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Metaphisics and Naturalism

In the 1950's Quine rejected the analytic/synthetic distinction insisting, instead, on language conceived of as a tool created by mankind for practical purposes, and this move allowed him to overcome the strictures of a purely analytic conception of language by resorting, instead, to the pragmatist tradition represented by thinkers like James, Peirce and Dewey and C.I. Lewis. In the subsequent phases of his philosophical development, however, his commitment to pragmatism became looser, maybe because Dewey and the other main figures of American classical pragmatism always stress the practical side of the scientific enterprise, thus not giving too much importance to the construction of artificial languages. What kind of metaphysics, if any, can a pragmatically oriented philosopher consistently endorse? All we have to do is to envision a more modest concept of metaphysics. A pragmatist metaphysics can indeed be construed, provided we recall that metaphysics – just like science – evolves with the passing of time. An author like Rescher follows this path. Nowhere he presents his own system as giving the "final" answer to all metaphysical, epistemic or ethical interrogatives. After all, if science is no longer held to give the ultimate answers, why should such a burden be put on the philosopher's shoulders?

The terms "holism" and "holistic", which have become so fashionable today, correspond to the words "systematicity" and "systemic". Speaking of holism the mind goes to Willard Van Orman Quine's approach contained in some famous statements of "Two Dogmas of Empiricism", where he claimed that:

> The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs (...) is a man-made fabric, which impinges on experience only along the edges. Or, to change the figure, total science is like a field of force whose boundary conditions are experience. A conflict with experience at the periphery occasions readiustements in the interior of the field. Truth values have to be redistributed over some of our statements. Reevaluation of some statements entails reevaluation of others, because of their logical interconnections – the logical laws being in turn simply certain further statements of the system, certain further elements of the field (...) But the total field is so underdetermined by its boundary conditions, experience, that there is much latitude of choice as to what statements to reevaluate in the light of any single contrary experience. No particular experience is linked with any

> particular statements in the interior of the field, except indirectly through considerations of equilibrium affecting thae field as a whole.[1]

In the 1950's Quine rejected the theoretically asceptic analytic/synthetic distinction insisting, instead, on language conceived of as a *tool* created by mankind for practical purposes, and this move allowed him to overcome the strictures of a purely analytic conception of language by resorting, instead, to the pragmatist tradition represented by thinkers like William James, Charles S. Peirce and John Dewey and Clarence I. Lewis. In the subsequent phases of his philosophical development, however, his commitment to pragmatism became looser, maybe because Dewey and the other main figures of American classical pragmatism always stress the *practical* side of the scientific enterprise, thus not giving too much importance to the construction of artificial languages.

In other words, Quine had to choose, and his choice eventually favored a narrow vision of formal logic and logical analysis of language. No doubt things would have taken a different course had he pursued in the later years his early pragmatist inclinations. Quine deserves the great merit of having underlined the importance of pragmatism in a period which saw a large predominance of logical positivism, but it is correct as well to note that subsequently he somehow betrayed the refreshing insights of the "Two Dogmas"[2]. Turning now our attention to Rescher's metaphysical positions, it is worth to mention that his philosophy is indeed holistic, although he does not use this term frequently. The following words clearly confirm our remarks:

> In philosophy we cannot erect a viable structure one brick at a time, putting each element into place step by sequential step so that it is secure, irrespective of what comes later. Even as one cannot really produce a well-wrought story one sentence at a time without worrying about what is to come (...) so too, a tenable philosophy must be systematically dovetailed whole. For in the end, the range of our philosophical concern is a network where everyting is interconnected with everything else. A philosopher who achieves his or her proximate, localized ends at the cost of off-loading difficulties onto other sectors of the wider domain is simply not doing an adequate job. To be acceptable, a philosophical problem-solution must form an integral part of a wider doctrine that makes sense overall (...) For better or for worse, viable philosophizing has to be a matter of systematization. [3]

The question to be addressed now is the following: What kind of metaphysics, if any, can a pragmatically oriented philosopher consistently endorse? The answer is not as difficult as it might seem at first sight. All we have to do is to envision a

1 W.V. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in: *From a Logical Point of View*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 2003, 2nd ed., pp. 42-43.

2 More details on Quine's "middle-of-the-road" position between pragmatism and logical positivism may be found in M. Marsonet, *Science, Reality, and Language*, State University of New York Press, Albany (NY) 1995, chapter 2.

3 N. Rescher, *A System of Pragmatic Idealism*, vol. 3, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ), 1994, p. 35.

more modest (or, if you prefer, less pretentious), concept of metaphysics. A pragmatist metaphysics can indeed be construed, provided we recall that metaphysics – just like science – evolves with the passing of time. Contemporary metaphysicians are no longer supposed to detect the structure of reality by using mere thought and pure deductive reasoning: they must instead take into serious account both scientific results and the metaphysical views that today scientists constantly put forward[4].

It may be noted, in this regard, that Richard Rorty has insisted that Dewey himself had his own, naturalistic, metaphysics[5]. Let us then ask ourselves: Is there any rational motive for feeling uneasy about that? And why is a pragmatist thinker supposed not to endorse a metaphysics? As a matter of fact, it would be easy to show, just by reading carefully his writings, that even Rorty has his own broad picture of the world, a sort of "conversationalist" view which is in turn indebted, to a certain extent, to Donald Davidson's ideas. It is an *unconscious* metaphysics, as was the case with the logical empiricists, whose original (but hidden) "global" world-perspective was subsequently brought to light by some clever interpreters[6].

Indeed, this situation is not totally new. If we consider the classical positivism of nineteenth century, it is easy to verify that *mechanism* was a sort of new metaphysics – stemming from natural science – which was enormously successful not only with practicing scientists, but also with many scientifically oriented philosophers. A mechanical physicalism offered to the positivists the opportunity to build up a unified synthesis of scientific knowledge taken as a whole, thus pursuing the project of explaining any natural fact by means of the mechanistic model. But this, of course, *was* metaphysics, since the positivists thought that they were able to reach the first principles of a reality conceived of in purely material and observable terms. Since, according to the positivists, reality is formed only by matter, science is able to get a complete knowledge of it, and so we had a metaphysics which was both *unconscious* and *monistic*. Logical positivism, in turn, was just an updated version of classical positivism. The positivists of our century no longer view philosophy as the elaboration of metaphysical world-visions but, rather, as a technical and linguistic activity meant to clarify the meaning of concepts; a pivotal role is played, in it, by formal logic. No doubt, however, even the metaphysical commitments of logical positivism (and of contemporary linguistic analysis at large) were quite strong, as it was shown when their philosophical success began to fade away.

The fact is that no skilled philosopher takes the world as it is (why bothering to do philosophy, in that case?), but always *interprets* it. And interpretation means to construct a world-view, which may be narrow or broad. Those who see a neat difference between the terms "metaphysics" and "world-view" are still tied to the

4 Many contemporary famous scientists like Stephen Hawking, Paul Davies and Steven Weinberg often address metaphysical issues in their works.

5 R. Rorty, "Dewey's Metaphysics", in R. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1982, pp. 72-89.

6 See especially G. Bergmann, *The Metaphysics of Logical Positivism*, Longmans, Green & Co., New York-London, 1954.

pretentious conception of metaphysics which made sense in the past centuries, when philosophers could think that they were entitled (or even compelled) to say the last word in practically every field of human knowledge. Today the situation is different, if only because the need exists to make the philosophical world-view compatible to a certain extent with the scientific one. We think that Dewey got things right when he observed:

> The generic insight into existence which alone can define metaphysics in any empirically intelligible sense is itself an added fact of interaction, and is therefore subject to the same requirement of intelligence as any other natural occurrence: namely, inquiry into the bearings, leadings and consequences of what it discovers. The universe is no infinite self-representative series, if only because the addition within it of a representation makes it a different universe. By an indirect path we are brought to a consideration of the most far-reaching question of all criticism: the relationship between existence and value, or as the problem is often put, between the real and the ideal.[7]

This means to endorse a world-view which, unlike the classical metaphysical systems of the past, is a sort of "working hypothesis" open to revision just like scientific hypotheses are. Dewey was able to endorse such a position because, by following the path of the best pragmatist tradition, he took thought (and language) to be not an a priori factor that creates reality but, rather, an extremely sophisticated form of the *active* relationship between a living organism and the environment in which the organism lives, so that thought becomes a natural activity among many others. And, by adopting such a stance, he avoided both the strictures of classical idealism and of twentieth century analytic philosophy.

It is important here to stress that an author like Rescher follows just the same path, since the tradition to which he really belongs is the American pragmatist tradition of C.S. Peirce, W. James, J. Dewey and C.I. Lewis. Nowhere of his works does Rescher endorse a relativistic "take it or leave it" stance. His broad view of reality is, like Dewey's, a working hypothesis which is supported by a cluster of tidly expressed arguments. Nowhere he presents his own system as giving the "final" answer to all metaphysical, epistemic or ethical interrogatives, also because this would be inconsistent with his views on scientific realism. After all, if science is no longer held to give the ultimate answers, why should such a burden be put on the philosopher's shoulders?

Rescher is, thus, both a consistent pragmatist and a thinker who never hides his interest in classical metaphysical issues. He characterizes his own position as a "naturalistic idealism"[8], and this definition deserves to be explained at length. Naturalism and idealism, in fact, usually look like incompatible positions. Let us start with a basic question: Is Rescher a naturalistic thinker? The answer is not

7 J. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, Open Court, Chicago & La Salle (Ill.), 1994 (2nd ed., 9th pr.), pp. 335-336.

8 N. Rescher, *The Riddle of Existence*, University Press of America, Washington D.C., 1984, pp. 83-99.

bound to be a plain "yes" or a simple "no". It is only conditionally affirmative, where "conditionally" means that he can be deemed to be a naturalistic philosopher from *some* viewpoints, but not from others. As regards the philosophy of mind, for example, naturalism implies that mental phenomena can be reduced to the neurophysiological processes located in the brain, and our author strongly opposes this perspective.

In elaborating his naturalistic idealism, Rescher resorts to his favorite image of the mind which is both placed in nature's scheme of things and gives a fundamental creative contribution towards shaping the world-as-we-actually-see-it. Wondering how is natural science possible at all, and how is it that mathematics can be effectively used to characterize the *modus operandi* of nature, he purports to face the respectably old problem of the "intelligibility of nature". Interestingly enough, however, he picks up a typically Kantian theme treating it in a non-Kantian fashion, claiming that "the present deliberations will not be addressed, *à la* Kant, to certain *a priori* principles that supposedly *underlie* physics. Rather, our concern is with the factual (*a posteriori*) principles that *constitute* physics – the laws of nature themselves. Moreover, the issue is not one of understanding these laws completely in the large or perfectly in detail, but of understanding them sufficiently to facilitate (reasonably) effective prediction and control with respect to (some sectors of) natural phenomena"[9]. It is worth noting that this strategy is frequently adopted by Rescher. The presence of Kantian themes is in fact widespread in both his early and mature writings, but the spirit of his solutions is somewhat distant from the one put forward by the philosopher of Königsberg.

First of all we must understand that, in dealing with the relations between the natural world and our conceptual apparatus, we need to have recourse to a two-sided story involving not just one, but two actors. This is because "the circumstance that *X* and *Y* stand in a condition of mutual affinity and consonance [...] is a two-sided affair in which both sides must be expected to have a part"[10]. An obvious question arises at this point: Is Rescher endorsing some kind of dualism, placing a wedge between nature on the one side and our mind on the other? The answer is bound to be negative because nowhere he suggests a non-natural origin of the mind. Along with all other human faculties, the intellectual capacities stem from the natural environment, and their presence can be explained in evolutionary terms. We also know, however, that biological evolution by no means is the only kind of evolution: a sociological-cultural type of evolutionary framework is called for if we want to get a complete picture of humankind's history. Within the context of the relations between ourselves and the world, man's side of the aforementioned bilateral story is not so difficult to understand. As Rescher has it:

> After all, man is an integral part of nature – connected into its scheme of things as an intrinsic component thereof (…). The intellectual mechanisms we devise in coming to grips with the world – in transmuting sensory interaction with nature into intelligible

9 *Ibid.*, p. 84.
10 *Ibid.*, p. 87.

> experience – have themselves the aspect of being nature's contrivances in adjusting to its ways a creature it holds at its mercy. It is no more surprising that man's mind grasps nature's ways than it is surprising that man's eye can accomodate nature's rays or his stomach nature's food. Evolutionary pressure can take credit for the lot.[11]

So far we dealt with man's contribution to the scheme, but what about nature itself? Our author has recourse to the case of mathematics, whose applicability to nature has often been seen as a sort on unexplainable mystery liyng beyond our capacity of comprehension. This was the opinion of such prominent scientists as Eugene Wigner, Erwin Schrödinger and Albert Einstein, who thought that the intelligibility of the world is a miracle or an eternal mystery. This kind of reasoning, however, stands only if we do *not* take into account the holistic picture which is instead called for here, and descends from viewing man (and his mind) as *opposed to* nature.

Rescher thus points out that the two-sided story can be stated this way. On the one hand, we can take the applicability of mathematics to the description of nature to be due to the fact that we devise *our* mathematics to fit nature[12]. On the other, however, it is clear that this fitting would not possible if nature were not somewhat cooperative ("any more" – he adds – "than we could paint scenes accurately with three colors of paint were the physics and optics of color-mixing not suitably cooperative"[13]). Not only nature allows the evolution of intelligent beings: it must also provide them with environmental patterns that make coherent experience possible. In other words, the information we gather from those patterns has nothing "miraculous" or "mysterious" about it, but simply is the cross-product of a constant interaction between mind and nature. Given this fact, it should not be surprising to find out that mathematical representation is indeed possible and useful:

> The development of *life* in the world and thereupon of *intelligence* in the world may or may not be inevitable; the existence of intelligent creatures in the world may or may not be surprising in itself and as such. But once they are there, and once we realize that they got there thanks to evolutionary processes – it can no longer be seen as surprising that their efforts at characterizing the world in mathematical terms should be substantially successful (…). A world in which creatures who possess a high level of intelligence can evolve by evolutionary means must be one whose law structure is sufficiently benign to admit of effective characterization through mathematical instrumentalities.[14]

Intelligence and intelligibility, in sum, must be taken to be mutually correlated if we want to make sense of the intelligibility of nature itself, leaving aside miracles and mysteries that admit no philosophical (and let alone scientific) explanation. Once this is granted, the question of *why* have intelligent creatures evolved in the

11 *Ibid.*, p. 89.
12 Note how distant Rescher is from any Platonistic conception of mathematics.
13 N. Rescher, *The Riddle of Existence*, cit., p. 90.
14 *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.

natural framework remains unaddressed. Rescher does not favor the classical teleological answer, according to which there is *in* nature a fundamental tendency to produce beings endowed with growing complexity. In Leibniz's philosophy this amounts to saying that nature brings forth beings capable of mirroring the world from an intellectual viewpoint, while Hegel and his followers saw in nature a built-in impetus to "realize itself in thought". A similar perspective, although expressed in essentially theological terms, was revided in the past century by Teilhard de Chardin, *Mutatis mutandis*, even some professional scientists of our day, like Paul Davies, seem to endorse a similar position. The answer is that:

> The true explanation – the evolutionary response – is much more prosaic, sober, and unromantic. It begins by noting that there are various different ways of coming to terms with nature (...) the routes of multiplicity, toughness, flexibility, isolation, etc. But one prospect is afforded by the route of *intelligence* - of adapting by the use of brain rather than brawn, of cleverness rather than force (...) in a competitive Darwinean world the creature that best understands how things work in its environment has the evolutionary edge (…). Once life evolves and proceeds to search out various routes to survival under the auspices of a fecond mother nature, it is only natural that intelligence should evolve (…). Intelligence evolves not because nature favors intelligence but because intelligence favors the survival of its possessors within nature.[15]

In developing his theses about the intelligibility of nature, Rescher also sketches an interesting philosophy of mathematics. Needless to say it is a pragmatist-flavored philosophy of mathematics which, as such, stands in opposition not only to the classical approaches thriving in the past century like Bertrand Russell's Platonism and David Hilbert's formalism, but even to the post-empiricist trend made popular nowadays by the works of Imre Lakatos, who equated mathematics to the empirical sciences like physics or chemistry. We cannot develop this theme in the present context, but the idea that our mathematics is a theory of hypothetical possibilities, which are in turn conceived by us within an evolutionary scheme, deserves serious attention. Be it as it may, the fact remains that on the basis of the metaphysical views described above, Rescher looks like a convinced naturalist, prompting someone to ask: If so, where is his self-proclaimed idealism located? This important question, however, cannot be addressed in the present context.

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15 *Ibid.*, p. 96.

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