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ON NICHOLAS RESCHER'S ORIENTATIONAL PLURALISM IN METAPHILOSOPHY

ABSTRACT

The article discusses Nicholas Rescher's metaphilosophical view of orientational pluralism. In his essay *Philosophical Disagreement: An Essay towards Orientational Pluralism in Metaphilosophy* Rescher explains a substantial difference between philosophy and science—namely, that philosophers—differently than scientists—continuously propose and undermine various solutions to the same old problems. In philosophy it is difficult to find any consensus or convergence of theories. According to Rescher, this pluralism of theoretical positions is caused by holding by philosophers different sets and hierarchies of cognitive values, i.e. methodological orientations. These orientations are chosen in virtue of some practical postulates, they are of axiological, normative, but not strictly theoretical character. Different methodological orientations yield different evaluations of philosophical theses and arguments.

This article shows that Rescher's account does not determine clearly acceptable cognitive values. If there are no clear criteria of evaluation of methodological orientations, then the described view seems to be identical to relativism adopting the *everything goes* rule. In addition, accepting orientational pluralism it is hard to avoid the conclusion that discussions between various philosophical schools are futile or can be reduced to non-rational persuasion.

Keywords: metaphilosophy, Nicholas Rescher, relativism, methodology of philosophy, orientational pluralism.

1. INTRODUCTION

Philosophy, since its beginning, has been criticized for its inconclusive nature. Philosophical disagreements rarely end with a relatively permanent consensus. The same problems are investigated over and over again; old solutions are repeatedly proposed, although expressed in various terminologies. Whereas in science we can observe a cumulative progress: old prob-

lems usually have widely accepted solutions and new ones are solved according to commonly accepted rules. Thus it is not surprising that philosophy have been attacked for its inconclusiveness. Among others ancient skeptics insisted that philosophical efforts were futile. They asserted that philosophical questions were undecidable, so they recommended suspending judgement. Descartes tried to elaborate an effective method as well as a base of indisputable premises in order to rebuild a whole body of knowledge. Neopositivism repudiated some areas of philosophy, including metaphysics as the set of nonsensical pseudo-problems.[1]

Is the enterprise of philosophy futile? How does science omit correspondent difficulties? In this essay we will outline and discuss the answer given by Nicholas Rescher[2] who proposes the metaphilosophical theory called *orientational pluralism*.

2. EXPOSITION OF RESCHER'S ORIENTATIONAL PLURALISM

At least three explanations of the problematic situation of philosophy are offered. Firstly, it has been pointed out that philosophy promotes originality of thought, encouraging philosophers to unhesitatingly disprove existing conceptions and modes of argumentation. Secondly, it has been suspected that it is the lack of one methodology which causes unending disputes. Thirdly, it has been claimed that philosophy is concerned with essentially undecidable questions. Rescher provides an alternative explanation. He postulates that the troublesome situation of philosophy is attributable to the nature of its problems. They are decidable but not absolutely and therein lies the source of disagreement lies.

Rescher specifies the form of genuinely philosophical problem as an *aporetic cluster*. In this domain we can observe groups of interrelated but incompatible theses. Each of them might be provided with persuasive arguments and is based on our intuitions. A solution to a philosophical problem denies some of them in order to avoid inconsistency. Rescher gives the following example of such situation:

> „… a major family of controversies in moral philosophy revolves about the following inconsistent triad of theses:
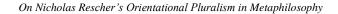>
> (1) (Ethical Cognitivism) We have knowledge of certain ethical facts.
> (2) (Ethical Autonomy) Neither experience nor reasoning yields ethical knowledge.

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[1] N. Joll, *Contemporary Metaphilosophy*, in: Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2010 [19.06.2017] <http://www.iep.utm.edu/con-meta/>.

[2] N. Rescher, *Philosophical Disagreement: An Essay Towards Orientational Pluralism in Metaphilosophy,* The Review of Metaphysics, 32, 1978, 217–251.

(3) (Empiricism) There is no source of knowledge apart from experience and reasoning.

Various major positions can be exfoliated from the alternative modes of resolution of this controversy. Thus *Ethical skepticism* reasons from (2) and (3) to the denial of (1). *Ethical intuitionism* reasons from (1) and (2) to the denial of (3). *Ethical naturalism* reasons from (1) and (3) to the denial of (2)."[3]

 We have already seen that introducing only positive argumentation is insufficient, because each of the theses of a given aporetic cluster can be provided with a supporting argument. Hence, the situation requires the refutation of the argumentation supporting the denied theses. According to Rescher, it is not enough to give a counterargument. The standard way of proceeding in philosophy is to evaluate not only arguments, but also the inherent plausibility of their conclusions and consequences.

In order to take a stance it is necessary to analyse intellectual costs and benefits, which include defining and weighing some parameters of competing solutions to a problem. Rescher enumerates "formal criteria like consistency, uniformity [...] comprehensiveness, systematic elegance, simplicity, economy ('Ockham's razor', etc.), but also various material criteria like closeness to common sense, explanatory adequacy, inherent plausibility, allocations of presumptions and burden of proof."[4] By using the criteria in question, philosophers follow their *methodological* (or *probative*) *orientations*, i.e. predispositions to a certain mode of evaluation. This kind of general attitude is a necessary condition of proceeding towards a solution of any problem and that is why it is indispensable. Probative orientation does not consist of a body of basic assumptions or modes of reasoning but it is an axiological attitude establishing a hierarchy of cognitive values. It limits the range of alternative philosophical stances in such a way that only one of them is adequate. Another requirement is being intelligible for debaters following another methodological orientation.

Sciences, in contrast to philosophy, evolve toward a stable consensus, precisely because they generally share cognitive values. However, probative orientations and the related methods of solving problems themselves also constitute a philosophical issue. Fruitful investigations concerning them also presuppose that one follows some set of cognitive values. Rescher "...reach[es] the position of what might be called an orientational pluralism in philosophy—a view which has it that there are different and [...] equally eligible alternative evaluative orientations which underwrite different and mutually incompatible resolution of philosophical issues."[5]

In Rescher's view, since there is no one correct hierarchy or set of cognitive values, philosophical theories can be true or adequate only relatively to

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[3] Ibidem, 221–222.
[4] Ibidem, 225.
[5] Ibidem, 229.

some probative orientation. His orientational pluralism is a metaphilosoph-
ical relativism—reality investigated by philosophy is *multifaced*. It is not the
case that only one of the alternative solutions to a problem from the domain
is correct, or that philosophical problems are not related to reality. The rule
everything goes does not obtain. Each philosopher works following one and
only one methodological orientation which admits a particular solution to
a given issue. And because of that, as Rescher tells us, on the basic level of
philosophical work one must proceed (and actually proceeds) as if one ac-
cepted metaphilosophical absolutism.

The outlined metaphilosophical conception, according to Rescher, does
not imply either skepticism or indifferentism (or quietism). Pursuing phi-
losophy is indispensable by virtue of significance of its questions and the
natural tendency of the human mind to grapple with its issues. Suspending
judgement in philosophy is not a proper reaction in the described situation,
for on the basic level of reflection, given a particular set of cognitive values,
there is no *isothenia* and *isothenia* on the meta-level does not entail *epoché*
on the basic level. It also is not neutral which of alternative answers to phil-
osophical question should be picked. The philosopher occupies a particular
probative orientation which determines standards of rational selection of an
adequate theoretical option. In addition, Rescher points out that his
metaphilosophy can be useful as it enables respect to other participants in
the philosophical discussion which is of crucial importance in the develop-
ment of the discipline of philosophy. Mutual critique stimulates to improve
one's argumentation and to develop conceptions adequate to one's set of
cognitive values. In philosophy, as it has been said, there are no ultimate or
absolute solutions. Successive proposals of argumentation are rejected
sooner or later. This domain of human reflection is a kind of communal ven-
ture consisting of high quality debate progressively producing more respect-
able theories.

Rescher's relativism entails that one cannot ascribe to anyone a philo-
sophical knowledge or truth. The metatheoretical view on the discipline
enables only to ascribe the knowledge *of* philosophy—of some theses and
arguments—which is the domain of the history of philosophy. The main goal
of inquiry in philosophy is not absolute truth but rather the warranted as-
sertability of certain theses in relation to given probative orientation.

3. CRITICAL DISCUSSION

It is worth noting that Rescher's conception is not only a metatheory of
philosophy and an account for its problematic situation, but also a norma-
tive proposal. The author defines the aim of the enterprise, the proper atti-
tude towards the discipline and determines the framework which delimits
activity in this field. The proper stance consists of acceptance of intelligible

probative orientation and methodological absolutism (or monism) on the basic level of investigation. Rescher points out that the standards of rational settlement of philosophical issues are internal to a given methodological orientation. Therefore, it seems that cultivating this discipline in a responsible way should begin with a clear and distinct exposition of cognitive values which one follows. Without this step expressing one's theoretical views might be regarded as futile because evaluating their adequacy would be problematic.

Theoretical components of the orientational pluralism appeal to the notion of cognitive values. The condition of intelligibility delimits acceptable methodological orientations and, intermediately, cognitive axiologies. However, this condition is too weak, so it seems that the objection of *everything goes* can be provided and Rescher's metaphilosophical view can be considered as relativistic.

Although in sciences there is a general agreement on cognitive values, in the light of Rescher's theses, scientific theories have only a conditional form —*theory T is correct only in the light of a given cognitive axiology*. If one can change his/her methodological orientation in philosophy, why should we claim that it is impossible in science? Metaphilosophical relativism, then, is exposed to critique as being engaged in the consensual theory of truth. It is because the consensus on cognitive values determines ascriptions of truth values. However, Rescher can keep this question open and claim that such a conception of truth is adequate according to the cognitive values which he accepts.[6]

Rescher's thesis does not explain how the discussion between philosophers adopting various sets of cognitive values can influence on improving their argumentation or theses evaluated within respective methodological orientations. Such improvement would be possible if the representatives of different strands argued about the adequacy of reasoning to proposed conclusions on the assumption that particular methods were applied. But in such a case philosophy should be metatheoretically described in absolutistic terms—as disagreement on the correctness of conditional statements of some kind. Rescher could reply that the antecedents of such statements do not express genuine propositions, but rather axiological attitudes or modes of evaluation. However, in such a situation controversies between representatives of different philosophical strands could be convincingly characterized as attempts to mutual persuasion. It would be a local instance of an ultimate incompatibility in so called *forms of life* described in Ludwig Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*:

> "611. Where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, then each man declares the other a fool and heretic.

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⁶ M. Marsonet, *Nicholas Rescher (1928–)*, in: Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2009 [19.06.2017] <http://www.iep.utm.edu/rescher/>.

612. I said I would 'combat' the other man—but wouldn't I give him reasons? Certainly; but how far do they go? At the end of reasons comes persuasion. (Think what happens when missionaries convert natives.)."[7] In such case, Rescher's proposal should be consequently treated as a subject of pragmatic choice, rather than theoretic one."?

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O NICHOLASA RESHCERA ORIENTACYJNYM PLURALIZMIE W METAFILOZOFII

STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł przedstawia metafilozoficzne poglądy Nicholasa Reschera i pewne uwagi krytyczne pod adresem jego koncepcji orientacyjnego pluralizmu. W swym tekście *Philosophical Disagreement: An Essay towards Orientational Pluralism in Metaphilosophy* Rescher wyjaśnia istotną różnicę pomiędzy filozofią a nauką: filozofowie nieustannie proponują i odrzucają różne rozstrzygnięcia tych samych dawnych problemów. W filozofii trudno dostrzec konsens lub konwergencję teorii. Zdaniem Reschera pluralizm stanowisk jest spowodowany tym, że filozofowie przyjmują różne zbiory i hierarchie wartości poznawczych, tj. różne metodologiczne orientacje, wybierane na mocy pewnych postulatów praktycznych i mające charakter aksjologiczny, normatywny. Różne takie orientacje rozmaicie oceniają filozoficzne tezy i argumenty. W artykule pokazuję, że Rescher nie wyznacza jasno zbioru dopuszczalnych wartości poznawczych. Jeśli nie ma kryteriów oceny orientacji metodologicznych, to stanowisko Reschera wydaje się identyczne z tezą radykalnego relatywizmu: „wszystko jest dozwolone". Ponadto, gdy akceptuje się orientacyjny pluralizm, trudno jest uniknąć konkluzji mówiącej, że dyskusje pomiędzy różnymi szkołami filozoficznymi są daremne lub redukowalne do nieracjonalnej perswazji.

Słowa kluczowe: metafilozofia, Nicholas Rescher, relatywizm, metodologia filozofii, pluralizm orientacyjny.

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[7] L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, G. E. M. Anscombe, G. H. von Wright (eds.), D. Paul, G. E. M. Anscombe (trans.), Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1969.