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The Riddte of Existence : An Essay in Idealistic Metaphysics

Nicholas Rescher; Lanham, MD : University Press of America, 1984. Pp. vi, 99. $ 12.25

This relatively brief essay has set out for itself an ambitious project, namely, of addressing the problem of why anything exists, or as we might say, simply, where it all came from, perhaps secretly hoping once and for all to close the explanation gap. As Heidegger has already made us aware, the problem of why there is something in the universe rather than nothing is indeed and also has been one of the most fundamental questions which metaphysicians have had to face. In the present essay the author in general looks for an explanation of the existence of thinges, not in the productive operation of efficient causes, but in an account of the world's law framework in terms of a 'teleology of value' which amounts to an evaluative axiology without, he himself is careful to explain, taking into account a teleology of purpose. Rescher attempts to develop a naturalistic approach to an idealistic metaphysics in the tradition of Plato, a metaphysics later furthered, it is claimed, by Leibniz and his followers. It is hypothesized that by admitting an evolutionary naturalism an emergent intelligence should be able to understand and explain its own existence in the conceptual terms of reference that have evolved with it such that we as intelligent human creatures are now able to come to cognitive grips with reality on our own mind-reflective terms.

In his introductory chapter Rescher proceeds to dismiss some of the many responses that have been put forward in attempting to explain what has been heretofore for the most part inexplicable. For example, necessitarianism, mysticism and all theological solutions are summarily ruled out of court since it is the author's avowed purpose to proceed exclusively along naturalistic lines. His declared option is a nomological approach invoking fundamental laws or 'protolaws' of nature comprising an overarching 'hylarchic' value principle in order to provide the basic conditions for all existence. It is assumed at the outset that there are always reasons why things in the world are as they are such that we are fully justified in doing battle with the problem of existence through the powers of rational inquiry alone.

Rescher argues for a domain of real possibility, a 'receptacle' after the fashion of Plato's *Timaeus* composed solely of protolaws which would furnish basic lawful principles for existence and wherein all actual existence must find its accommodation. He attempts to show that any such principle is a feature that the existing world must necessarily possess. His reasoing is simply that the real world must possess some feature suggestive of a superior value principle in lawfulness because the world must have it necessarily, and the world has to have it necessarily because all worlds actually are found to have it. This piece of week inductive reasoning is obviously an appeal to instances in fact alone. A transcendent protolaw is invoked to explain the world of existing things, yet it is never spelled out precisely how this principle originates beyond the fact that it is grounded in the nature of all the 'really' possible worlds to be found in nature An even closer look at Rescher's pivotal argument shows that he wishes to prove a theory for the whole of existence, a theory which should stand apart, if need be, from the existence of individual things. Yet the theory depends implicitly for its proof

upon the circumstances of real possibilities in the actual world, possibilities that are nevertheless authorized by the supreme protolaws. We must have existent things, it is said in order to have the required explanatory principle, and we must have a value-supported principle in order to provide the authority for things in existence. Indeed the argument spins in place, for in establishing a highest axiological principle to formally sanction the existence of things the theory has deliberately drawn upon premises which state the existence of all the observables in nature. The theory wants at the same time to be transcendent and empirical, one foot in each camp, so to speak, although it can hardly pretend to reside in both.

In the second chapter the author further considers his concept of protolaw as a precondition for all that exists, including all ordinary first-level laws of nature. The high-level or protoprinciple will be value optimizing and must take the form of a Principle of Axiology, yet it must be neither anthropocentric nor unscientific. Rescher purports to provide a metaphysical justification for all the laws of nature, a truly global pattern in explanation of the real possibility of all laws. To accomplish this a normative evaluative order is required in the mode of a final causality, a Principle of Axiology that will enhance all lesser values maximally, one that will embrace simplicity and elegance and all the desirable features of the laws we have already set out for ourselves in the natural realm. Even the ordinary laws of nature are declared to be what they are only when it is felt they fulfil a teleological necessity. In brief, Rescher means to say that only the axiological value principle is of ultimate worth as a principle because of its own inherent value to itself, a conclusion which on the face of it appears somewhat less than conclusive. The problem would reside in how to demonstrate a final proof for this very final principle.

Yet it is insisted that intrinsic value as such is self-explanatory since it is seen to possess ultimate worth in itself, an unobservable ideal in which may be found the one principle possessing a kind of unique and all-encompassing value. Rescher adds that a supreme value principle has the select power it does have because such is for the best, and it is largely on the strength of this assertion that the Principle of Axiology is seen to rest. The principle is thus affirmed to be self-substantiated and self-referential because it is in and through itself value-referential. There is no mention made of a possible conflict of values encountered in the process of selection of the one final and best value principle.

Chapter three centers around the contention that an axiological explanation need not be purposive, where purpose may be said to relate to human interests. While admitting his final causality of value to be a form of teleology, Rescher desires that the Axiological Principle should be entirely impersonal and one that is altogether distinct from human experience. But almost immediately in chapter four Rescher claims for his system a conceptual idealism capable of being understood by mind-endowed beings. The idealist aspect of the theory is said to depend upon its interpretation by human minds, a mind-involvement without total mind-dependency. The value principle, the mainstay of the theory, is to remain objective and impersonal; it is in no way assumed with Schopenhauer, for example, that this world is my idea, but simply that the nature of the world, however it may be possible to conceive the world, reflects the nature of the human mind. If such is the case, and not forgetting that we are now asking for a mind-interpreted universe which aspires to an idealism, the theory is not as severely and objectively distinct from human experience as we were given to believe in the previous chapter.

The final chapter can only be described as a disappointing and even a distressing anticlimax affixed to the main body of the essay, detracting from whatever unity might have been achieved in the first chapters. Rescher now appears to turn exclusively to the natural sciences and to mathematical physics in particular in order to provide a methodological prototype in the interests of answering metaphysical inquiries. The coveted protolaws are now to be thought of as fundamental field equations patterned after the general laws of relativity and according to the way in which these laws have been developed in the physical sciences. It is as if nature as found in the physical world makes up the whole of existence and furnishes us with everything that is needed to be explained. Rescher at the start sought an ultimate principle for all existence, but his concern is latterly with principles that embrace only pure science, for his strategy is now one that hinges of the deliverance of science to provide a prototype for his own unique axiological approach to value theory. He is not ready to acknowledge that science, especially the direction taken by science according to its late technological developments, has failed to offer us a life–affirming view of the universe. Rescher does not notice the fact that traditionally the focus of intrinsic value has rested entirely with the individual rather than with the field theories of physics. He very much wants a scientific model but is neglectful of the fact that science itself has up to now been careful to avoid value solutions in its own theorizing.

In his essay Rescher has made no mention of the realm of human morality nor of the world of aesthetic judgment responded to and recognized by sense verification alone, worlds nevertheless having actual existence for the individual concerned. Further, the author does not distinguish between being and existence, a consideration which would be essential in order to

admit him to a rock–bottom level of metaphysical deliberation dealing as it does with being as being as surely the proper subject matter of metaphysics. We fail to be convinced of the conclusion that the Axiological Principle is self–explanatory, alleged to be so because the role played by value itself can be explained in given value–referential terms. We doubt very much that the essay can pretend to offer any complete metaphysical solution to the problems inherent in existence as such without taking into account a basic ontology of being.

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