ is equivalent to $\Box(\exists x)(Wx \land \Diamond\neg E!x \land E!x)$ ("the existence of *some* contingent [possible] order of things [is] necessary" [229]). Rescher thinks that $\Box(\exists x)(Wx \land E!x)$ / $\Box(\exists x)(Wx \land \Diamond\neg E!x \land E!x)$ is possible, even plausible. He even thinks that $\Box(\exists x)(Wx \land \Diamond\neg E!x \land E!x)$ is "'for the best'", along with $\Diamond\neg E!w^* \land E!w^*$. If so, $\Box(\exists x)(Wx \land \Diamond\neg E!x \land E!x)$ should be *true* for Rescher (and not just possible and plausible), *given* his belief in the Optimality Principle. He praises "optimalism" – "an axiogenetic approach" – for its "rational economy" in providing a "single uniform rationale" both for $\Diamond\neg E!w^* \land E!w^*$ and for $\Box(\exists x)(Wx \land \Diamond\neg E!x \land E!x)$: "'this is for the best'". He seems unaware of the fact that the truth of $(\exists x)(Wx \land E!x)$ is a mere requirement of logic, and therefore also the truth of $\Box(\exists x)(Wx \land E!x)$.

Why is that so? Because the set of all possible world is an *exhaustive* range of possible alternatives. In an exhaustive range of possible alternative at least one alternative must be actual; otherwise the range would not be *exhaustive*.[8] Thus, $(\exists x)(Wx \land E!x)$ and $\Box(\exists x)(Wx \land E!x)$ – and its equivalent $\Box(\exists x)(Wx \land \Diamond\neg E!x \land E!x)$ – do not need optimalism for explaining their truth. And since $\Box(\exists x)(Wx \land \Diamond\neg E!x \land E!x)$ does not need optimalism for explaining its truth, neither does $(\exists x)(\Diamond\neg E!x \land E!x)$, which is a straightforward logical consequence of the first statement. Therefore, the Leibnizian Fact in the *first* of its two Rescherian construals does not need optimalism for its explanation. And it also does not need optimalism for its explanation in its *second* Rescherian construal, where it is expressed by $\Diamond\neg E!w^* \land E!w^*$; it does not need optimalism for its explanation in this latter construal because optimalism is not even helpful for explaining it in that construal, as we have already seen (in the previous section).

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[7] In the real "struggle for survival" there is always a balance between several living beings that are, for a time, the fittest.

[8] Note that for finite ranges of possible alternatives that are expressible by (finite) sentences, we have: $\{A_1, ..., A_n\}$ is *exhaustive* if, and only if, $A_1 \lor ... \lor A_n$ is true.

8. Overestimation of intelligence and lack of consistency –
Comments on section 8

If the existence – the actuality – of this world, w*, is to be explained by its supreme ontological merit (surpassing the ontological merits of all other possible worlds), then it is important to specify what this ontological merit consists in. I frankly do not know which selection of ontological values would make w* – *this* world – better than all other possible worlds. Rescher, however, attempts a specification of such values. What strikes me about Rescher's specification is (a) his overestimation of intelligence and rationality, and (b) his lack of consistency even in that overestimation. "[O]ptimalism [...] is oriented at optimizing the conditions of existence for intelligent beings at large," (230) says Rescher. Are the conditions of existence for intelligent beings oriented towards optimality in a universe where chance and randomness play a large role (the role they in fact play in w*)? Rescher claims that this is so, but this claim seems inconsistent with his other claims. What rational intelligent beings need qua rational intelligent beings is freedom of choice, what they do not need is chance and randomness. The most radical version of contingency is ontological chance, which is instantiated if, and only if, a '*why did this happen?*'-question cannot be answered, *not* because there is a true answer to it which, however, is humanly unknowable, but because there is not *any* true answer to it. Ontological chance is the perfect paradigm of irrationality and of absolute imperviousness to intelligence. And ontological chance appears to be countlessly many times instantiated in w* – the world which Rescher nevertheless considers to be "favorable to the best interests of intelligence" (230) and "user-friendly for intelligent beings" (231). It would certainly have been more user-friendly without ontological chance.

Moreover, Rescher values intelligence so much that the following question comes to mind: What is the place of irrational and unintelligent creatures in a universe that, according to Rescher, "must, in sum, manage things in a way that rational creatures would see as optimal from the vantage point of their own best interests as rational beings" (230)? Wouldn't it be better if there were no irrational or unintelligent creatures at all? In fact, the world is rather far away from that. Most living beings in w* are neither rational nor intelligent, but simply *alive:* there are immeasurable multitudes of them in w* – in the very same world whose existence Rescher claims to explain by holding that it is the world "best for the enhancement and diffusion of intelligence". The real world, w*, if it is best for anything, is certainly not best for "the enhancement and diffusion of intelligence" (230); as far as intelligence and rationality is concerned, w* rather seems to be best for the brief flowering but ultimate self-destruction of intelligence and rationality. The writing is already on the wall. Would all ontological value disappear if rationality and intelligence disappeared from the world like a fever dream? Who has ever really looked at a large old tree, knows that even now a living being can have ontological dignity without being rational or intelligent. Reason and intelligence are good things, but there is no call for noophelia.

In his "Leibnizian ruminations," Rescher declines to speak about "the Problem of

Evil," which is understandable, since that problem is a very large topic indeed. Yet, for such an ardent believer in intelligence and rationality as Rescher seems to be, it would have been appropriate to make at least some remarks about why intelligence and rationality are so often in the service of radical evil, and why it is that good will and compassion, and not intelligence, are the prime movers in alleviating at least some evils in this evil world.

9. Self-sufficient reason? –
Comments on section 9

In section 9 of Rescher's paper there is little that has not been said before in it. The unusualness of the Leibnizian Question and the corresponding unusualness of an adequate answer to it are once more emphasized (cf. section 4), "virtuous circularity" is once more defended (cf. section 6). Rescher talks about the "systemic self-sufficiency of reason", its "self-endorsement" (231). Now, if reason is self-sufficient, then it does not seem reasonable to have a contingently existing world at all. For *contingent* existence (let alone *chance* existence) is not something that is entirely reasonable, and it is something that is entirely unreasonable if reason is, qua reason, self-sufficient. For it is only necessary existence that self-sufficient reason can be content with. Why, then, does w^*, for which it is possible not to exist, nevertheless *exist*? *Self-sufficient* reason cannot explain this contingent existence. Rescher might respond that it is a truth of self-sufficient reason that w^* is the best of all possible worlds, and that it is also a truth of self-sufficient reason that what is best must be actual. But even if one granted (just for the sake of the argument) that w^* is on the basis of self-sufficient reason the best possible world, it is certainly not also a truth of self-sufficient reason that what is best *must alethically* be actual – which is what Rescher needs in order to explain the existence of w^*. It is only a truth of self-sufficient reason that what is best *must deontically* (i. e., *ought to*) be actual – which is *not* sufficient for getting the job done: explaining the existence of w^*. *Who* or *what* turned the 'ought to' in 'w^* *ought to* be actual' *salva veritate* into 'is' – granting, merely for the sake of the argument, that 'w^* ought to be actual' is a true sentence (which is, in fact, very unlikely)?

10. God is not the equivalent of a principle –
Comments on sections 10 and 11

For Leibniz, who shares with Rescher the belief that w^* is the best of all possible worlds, it is God who effects the transition from the (presumed) truth of 'w^* ought to be actual (because w^* is the best)' to the truth of 'w^* is actual' (and according to Leibniz, God – given the absolute perfection of His essence – could not have done otherwise). For Rescher, in contrast, the Optimality Principle is the effector of the said transition. And the Principle can bring about an even more remarkable feat: it can *render* the existence of God actual (it is, after all, for the best that God exists).

Now, the Optimality Principle is not true (see section 5); but even if it were true, it could do no more than truthfully describe what happens to be the case. It is, after all, just a sentence (of a human language), and what it states is a proposition, an abstract entity. The Optimality Principle is not in the business of *effecting, rendering, making, or bringing about* anything at all. And if the principle were true, it would only be contingently true (Rescher himself admits that its truth is logically contingent in section 6 of his paper). Therefore, the Optimality Principle itself, if it were true, would stand in need of explanation. We have seen that the Optimality Principle is self-explaining if it is true, or rather: that it *would* be self-explaining if it *were* true. But what *could* – or from the point of someone who believes in it: what *did* – make it true in the first place? I am certain of what *Leibniz* (who at least believed in the World Optimality Principle)[9] would have answered to this question; he would have answered 'God did,' and would have said so with conviction. Rescher, in contrast, is decidedly less enthusiastic about this answer, though he seems to attach some importance to the compatibility of optimalism and "enlightened theism" (233). Now, in my view, there would not be any better possible explanation of the truth of the Optimality Principle than *the God-explanation* if the Optimality Principle were true (better even – because substantial and causal – than its self-explanation). But, to repeat, it is not true. And the much more modest World Optimality Principle (entailed by the Optimality Principle) is very likely not true, either. For are there any *good* reasons – that is, reasons independent of the World Optimality Principle – for believing that this world – w*, the actual world just as it really is – is *the best* of all possible worlds? Rescher has not presented any such reasons. I, for my part, do not believe that this world is the best of all possible worlds: it is full of inexplicable evil and gratuitous extreme suffering; other possible worlds are far better.

Yet I believe in God – which means (in view of what was said in the preceding paragraph) that I do not believe that divinity and optimality are "'joined at the hip,'" (232) as Rescher puts it. The belief that they are "'joined at the hip'" is a serious metaphysical error, prevalent in the Western history of thought and prone to lead to atheism, an error for which Neo-Platonism is mainly responsible. Even worse is

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[9] One can make a case for Leibniz's acceptance not only of the World Optimality Principle but also of the more general Optimality Principle if one interprets *"best of them"* in *"Given an exhaustive range of possible alternatives, it is the best of them that is actualized"* not as *"simpliciter* best of them" but as "best of them relative to the *simpliciter* best possible world". The Optimality Principle then becomes: *"Given an exhaustive range of possible alternatives, it is the best of them relative to the simpliciter best possible world that is actualized."* The World Optimality Principle (in which "best" is still interpreted as *"simpliciter* best") follows from the Optimality Principle also in its just-described *Leibnizian* interpretation: *"Given an exhaustive range of possible worlds, it is the* [simpliciter] *best of them that is actualized"* follows from *"Given an exhaustive range of possible alternatives, it is the best of them relative to the simpliciter best possible world that is actualized"* because the latter obviously entails *"Given an exhaustive range of possible worlds, it is the best of them relative to the simpliciter best possible world that is actualized"*, and because *the best of the possible worlds, in the range, relative to the simpliciter best possible world* just is *the* [simpliciter] *best of the possible worlds in the range* (since "both" worlds are identical to *the simpliciter best possible world:* the possible worlds in the range are *all* the possible worlds, considering that the range is supposed to be *exhaustive*).

"the fusion of optimalism with the idea of a loving God" (232) which Rescher proclaims. Fusing these two heterogeneous ideas is a mistake Leibniz committed (in the tracks of the essentially Neo-Platonic perfect-being-theology in Christianity) and which Rescher repeats after him. The world's optimality (or perfection) does not entail God's love for the world, and God's love for the world (let alone God's existence) does not entail the world's optimality. There is not even a co-presence of those two metaphysical factors; for neither the world's optimality nor God's love for it is apparent to the human eye. Thus, humanly considered, there is neither a *conceptual coupling* nor a *factual co-presence* of God's love for the world and the world's optimality. For the believer, the real situation is this: God's theretofore non-apparent love for this severely sub-optimal world *did* become apparent in Christ, and then was veiled again; the world – all considered – did not become any better. The promise remains that the world's severe sub-optimality will be rectified after the end of (mundane) time.

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