Chapter 1

PRAGMATIC REALISM, IDEALISM, AND PLURALISM: A RESCHERIAN BALANCE?

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1. Introduction

One of the most remarkable features of the kind of pragmatism committed to advancing scientific rationality and objectivity – and thus to criticizing subjectivist and relativist misconstruals of pragmatism – that Nicholas Rescher has defended for several decades is its attempt to maintain a balance of a number of philosophical ideas that are often thought to be in tension with each other. Rescherian pragmatism is realistic (even “metaphysically realistic”), but it is also idealistic (in the sense of what he calls “conceptual idealism” or “pragmatic idealism”); moreover, its realism and objectivism do not seem to preclude a pluralistic conception of a variety of different perspectives (or “systems”, “conceptual schemes”) that we may employ for conceptually categorizing reality. These views are highly relevant to the general realism discussion as well as its special applications in the philosophy of science, to which Rescher has been a key contributor for decades.

Starting from some of Rescher’s own formulations of these and related ideas – spanning dozens of years and volumes of systematic philosophical work, from Conceptual Pragmatism (1973) via A System of Pragmatic Idealism (1992-94) to Realistic Pragmatism (2000) and beyond – this essay will critically examine the Rescherian attempt to overcome the potential conflicts between realism, idealism, and pluralism. Thus, this chapter will to some extent still
serve an introductory function, aiming at a relatively general outline of the specifically Rescherian position in the contemporary debates over realism. The core of Rescher’s distinctive realistic project, in my view, is his *pragmatism*. Although Rescher has hardly presented any truly novel interpretations of the classical thinkers of the pragmatist tradition, his discussions are highly valuable as they distinguish between significantly different currents within the movement from the standpoint of his own preferred form of pragmatism. In particular, he powerfully argues, against Richard Rorty and some other neopragmatists inclined toward relativism, that pragmatism should not be construed (or, rather, deconstructed) as a form of “antiphilosophical nihilism” abandoning systematic argumentative work in philosophy conceived as a rational project. Pragmatism, he urges, is compatible not only with scientific realism and objectivity but also with a conception of philosophy itself as a systematic cognitive enterprise (and, thus, as broadly speaking “scientific”). Rescher, indeed, is a profoundly systematic philosopher; yet, he wishes to recognize a certain plurality in the possible ways in which one can be systematic and argumentative.

I will, inevitably moving significantly beyond Rescher’s own position and its historical development, yet in a continuous critical dialogue with Rescher, seek to articulate a pragmatist approach whose key aim is a critical balance of Rescher’s allegedly mutually incompatible philosophical commitments. Such a balance will be sought by utilizing Rescher’s own systematic rational methods. I will, in particular, suggest that the kind of *holistic pragmatism* defended by Morton White (who, like Rescher, is a somewhat neglected pragmatist thinker fighting against various subjectivist and relativist tendencies within pragmatism), since his *Toward Reunion in Philosophy* (1956), is a helpful, albeit not unproblematic, resource for integrating pragmatic realism, idealism, and pluralism. I will argue that the Rescherian type of pragmatic realism-cum-idealism, even when enriched by
White’s holism, needs to take seriously the Kantian (and, therefore, transcendentally idealistic) background of pragmatism, pluralistically reinterpreted. Furthermore, in order to illustrate these issues, I will briefly apply the problem of pragmatic realism and objectivity to the science vs. religion debates.

2. Rescher as a pragmatist

As anyone acquainted with his writings knows, Rescher is an exception in contemporary philosophy in the sense that he is not only a pragmatist but also an idealist. He has for decades insisted that reality, as experienced by us humans, is inescapably “our reality”, that is, constructed, conceptually grasped, or schematized by us. While some pragmatists – most famously, or notoriously, William James, and more recently Hilary Putnam – have also often been regarded as idealists in a roughly similar sense, it is possible to interpret Rescher’s commitment to pragmatism itself as “a counterweight to idealism”: far from subscribing to any antirealist form of idealism, pragmatism reminds us that our mental activities cannot be detached from our natural needs, corporeality, and interests; accordingly, a pragmatic “reality principle”, while still compatible with idealism, prevents idealism from going too far in its legitimate emphasis on human world-construction. According to Rescher, such a reality principle is “an objective monitor whose operations lie above and beyond the reach of our own arbitrary contrivings”; it is with reference to “the nature of things” that the question of the pragmatic, purposive efficacy of particular means for particular ends is to be settled (RP, xiii). In this sense, pragmatism is, for Rescher, a realistic doctrine: pragmatic efficacy is sought and found in the operations of our conceptual machinery in a largely mind-independent reality. As Rescher explains, the pragmatist method of evaluating methods of inquiry in terms of their efficiency can also be applied to itself; far from leading to any vicious circularity, this makes

Curiously, Rescher’s idealism, strongly emphasized, for example in his three-volume System of Pragmatic Idealism, one of his main works in the 1990s, is virtually absent as we arrive at his key statement of pragmatism, Realistic Pragmatism. Possibly he there wishes to emphasize the realistic element in pragmatism so strongly that there is no room for his former idealism in the book any longer – or perhaps he had by year 2000 come to the conclusion that what he earlier called “idealism” (or “conceptual idealism”) is actually quite far from any recognizably idealistic doctrine. In any event, his failure to connect idealism with pragmatism in his work around the turn of the millennium is obviously related to another striking feature of Realistic Pragmatism, namely, his failure to acknowledge Immanuel Kant as one of the central background figures of the pragmatist tradition. I am afraid we cannot get rid of idealism so easily – either Kant’s, the pragmatists’, or Rescher’s own. Or so I will try to argue, returning to Kantian matters more explicitly in section 4 below.

It can also be argued that Rescher’s understanding of pragmatism is based on an unnecessarily sharp distinction between what he regards as objectivist and subjectivist (or realist and relativist) forms of pragmatism. His own version, the objectivist and realist one seeking an impersonal reality principle in real-world considerations of purposive efficacy, follows Charles S. Peirce’s and C.I. Lewis’s pragmatism, whereas subjectivist pragmatism originates, in Rescher’s view, with James and F.C.S. Schiller, culminating in Rorty’s more straightforwardly relativistic thought. As a picture of pragmatism, this is rather crude, however, and can only serve as a rough summary of the history of the tradition. There is, admittedly, a great difference between Peirce and Rorty, and Schiller’s “humanistic” pragmatism in particular was a radically subjectivist doctrine hard to reconcile with the spirit of objective scientific thinking, but there are also interesting intermediary positions that may be more plausible than either Peirce’s or Rorty’s (or
Schiller’s). I believe (although I am unable to argue for this view here) that James’s and Dewey’s pragmatisms were among such intermediary positions and that in our days, too, a Jamesian or Deweyan pragmatist may be able to avoid both strongly realist metaphysical speculations and the relativist and antiphilosophical swamps of mere Rortyan “conversation”.9

The Rescherian objective pragmatist’s “reality principle” can be considered self-subsistent and person-indifferent, but Jamesian or Deweyan pragmatists need not be irresponsible subjectivists or relativists, either. Rescher is, arguably, right in being critical of Schiller’s personalist subjectivism and Rorty’s postmodernist ironism, but he is somewhat unfair to James: while it may be correct to note that James “opened the way to fragmenting truth into a plurality of contextualizations” (RP, 17), it is far from clear that James himself walked that road of fragmentation and started a “deconstructive transformation of pragmatism” (RP, 61).10 Such an overhasty attack on James illustrates how Rescher himself falls back to a number of rather unpragmatic conceptual dichotomies, reflecting the most fundamental distinction he makes, i.e., the one between realistic “pragmatism of the right” and relativistic “pragmatism of the left” (RP, chapter 2; cf. 246–247). He subscribes to the dualisms between, say, epistemic and non-epistemic (affective), cognitive and normative/evaluative, objective and subjective, impersonal and personalistic, as well as legitimation and de-legitimation (RP, 49, 245).11 Instead of showing that pragmatism simply ought to take an objective (“Peircean”) route, Rescher thus succeeds in demonstrating how surprisingly unpragmatic some allegedly Peircean realistic and objectivist commitments are, at least on a certain strongly realistic interpretation. Rescher’s classifications of different forms of pragmatism – semantic, epistemic, metaphysical, moral and political – are clarifying, but by suggesting that we should return to what he takes to be the Peircean roots of the tradition he loses much of what is philosophically valuable in post-Peircean pragmatism.
Rescher’s most problematic, and presumably the most important, division lies between “thesis pragmatism” and “method pragmatism” (or methodological pragmatism). The latter, which he subscribes to, urges that pragmatic considerations ought to be applied to methods and procedures employed in the validation of theses, not to theses themselves (RP, 77, and chapter 3). Apart from historical inaccuracies, the obvious problem with this view is that it hardly acknowledges the idea of the theory-dependence of methods. It is a simplification to state that “a thesis can be justified by application of a method”, which, in turn, is justified by practical criteria (RP, 96). The very possibility of using some particular method, let alone the availability of the practical criteria with reference to which the method is assessed, may crucially depend on assumptions concerning the truth of certain “theses”, i.e., on researchers’ being committed to a theoretical framework that takes the world to be in some way rather than another. Methods can scarcely be developed and evaluated in total abstraction from the theoretical theses they are used to validate; it sounds suspicious to suggest that there even could be a completely “theory-external quality control upon cognition” (RP, 97). The threatening circularity built into the view that methods depend on theories and vice versa has been widely debated in the philosophy of science at least since Thomas Kuhn, but especially in Realistic Pragmatism Rescher simply fails to pay sufficient attention to this issue. Paradoxically, then, his “scientific” pragmatism is harmed by his not being sufficiently responsive to developments in the philosophy of science in, and since, the 1960s.

On the other hand, Rescher is certainly right – and obviously up-to-date – in conceiving of “the scientific method” as “not a single and uniform mode of procedure but a vast manifold of thought-tools”, as a fallible “procedural organon that is itself evolving under the pressure of considerations of pragmatic efficacy” (RP, 114). Here, I think, all pragmatist philosophers of science should follow him; however, the notion of pragmatic efficacy, inviting the
pragmatic realist’s “reality principle”, brings us back to the question of realism, the main
issue of this paper.

3. Rescher (and his critics) on realism and idealism – an uneasy balance?

Rescher labels his basic view of reality – which he considers not only compatible with
pragmatism but supported by it – *metaphysical realism*, defined as the doctrine that “there
indeed is a real world – a realm of mind-independent, objective physical reality” (RP, 126; see
also 147), i.e., that “the world exists in a way that is substantially independent of the thinking
beings that inquire into it, and that its nature – its having whatever characteristics it does actually
have – is also comparably thought independent” (SPI, I, 255). A critic of realism might
question the notion of (mind-)independence here, problematizing statements such as the one
about objective things existing and functioning “in themselves”, “without specific dependence
on us” (RP, 131). In the terms of Rescher’s (earlier) idealism, the objective world might still be
regarded as “conceptually” dependent on us – and not everybody, and certainly not every
pragmatist, maintains that conceptual and (say) existential or ontological (in)dependence can be
sharply distinguished from one another.

In any event, realism is, in Rescherian pragmatism, a deeply human commitment, not a
description of the world in itself or of things in themselves from a God’s-Eye-View. It is “a
commitment that we presuppose for our inquiries rather than discover as a result of them” (RP,
126). We cannot discover, on the basis of evidence, that such a general thesis as realism is true;
we can only presuppose realism as something that makes sense of and regulates our inquiries
and other practices. Realism can, then, be supported by means of something like a
*transcendental argument*: it is a necessary precondition for the possibility of inquiry and
communication (RP, 134–135). It is not a view to be defended on the basis of evidence but to be
postulated in order for us to be able to collect any evidence for any view whatsoever (or better, in order for us to be able to make sense of our “given”, unproblematized practice of gathering evidence for any other view). In this sense, Rescher’s realism is a transcendentally grounded commitment arising from what seems to be a transcendentally idealistic (Kantian) conception of the necessary constitutive conditions for the possibility of certain given actualities of human life (i.e., inquiry, discovery, conceptualization, and communication).

Again, one may wonder, therefore, why Rescher has not devoted more space to Kantian issues in his discussions of pragmatism, though he does refer to Kant’s “Refutation of Idealism” (RP, 127, n1). It is not clear without further investigation that the transcendental mode of argumentation (in favor of realism or anything else) could be employed entirely independently of transcendental idealism. A key issue here is the relation between pragmatism and Kantian-styled transcendental argumentation, since realism, transcendentally defended, is also for Rescher “ultimately a principle of practice”, justified because “we need it to operate our conceptual scheme” (RP, 134), that is, a principle of inquiry pragmatically “retrojustified” (see RP, 145–146). The very same principle is treated simultaneously as a transcendentally necessary condition for the possibility of certain purposive human activities and as a pragmatically useful postulate enabling us to engage in those activities efficaciously – that is, as a postulate itself pragmatically validated. A pragmatist conception of human activity is both a presupposition of realism (understood as a practical commitment) and something that itself requires a realistic conception of the world in which human beings act. In this sense, we may say that the transcendental cuts both ways: something can be a transcendental precondition of something else while also being itself “conditioned”. These different Rescherian commitments could also be seen as constituting a set of mutually supportive philosophical principles that are themselves constitutive elements of inquiry (see also section 5 below).
However, one may wonder why Rescher calls his realism “metaphysical”. He might have chosen a more neutral term, but presumably he wants to draw, again, a (rather unpragmatic) distinction: he wishes to be able to say that although one might, epistemologically, embrace conceptual idealism, one can and should be a realist in metaphysical matters. The meaning of the term is here different from what Hilary Putnam, another influential neopragmatist, meant by “metaphysical realism” in his famous attack on that doctrine. In any case, it is clear that the problem of realism vs. idealism lies at the heart of pragmatist philosophizing; it is much less clear that Rescher has adequately settled this vexing question. Realistic Pragmatism – as just one selected example of his enormous oeuvre – makes it very clear that several tensions remain in his position.

Turning to a diagnosis of what might be going wrong in Rescher’s project, it might be suggested that one of the reasons why he has difficulties with the issue of realism is his failure to pay due attention to what he takes to be merely the subjectivist trend in pragmatist thought, especially to James’s pragmatism, which views any realistic commitment to an objective reality as a commitment based on concrete, individual human purposes and thus arrives (arguably) at a genuinely pragmatic form of realism, in which realism is subordinated to pragmatism (rather than vice versa). The key problem in Rescher’s (and many others’) accounts of realism and idealism is the (transcendental) role played by human conceptualizations, idealizations, and schematizations in the structuring of reality. The issue of realism cannot, therefore, be discussed independently of our philosophical views on what it is to be a human being intelligently examining the world. The most important lesson that Rescher’s reflections on pragmatism may teach us is the unavoidability of something like philosophical anthropology in the realism discussion. We have to acknowledge the relevance of philosophical inquiries into “human nature” regarding our disputes over realism and idealism (and several other philosophical disputes as well). Realists, after all, claim that the
world is independent of us humans (or, more precisely, of our ways of conceptualizing it and inquiring into it), whereas idealists regard it as being somehow (but exactly how?) dependent on us.

Rescher interestingly argues that pragmatism, rightly developed, leads to an ethically (and metaethically) responsible realistic position (RP, chapters 7 and 8; see also SPI, II). Here, I believe, his case for realistic pragmatism is at its strongest, at least if his pragmatic defense of moral realism can be distinguished from the more problematic assumptions of metaphysical realism. The view that there are not only descriptive but also evaluative or “morally laden” facts (RP, 198, 220) – or that facts and values are inseparably entangled – has been central in the pragmatist tradition since James and Dewey.

A key idea in Rescher’s axiology and metaethics is that the pragmatic principle of rational evaluation through purposive efficacy should be extended to the normative area. Values, no less than methods employed in factual belief-acquisition, ought to be pragmatically assessed; they are not just “matters of taste”. What is decisive in such assessment is the capacity of our values to contribute to the realization of human interests. Hence, philosophical anthropology is needed in the pragmatic legitimation and rational criticism of values (RP, 168–169). Morality is ultimately grounded, Rescher maintains, in our inherently rational “ontological duty of self-realization”, “the fundamental obligation of endeavoring to make the most of one’s opportunities for realizing oneself as fully as possible as the sort of being one is” (RP, 213). The kind of value objectivism Rescher advances is certainly worthy of being taken more seriously than is customary in contemporary moral philosophy, but Rescher’s strong emphasis on rationality in axiology and ethics may also be misleading, as not all pragmatists would join him in defining morality as something essentially “geared to the benefit of rational agents” (RP, 199) – or as anything grounded in any metaphysical principles whatsoever.17
Not only is Rescher himself caught in the problematic web of realistic, idealistic, and pragmatist commitments; the same is true of some of his sympathetic critics who are trying to resolve the tensions we find in his work. I will conclude this section by taking a look at how some of his commentators contributing to the essay collection, Pragmatic Idealism (1998), have tried to deal with these matters.

As one of the editors of the collection, Axel Wüstehube, clearly explains, Rescher endorses a conceptual idealism which states that “everything real is knowable, and all knowledge includes [human] conceptualizations” (PI, 15). On the other hand, we have to be realists and acknowledge the independent existence of the natural world – even though this realism is, again, our conception, only pragmatically justified (PI, 15). We presuppose in our inquiries and practical actions the reality of an objective, mind-independent world; as noted above, we do not discover it on the basis of evidence (cf. also SPI, I, especially chapter 15). This defense of realism is thoroughly anthropocentric and pragmatic, as it appeals to our practical need to be realists. Wüstehube concludes that while we must accept realism, “we cannot but be conscious of the fact that realism does not describe the world as it really is” (PI, 15). This is a puzzling statement, however. If Rescher’s realism is distinguished from what Putnam and others have called metaphysical realism, as Wüstehube claims (PI, 15–16), then it of course cannot describe the world “as it really is” (as seen from a “God’s-Eye View”), for the concept of such a world does not make sense. If, however, Rescher’s realism amounts to something weaker, e.g., to a mere “internal realism” in Putnam’s sense, or perhaps “empirical realism” in Kant’s sense, it can be seen as describing the world as it really is (empirically speaking), from within a human, practice-embedded perspective, or rather, as describing the relation between our descriptions and the world we take them to be about.18

While Rescher does call his view “metaphysical realism”, he qualifies his notion of mind- or thought-independence by admitting that his pragmatic argument for this kind of realism does not
establish the mind-independent reality of physical entities (e.g., stones), but only establishes the fact that our conception of them is a conception of something mind-independently real (SPP, I, 274). Realism is, then, as emphasized above, our human pragmatic commitment, not a description of the world in itself or of things in themselves. At this point, a critic might claim that Rescher’s combination of idealism and realism is quite trivial. The world as we know or experience it is unavoidably a world reflecting our cognitive peculiarities. What we know or experience is, as Kant already emphasized, a “world for us”. Even a rather strong (metaphysical) realist could easily accept Rescher’s allegedly idealistic statement that our knowledge of the world is “a knowledge of it in our own, characteristically human terms of reference” (SPP, I, 323). Not even the strongest of realists would claim that realism is anything else than a human picture of the world, or of the relation between human inquiries and the world (even though such a realist might claim – albeit somewhat circularly, I would argue – that it is a true picture independently of whether we humans regard it as true or not, that is, that the truth of any humanly maintained view, realism itself included, is ultimately determined by the mind-independent world). If, on the other hand, conceptual idealism is construed in a stronger way, unacceptable to the realist who refuses to admit that human beings construct the world in any sense, it may threaten to take us into the kind of subjectivist pragmatism Rescher abandons. Hence, the critic would argue, Rescher’s “idealism” is either vacuous (because it is, in the end, realistic) or, if genuinely idealistic, too implausible or even crazy (too strongly constructivistic) to be acceptable by a rational, realistically-minded thinker.

Helmut Pape, in his contribution to Pragmatic Idealism, illuminates Rescher’s realistic requirement of the “stubbornness of things” and the “bruteness of facts” with reference to Peirce’s pragmatic idealism. He succeeds in formulating a crucial question (PI, 122): “What is the ontological status and what is the epistemological connection between mind-independent reality and mental processes? In what sense is Rescher’s conceptual idealism still a form of
idealism if it treats mind, consistent with the causal autonomy of nature and its physical processes, as a non-causal factor in the general scheme of things that has an explanatory role to play?" That is, in what sense is Rescher still an idealist, if he insists (as we saw above) on metaphysical realism?  

In his response to Pape, Rescher reformulates his combination of realism and idealism in explicitly Peircean terms (PI, 245): “With Peirce, I want to be a scholastic realist who sees mental phenomena as the causal product of an extra-mental reality.  

What we thus have is a commitment to realism of sorts that is itself embedded in an idealistic position.” Now, idealism again seems to be the basic commitment, somehow more fundamental than realism, as realism needs to be embedded in idealism. Hence, the reality external to the mind postulated by the realist is, according to Rescher, “ultimately ideal”, a “mental projection”, but yet, astonishingly, mental only in its “status” and extra-mental in its “nature” (PI, 245–246). Neither this distinction between status and nature nor Pape’s Peircean considerations can, I am afraid, fully settle the dialectics of realism and idealism we have arrived at. Both realism and idealism seem to be mutually presupposed; neither is self-standing without the other; and yet it remains unclear how exactly they are integrated.  

Indeed, Peirce’s own form of realistic idealism or idealistic realism is entangled with the same bunch of problems. In the spirit of Peirce, Rescher, and Pape, we may agree that realism and idealism should somehow “come into alignment” (PI, 245), but none of these philosophers has shown in detail how this can be achieved. Essential tensions seem to remain at the heart of pragmatist realism-cum-idealism. At this point I propose revisiting the Kantian background of these issues – with Rescher’s help.
4. Kantian matters: things in themselves and conceptual schemes

I already hinted at the Kantian features of Rescher’s thought by characterizing his argument for realism as “transcendental”. More generally, his interpretation of realism and idealism reminds us of Kant’s critical combination of empirical realism and transcendental idealism; famously, Kant maintained that empirical realism is possibly only insofar as we embrace transcendental idealism. Furthermore, while Rescher neglects, at least in Realistic Pragmatism, the Kantian background of pragmatism, he has elsewhere interpreted Kant’s philosophy in a (broadly) pragmatist manner, elaborating on the idea that philosophizing, according to Kant, is “ultimately a matter of practical rather than theoretical reason”, as practical reason addresses both moral and cognitive interests and thus in a sense guides our entire project of reason-use. It is now time to examine further the (pragmatistically updated) Kantian idea – integrating idealism and realism – that humanly developed conceptual schemes organize or categorize a mind- and scheme-independent world of “things in themselves”. This is realism, given that the reality of things in themselves (or a world in itself) is not denied, but it is also idealism, given that the independent world is always inevitably categorized by means of human conceptual schemes.

The postulation of Kantian-like things in themselves starts from the above-discussed idea that realism is something that we must presuppose instead of maintaining on the basis of any conceivable evidence. We do not, Rescher reminds us, discover that there is an objective, mind-independent reality; rather, the assumption of the existence of reality is justified on the basis of its utility and functionality, as we observed above (see SPI, I, chapter 15). “As Kant clearly saw”, he writes, “objective experience is possible only if the existence of such a real, objective world is presupposed from the outset rather than being seen as a matter of ex post facto discovery about the nature of things” (SPI, I, 257). This presupposition is necessary for various reasons: we need to maintain distinctions between truth and falsity and between reality and appearance; we need a basis for intersubjective communication and for a “shared project of
communal inquiry”; and we need to endorse fallibilism and conceive of inquiry in terms of a causal model based on the interaction between the inquirer and the world (SPI, I, 260-264). Thus, realism is both a presupposition of inquiry and retrospectively justified by the cognitive and practical success of inquiry (SPI, I, 266-270). As we already saw above, Rescher’s validation of realism is pragmatist in the sense that we need to be realists: an “intellectual accommodation to the world” is, we are told, “one of our deepest practical needs” (SPI, I, 265-266).

This is directly related to what Rescher has to say about the Kantian postulation of things in themselves. He argues that the notion of a thing in itself does not commit Kant to any ontological category of “wholly mind-independent reality”. Things in themselves are not “things” in the sense of “real things”, but rather some kind of mental products, creations of the human understanding, or “thought-things” (TT, 296-299). Their role, for Rescher, or Rescher’s Kant, is epistemological rather than metaphysical. They serve as “an instrumentality of our thought about the real world” (TT, 298). Our conception of them is “a self-imposed demand of the human understanding needed to implement its commitment to the externality of things with which it has to deal on the basis of the deliverances of sensibility and understanding” (TT, 295), that is, “a mental contrivance to which our reason finds itself unavoidably committed” (TT, 297). Hence, we can never know the existence of things in themselves but we have to postulate them (TT, 295), just as we have to postulate realism while admitting that our knowledge is confined to things “carved out” (idealistically) within our cognitive practices. Even if there were, per impossibile, a “realm of mind-independent realia that exist altogether ‘in themselves’”, such things would, “literally, be nothing to us” (TT, 297). Rescher writes:

> The conception of a thing in itself […] is a creature of the understanding to which we stand irrevocably committed in viewing our experience as an experience of something that is itself experience-external […]. The existence of things in
themselves thus emerges as a postulate of the human understanding. To be fully objective and authentic, an appearance must be an appearance of something; there must be an underlying something that does the appearance – that grounds it in a nonphenomenal order. [...] Our understanding is committed to the postulate or supposition that such experience-external nonsensuous entities exist, however little we may know about them [...]. (TT, 292.)

This is somewhat puzzling, as Rescher says we do postulate things in themselves as existing, yet in effect he is saying that they are dependent on our postulating them (as mind- and postulation-independent, though). There is a kind of dialectic of ontological dependence and independence at work here. The ontologically independent world paradoxically depends on our actively granting it such a status, although it is postulated precisely as being independent of any such activities of ours.

In essence, Rescher’s argument for the reality of things in themselves is the same as his argument for realism: these postulations are needed for us to be able to make sense of our experience. This is at the same time a pragmatic and a transcendental argument. It also implies that the Kantian notion of a thing in itself needs to be thoroughly humanized and “pragmaticized”. Our postulation of Dinge an sich selbst is not a metaphysical postulation of an unknown and unknowable transcendent realm, but a transcendently necessary pragmatic postulation playing a functional role in our dealings with the world we inquire into. This turns our realism itself thoroughly pragmatic.²⁵

Again, this also means that realism is justified by a “fundamentally idealistic basis” (SPI, I, 271; cf. NU, 115). The worry here may be that this realism – or the pragmatic postulation of practice- and experience-external things in themselves – verges on triviality. Of course we cannot conceptually make sense, or categorize, any other reality than the reality we do, or at least can,
conceptually categorize. Of course we can know only a world reflecting our conceptual capacities, because any other world would be completely beyond our cognitive and conceptual reach. Of course philosophical concepts such as the concept of things in themselves are only our conceptual ways of making sense of the externality of reality. Even a rather strong metaphysical realist not subscribing to anything like “conceptual idealism” or even pragmatism could agree with Rescher that our knowledge of the world is “knowledge of it in our own, characteristically human terms of reference” (SPI, I, 323), without agreeing that this commits us to any sort of idealism. In a way, his explicit treatment of things in themselves as merely human “thought-things” – indicating simply our commitment to there being something external to our experience – makes this even clearer. But we cannot get rid of the paradox, as that externality itself depends on us. In my view, only an explicitly transcendental (albeit not for that reason non-pragmatist) approach (reinvoking Kantian idealism) yields a plausible account of realism and idealism qua pragmatically interpreted.

Let us complete our picture of Rescher’s various tensions by turning from things in themselves to the other “pole” of the relation, namely, our concepts. I will again phrase this discussion by citing a relatively early paper by Rescher, in this case an essay in which he examines Donald Davidson’s celebrated argument against “the very idea of a conceptual scheme”. Rescher argues against Davidson’s conception of the necessary intertranslatability of languages (or schemes) by pointing out that if the descriptive, taxonomic, and/or explanatory mechanisms of two languages are “substantially” different from each other, no genuine translation can take place between them; yet, they may still be mutually interpretable without being mutually translatable. The functional role of languages in communication and human action in general is what makes them languages. (CS, 327-329.) The idea of alternative conceptual schemes is, therefore, intelligible, as our concepts are theory-laden and make factual commitments: “A conceptual scheme comes to be correlative with and embedded in a substantive position as to
how things work in the world.” (CS, 330.) If conceptual schemes differ from each other, this
does not mean that different truth-values are given to the same statements about the world or that
the same questions are answered in different ways. Instead, different schemes approach the
world from entirely different perspectives. They do not make different statements about the
same things but speak about different things. (CS, 331-333.)

Rescher’s view would undoubtedly be classified by Davidson and his sympathizers as just
another version of the conceptual relativism the argument against different schemes seeks to
silence. However, here again Rescher is a pragmatist – and a pragmatic pluralist (cf. SPI, III,
chapter 4) – instead of being simply a relativist. As a pragmatist, he suggests that conceptual
schemes describing experience, or the world, in different yet equally valid and equally objective
ways can be compared to each other only on the basis of criteria of pragmatic efficacy.

Successful human practice is the “semantically neutral” judge in the comparison between rival
schemes. (CS, 342-343.) Moreover, there is no need to presuppose any “preexisting ‘thought-
independent’ and scheme-invariant reality that is seen differently from different perceptual
perspectives” (CS, 337); that is, the idea (presupposed by Davidson), that the “content” of the
rival conceptual schemes would have to be something like “the given” or “the world in itself” is
itself (like the notorious “myth of the given”) a myth. The Davidsonian argument is based on the
false assumption that the content must be invariant, neutral, or ready-made. Insofar as such
assumptions are rejected, the argument against the so-called scheme vs. content dualism
becomes either trivial or unsound.

I am not going to settle the issue regarding conceptual schemes and conceptual relativism here.
It is, however, important to consider the possible links between Rescher’s views on things in
themselves and his views on conceptual schemes. While the “content” of the schemes need not
be any world in itself, we might say that we pragmatically need the concept of a thing in itself in
order to make sense of the very idea that we may through our conceptual scheming categorize
the world in a plurality of different ways, while also retaining the “reality principle” according to which our categorizations do not just make up the world but pragmatically contribute to shaping the world “for us” into a cognizable and experienceable structure. We may also say that the notion of a thing in itself is one of the presuppositions of our conceptual schemes, the very schemes we need to employ in our inquiries. This, again, yields a transcendental argument for realism – as Rescher puts it in a slightly different context, a “transcendental argument [...] from the character of our conceptual scheme to the acceptability of its inherent presuppositions” (NU, 112).

This all goes back, ultimately, to Rescher’s pragmatic views on the compatibility and (so to speak) interpenetration of realism and idealism. This is a most pragmatic position to take, even though it also rests on a kind of transcendental argument. Yet, the tension between realism and idealism still seems to remain unresolved, like (arguably) in Kant himself and the classical pragmatists. Let us therefore examine one more attempt to integrate these views into a coherent whole.

5. **Holistic pragmatism**

How could we try to find a way of living with the Kantian tensions of realism and idealism? It might, indeed, be argued that the pragmatist should attempt to critically reconcile, instead of resolving, such tensions as the one between realistic and idealistic commitments. There is no way, and no need, to establish either realism or idealism as the most fundamental commitment; even attempting to do something like that would be against the even more fundamental pragmatist principle of anti-foundationalism.
We may learn from Rescher’s reflections on these matters that realism and idealism, far from being the kind of philosophical rivals or opposites they are often claimed to be, presuppose each other and are mutually entangled and self-supporting. Moreover, their interdependence can be analyzed, again in quasi-Kantian terms (departing from Rescher’s actual views), as a “transcendental” interdependence: the relations of presupposition that run both ways are transcendental in the sense that very possibility of realism requires idealism, and the very possibility of (the relevant kind of) idealism requires realism. This is because both are ultimately pragmatic doctrines. So what we have here is an illustrative case of mutually supporting pragmatic transcendentalia.

In addition to going back to the Kantian tradition of transcendental philosophy (including transcendental idealism) in order to make sense of the Rescherian entanglements (and tensions) of realism and idealism, we may also find useful resources within the pragmatist tradition itself. What I would like to suggest here is that Morton White’s holistic pragmatism can be used to systematize the holistic commitments to realism and idealism, as well as, at the meta-level, to pluralism and pragmatism, that Rescher makes but leaves into a state of tension. Helping ourselves to White’s views at this point is a way of endorsing Rescher’s own systematic rational methods of philosophical and metaphilosophical inquiry. In particular, the Rescherian idea that valuational issues, no less than factual ones, are open to rational consideration and argumentation is fundamentally important here. Indeed, a crucial part of White’s holism is the entanglement of the rational evaluation of factual and valuational beliefs.

White’s pragmatism is indebted to W.V. Quine’s better known but considerably narrower position. It can also be seen as a development of the Quinean idea of a “web of belief”. In a Quinean manner, White maintains a “holistic” form of pragmatism; like Quine, he follows the strongly anti-Cartesian line of pragmatism, abandoning any “first philosophy”.28 The
specific nature of White’s position emerges against this background of Quine’s more extreme views. While both Quine and White begin from the rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction and from the holistic idea that our beliefs (or sentences) are not tested individually but “face the tribunal of experience” in corporate bodies, they draw quite different morals from this picture. White believes that the kind of holistic, empirical approach Quine favors in the philosophy of science can be extended to the philosophy of culture, covering not only science but also religion, history, art, law, and morality. Philosophy of science is, of course, one of its subfields – but White insists that other cultural institutions require empirically informed philosophical scrutiny no less than science does. Holistic pragmatism says that “philosophy of art, of religion, of morality, or of other elements of culture is in great measure a discipline that is epistemically coordinate with philosophy of natural science”. The idea that ethics, in particular, “may be viewed as empirical if one includes feelings of moral obligation as well as sensory experiences in the pool or flux into which the ethical believer worked a manageable structure” has been strongly present in White’s writings from an early stage to the present.

Quine took his famous holistic step by arguing that even logical truths are not immune to revision, because they are tested along with factual claims as components of a large conjunction of statements. No general analytic/synthetic division can be drawn, as statements about, say, the synonymity of terms are ultimately empirical statements describing the contingencies of language-use. Despite this fundamental agreement with Quine, White argues that “observation sentences” (e.g., “That’s a rabbit”) and ethical sentences such as “That’s outrageous” cannot be sharply separated from each other any more than analytic and synthetic statements can; their difference is a matter of degree rather than a difference in kind. That is, descriptive statements and normative ethical principles form conjunctions that are tested holistically, just as Quine argued that scientific and logico-mathematical beliefs in
Science are. Logic, science, and ethics form a unified whole, a holistic web without epistemic dichotomies. Moreover, as logical principles may, by Quinean lights, be given up in the face of sufficiently recalcitrant experience, descriptive statements may be denied in order to preserve a normative principle we do not want to give up, although such situations are rare. White’s point is that ethics is not inferior to science, or immune to empirical evaluation, because feelings of obligation together with sensory observation link ethical sentences to the natural world. Pace Quine, ethics is, then, “anchored in experience”. Ethics is a “soft science” rather than a “hard” one, but it is a science nonetheless, hardly any softer than Quine’s own naturalized “epistemological science”, the branch of psychology studying human cognition. Furthermore, “feeling sentences” are also fallible and can be surrendered when a conjunction is tested. Both ethics and science are, then, corrigible but cognitive enterprises – just like classical pragmatists like John Dewey also maintained already a century ago. Both are elements of culture forming a holistic totality instead of being distinct areas with definite boundaries. Knowledge and morals, as White himself formulated his point many years ago, form a “seamless web”.

Given this introduction to holistic pragmatism, how might White’s approach save us from the tensions inherent in Rescher’s pragmatism? How can Rescher’s pragmatism, philosophical or metaphilosophical, be rendered truly holistic? I would like to suggest that realism and idealism (as well as related meta-level views such as pluralism and pragmatism) form a critically and holistically testable web of (philosophical or metaphilosophical) beliefs in Rescher’s system, none of which can be assessed individually but all of which need to be assessed as a corporate body. In this sense, Rescher’s “systematic” tendencies need to be taken very seriously: to be systematic in his sense, we may argue, is to be a holistic pragmatist in White’s sense. The relevant kind of systematization in our philosophical web of beliefs can be achieved when we subordinate our entire philosophical framework to a meta-
level pragmatic testing. In this sense, Rescher’s entire system should primarily be approached from the perspective of pragmatism – albeit without turning even pragmatism into a fundamentalist dogma.

Let us, by way of an analogy, pursue this further by examining a reflexive problem concerning the internal coherence of White’s holistic pragmatism. White tells us that holistic pragmatism enables us to evaluate both factual (descriptive) and valuational (normative, e.g., ethical) beliefs or statements. However, isn’t holistic pragmatism itself a normative view within morality, in the sense that it is a position that contains a significant ethical element, having to do with what we can or should (legitimately) think or say about human cultural institutions? Aren’t we, if we follow White’s own principles, testing the whole conjunction of our beliefs, holistic pragmatism included (if it indeed is among our beliefs), whenever we test any belief, scientific or ethical? Now, someone might, pace White, come up with the belief (or, perhaps, the feeling?) that, say, mere feeling is not an appropriate experiential back-up for ethics, i.e., that moral obligation transcends feelings of obligation. How can this feeling (stimulated, possibly, by our experience of reading Kant) be accommodated within holistic pragmatism? Is the principle that feelings are central in ethics unsurrenderable in White’s pragmatism? It shouldn’t be, given his all-encompassing fallibilism and reflexively critical attitude. An analogous case in Rescher would be, e.g., the apparent unsurrenderability of realism itself. Could our holistic meta-level inquiry into the tensions between realism and idealism lead us to revise, or even abandon, the principle of realism (or the pragmatic “reality principle”) adopted as a way of making sense of our commitments in inquiry?

White does step on the meta-level when he suggests that holistic pragmatism itself ought to be conceived as a rule rather than a descriptive statement. The holistic pragmatist behaves like a legislator transforming a custom into a law when s/he formulates the rule that no experience may disconfirm holistic pragmatism itself, because this is the method we should
employ in testing our beliefs. White thus saves the normativity of epistemology, but he hastens to add that even such rules are not immutable, any more than legal statutes are. “Resolving to accept holistic pragmatism does not mean that it can never be altered or surrendered, but it does mean that a very powerful argument would be required to effect either of those changes”.

White intends his holism to be a normative view of how philosophers should philosophize, and about which topics – hence, it can be seen as a broad cultural thesis about the way in which a certain area of human culture, philosophy, ought to be organized – but he does not put it forward as a non-revisable norm. It is neither analytic, a priori, necessary, nor self-evident; it is just our best guess so far, and as things are we ought to follow this rule, in a fallibilist spirit. Yet, it is very important to observe here that to admit this possibility of critically evaluating and “testing” holistic pragmatism is to already work within holistic pragmatism. In this qualified sense, I grant that White has made a very powerful case for his position, even though some of its details perhaps cannot be fully accepted. Arguments against his conception of ethics should be evaluated within the overall normative scheme he develops.

The analogy to Rescher becomes obvious as soon as we compare holistic pragmatism to the Rescherian kind of pragmatism that includes both realism as a pragmatic “reality principle” and idealism as the “conceptually idealist” view maintaining that human principles such as realism are our ways of making sense of the world rather than pictures or descriptions of the world in itself. This combination of realism and idealism can itself be reflexively and pragmatically examined within the overall pragmatist-realist-idealistic picture it affirms. Furthermore, this integration – this holistic totality – of Rescherian philosophical theses bound together by the systematic use of pragmatist methodology is itself neither a priori, analytic, necessary, nor self-evident. It is, Rescher might agree with White, our best guess so
far, and it is on the basis of such a guess that we need to develop our total picture of
pragmatic commitments of inquiry.

6. Science and religion

An interesting test case for Rescher’s pragmatism is the heated debate on science and
religion. Is there a role for holistic, pluralistic pragmatism integrating realism and idealism to
play here?

Let us once more recapitulate the essential tension of pragmatism, as applied to realism and
idealism. Pragmatism can, as I have suggested, be seen as a philosophical approach seeking
to mediate between realism and idealism in a manner comparable to Kant’s attempt to argue
that empirical realism is compatible with (and even requires) transcendental idealism. While
the realism vs. idealism tension is inevitably present in pragmatism, both classical and “neo”,
pragmatists have typically attempted to move beyond this tension in interesting ways. The
Rescherian pragmatist can maintain that the world is (empirically) independent of us
(realism), but its independence is itself a human construct within our purposive practices
(idealism) possibly receiving different forms within different practices (pluralism). Moreover,
the world and whatever exists or is real within it can exhibit a number of different practice-
laden forms of mind-independence. For example, the mind-independence of electrons, of
historical facts, and of God (if, indeed, all of these entities or structures are mind-
independently real) are all quite different kinds of mind-independence, and it makes sense to
speak about these different kinds only within different purposive practices in which they play
some functional roles. The practice of physical science within which the independent
existence of electrons is at issue does not, presumably, have any function for God to perform,
but on the other hand the religious person’s prayer addressed to a God believed to be real
independently of that activity of praying hardly presupposes that electrons, or any other pieces of material world, are real.

There is no need to reduce all these to an essence of what it means to be mind-independent. This is a key observation in the philosophy of religion and the science vs. religion debate. Pragmatic realism – whether Rescher’s or, say, Putnam’s – is itself “practice-involving”, not just a view held for “practical” (e.g., non-theoretical or instrumental) reasons.47

Rearticulating realism (especially, in this special case, realism about religious and/or theological views) in terms of human practices is the key program of pragmatic realism in the philosophy of religion, analogously to the philosophy of science. This program is very different from the more radical neopragmatist (Rortyan) program of giving up realism, or even the issue of realism, altogether.

Some contemporary pragmatists, including Eberhard Herrmann and Niek Brunsveld, have suggested that the realism issue in religion and theology can be fruitfully articulated in terms of Putnam’s distinction between internal and metaphysical realism; according to Herrmann, in particular, Putnam’s internal realism can plausibly be used as a model for realism in theology and religion.48 This may or may not be a pragmatically workable approach (I must say I have some modest reservations regarding the contemporary “Putnamian” internal realism theologians’ views); what is worth pointing out here is that, similarly, one could rely on Rescher’s combination of realism and idealism in developing a pragmatist perspective on the realism issue in the philosophy of religion. There is no reason why we could not start developing a plausible pragmatic realism in the science vs. religion debate from the Rescherian entanglement of realism and idealism. We could start doing this by admitting that both realism and idealism are human ways of making sense of reality, religious and/or theological reality included. No human view, religious or theological views included, can be
regarded as a picture of reality as it is in itself, let alone of divine reality, which, if real, must almost per definitionem be beyond human cognitive and conceptual capacities.

In such a pragmatist philosophy of religion, one would rely on realism insofar as one claimed that religious and/or theological statements are about reality (and not merely, e.g., about subjective religious experiences or religious language). On the other hand, one would rely on idealism insofar as one claimed that such statements, just like the realistic (and idealistic) statements themselves at a meta-level, are necessarily human attempts to make sense of the world we live in, whether or not that world is taken to contain religious and/or theological aspects. Doing all this, one would then also rely on pragmatism, and more precisely holistic pragmatism, as one would subordinate one’s entire system of beliefs, realism and idealism (and even pragmatism and holistic pragmatism) included, to a pragmatic evaluation in terms of its success in enabling us to make sense of the world we live in and our practices of living in it, including both cognitive and valuational practices (with no dichotomy between the two).

Seeking to develop a holistic pragmatism inspired by White would be a subtly Rescherian undertaking in the sense that, even without any explicit connections to Rescher in this context, we would be operating on the basis of a rational, systematic pragmatism with a carefully construed realistic yet not non-idealistic “reality principle”. Even this brief example shows that Rescher’s approach has very interesting applications also outside the philosophy of science.

7. Conclusion

The relevance of Rescher’s position to the philosophy of religion cannot be further discussed here. What is important to observe, both historically andsystematically, is that Rescher can
be in interesting ways compared not only to the classical pragmatists (Peirce, James, Dewey) but also to contemporary neopragmatists like Putnam, for whom the realism–idealism tension seems to be very similar. Already in the 1970s and 1980s, it became clear that Rescher’s conceptual idealism shares several insights with Putnam’s internal realism – which is something that Putnam later gave up, in a way going through a similar development as Rescher. In addition, there are less well known approaches in recent philosophy that would offer at least as interesting points of comparison, such as Rein Vihalemm’s “practical realism”. It seems to me that these and many other pragmatists and neopragmatists seeking to maintain realism within some form of constructivism or idealism (or vice versa) would be saved from the trouble of moving back and forth between different philosophical commitments apparently in tension with each other by explicitly interpreting their realism-cum-idealism as a non-reductive, pragmatically naturalized form of (quasi-Kantian) transcendental idealism. This could, I believe, be most fruitfully done by construing this combination of realism and idealism as a holistic pragmatically testable set of commitments, to be analyzed in terms of White’s holistic pragmatism.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that Rescher, while developing a valuable version of pragmatic idealism-cum-realism, entirely lacks the meta-level worry regarding the coherence or meaningfulness of the realism debate that has been part of Putnam’s pragmatist and partly Wittgensteinian approach to these issues for decades. Rescher is a systematic theory-builder, primarily or even exclusively concerned with the truth and/or rational acceptability of philosophical theses such as metaphysical realism (albeit as pragmatic postulates). He is certainly no Wittgensteinian and does not find the coherence of the realism issue itself a problem worth serious consideration. This, depending on his reader’s philosophical temperament, may be a vice or a virtue in his system.
References


Notes

1 Rescher 2000b, xi. (Hereafter cited as RP.)

2 For Rescher’s views on philosophical systems and their diversity, see Rescher 1985.

3 Rescher has authored so many books that it would be impossible to discuss the minute differences between the various different formulations of his views in any detail here. As textual evidence, I will simply use some selected works by Rescher that I have over the years found useful for the purpose of my own research. Nor will I be able to take into account secondary literature in any comprehensive manner, but I will cite some helpful contributions illustrating the basic tension I will identify in Rescher’s project. Therefore, while I will take a detailed look at some representative writings by Rescher, mostly from the 1980s and 1990s up to the early 2000s, this inquiry focuses on what we may call “Rescherian” pragmatism, realism, and idealism (instead of primarily focusing on Rescher’s own views in their historical development).

4 See, e.g., James’s well-known discussion of how human categorizations “carve out” reality in James 1975 [1907], Lecture VII. Putnam’s association with idealism became a topic of hot debate when he announced his turn from metaphysical to internal realism in the late 1970s; see especially Putnam 1981. More recently, he has moved back to something like metaphysical realism.

5 See Wüstehube’s essay in Wüstehube and Quante 1998, 9. (Hereafter this volume will be cited as PI.)

6 Cf. Rescher 1992-94. (This work will be cited as SPI, followed by volume and page numbers.) In the 2000 book, Rescher speaks about “idealistic pragmatism” only when he defends the compatibility of pragmatism and a concern for “higher values” (RP, 189, 229).

7 See Rescher 1973b. In this earlier book, Rescher characterizes conceptual idealism as the
view that “nature, as we standardly conceive it, is conceived by us in terms of reference whose adequate analysis or explication requires some reference to the characteristically mental processes like imagining, supposing, and the like”, and that the mind “makes” “the mode-and-manner-determining categories” we employ to conceive nature (3). The argument then unfolds by seeking to show that such ontological categories as possibility, particularity, and lawfulness are “mind-involving” in this sense.

8 Another contemporary philosopher committed to a strongly realist (Peircean) understanding of pragmatism in a manner closely resembling Rescher’s is, as Rescher himself notes (RP, 60–61n1), Susan Haack (e.g., 1998). In addition, H.O. Mounce (1997) has defended the view that there are essentially two forms of pragmatism, the Peircean realistic one and the antirealistic one emerging from James. As Rescher (RP, 79–80) points out, however, Mounce’s way of dividing the pragmatist territory is somewhat different from his. Both defend a basically realistic interpretation of pragmatism, though.

9 For my attempts to interpret and develop the pragmatist tradition in these ways, implicitly critical of Rescher’s, see, e.g., Pihlström 2003, 2009, and the editorial chapters in Pihlström 2015.

10 Moreover, it is misleading to claim that James emphasized non-epistemic, affective, factors in belief validation (RP, 17, 20) and that he developed pragmatism into “a personalistic and psychologistic orientation towards matters of affective and subjective satisfaction” (RP, 18). It would be much more accurate to point out that James sought to offer a thoroughly pragmatic interpretation of epistemic concepts, deliberately blurring the kind of traditional dichotomies that have set the epistemic or cognitive on one side and the affective or “merely practical” on the other. James, as pragmatism scholars have for a long time recognized, did not give up objective correspondence truth, either, but required true beliefs to be in “agreement” with reality and sought to reinterpret this concept of agreement in terms of pragmatic efficacy.
Other dualisms that make his approach superficial from the perspective of Jamesian or Deweyan pragmatism are the ones between the definition of truth and the criterion of truth (RP, 52) and between “user-oriented” conditions of warrant and “reality-oriented” conditions of truth (RP, 150). It is one of the key insights of James’s (admittedly often unclear and confusing) discussions of truth that no such foundationalist dichotomies can be drawn: while there is no denying of the fact that truth in some highly general sense means “agreement with reality”, no abstract definition of truth independently of epistemic warrant can provide us with a “meaning” of the notion of truth as we use that notion in ways inextricably tied to our human epistemic affairs.

While it may be correct to say that methodological pragmatism is inspired by Peirce and the pragmatic evaluation of specific theses by James (see, e.g., RP, 89), this dichotomy is once again too straightforward: we should not forget that James also wanted to apply pragmatism to the evaluation of our methods or strategies of belief-acquisition (not only in science but in non-scientific, such as ethical and religious, matters as well).

A realistic conception of truth is also a key part of Rescher’s position. See his discussion of the distinction between “use conditions” and “truth conditions” in RP, chapter 6. One may wonder, however, what has happened to his earlier defense of a coherence theory of truth. (Cf. Rescher 1973a.)

For a famous Kantian argument seeking to establish a necessary connection between transcendental idealism and transcendental philosophy generally, see Allison 2004.

The notions of “practice” and “need” should, as always in Rescher’s texts, be interpreted in a wide sense: we are reminded that “intellectual accommodation” in the world is “one of our deepest practical needs” (RP, 141).

In addition to Putnam’s 1981 book cited above, see, e.g., Putnam 1990. For some comparisons between Putnam and Rescher, see, e.g., Niiniluoto 1999.
Jamesian pragmatists may feel that Rescher over-intellectualizes morality by assuming that all ethical issues are in principle rationally answerable. For those (pragmatists and non-pragmatists) who have come to think – with James, or perhaps with Wittgenstein – that ethical problems are ultimately personal and cannot be settled theoretically at all, Rescher’s rationalistic moral pragmatism may seem to be a violation of the seriousness of moral thought. His repeated insistence on the idea that rationality is “inherently impersonal” and objective (RP, 222) may appear as irrelevant in the ethical sphere.

Discussing Rescher’s conception of the objectivity of values in Wüstehube’s and Quante’s 1998 collection (PI), Timo Airaksinen suggests that Rescher’s moral realism might be called “internal moral realism” (PI, 35). Lorenz Puntel, in turn, speaks about internal realism in connection with Rescher’s coherentist conception of truth (PI, 165). Finally, Michele Marsonet (in the same volume) explicates the Rescherian view that science is a matter of truth estimation, not truth presentation, and that no particular scientific theory can give us the final and fundamental true picture of reality (see also Rescher’s response, in PI, 240–242; cf. Marsonet 1994).

Pape’s essay, “Brute Facts, Real Minds and the Postulation of Reality”, is one of the most interesting contributions of the PI volume from the point of view of our current interest in realism and idealism. See also Pape’s chapter in this volume.

Pape here defends Rescher by arguing that a notion of a mind-independent reality is, idealistically, constitutive for perceptual experience (PI, 124). For both Peirce and Rescher, reality is both real (i.e., it clashes with our interpretations and expectations) and ideal (i.e., general statements about it refer to future possibilities that are necessarily “mind-invoking”) (PI, 133).

This, of course, does not by itself make anyone a scholastic realist in Peirce’s sense. What scholastic realism requires is a realistic attitude to the reality of “generals”, such as habits, laws, and dispositions.

Rescher 2000b.
Rescher maintains that metaphysical validation is more generally “retrospective revalidation”, as metaphysics elucidates the “presuppositional backyard” of scientific knowledge by means of “second-order reflection” on the answerability of questions about reality. See Rescher 2000a, 4-5 (hereafter cited as NU). Our realism, again, also becomes validated in such a manner, along with various forms of “systematicity” that Rescher regards as conditions for the possibility of inquiry (NU, 18-19).

Rescher 1981, 289, 298. (I will cite this paper as TT in the text.) It can be suggested that in this essay Rescher defends a version of the “one world” interpretation of Kant’s distinction between things in themselves and appearances, familiar from Henry Allison’s work, in particular (see Allison 2004).

Another term Rescher uses in describing his realism is “contextualistic”: metaphysical realism, he tells us, “maintains investigation-antecedently that there is a physical state of natural reality”, but “‘what reality is like’ is nothing definitive and categorical but something contextual and limited to a particular state-of-the-art level of sophistication in point of scientific technology”. (NU, 71.)

See here also Rescher’s exchange with several critics in Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 54 (1994), containing a book symposium on SPI, as well as Marsonet 1994. Perhaps a slightly stronger attempt to formulate an interesting form of idealism is Rescher’s suggestion that idealism incorporates a “value-informed view of the world and one’s place within it” (SPI, II, 252-253), but even this need not be any threat to realism.


White 2002, 3-5.

Ibid., x-xi. In this regard, White’s philosophical temperament (employing a Jamesian phrase) is much closer to Rescher’s, who also strives for a comprehensive philosophical system.
30 Ibid., 66.

31 Ibid., xi; see also 3, 6, 76, 124-125, and especially chapter X.

32 Ibid., 71, 73.

33 Ibid., 154-155, 160-163.

34 In an earlier work, White (1981) labeled his view “epistemological corporatism”, meaning by it roughly the doctrine he later started to call “holistic pragmatism”. Note that this is a methodological or epistemic thesis about the testing or justification of the different types of statements forming the holistic totality, not a – much more radical – semantic or metaphysical claim about there being no difference between those types of statements, or their objects, at all. As such, it resembles Rescher’s methodological pragmatism.

35 Cf. White 1956, 257.


37 Ibid., 160.

38 Ibid., 161-162.

39 Ibid., 166.

40 White 1956, 287.

41 White 2002, chapter XI.

42 Ibid., 179.

43 Ibid., 180, 186.

44 Ibid., 181.


46 Ibid., 186.

47 At this point, a critic could point out that occasionally Rescher’s pragmatic realism does go too far in this direction, i.e., it is in the danger of collapsing into a merely instrumentally held position enabling us to make sense of our practices of inquiry rather than being constitutively
tied to those practices. I leave this question open here. Rescher’s own pronouncements could be interpreted in both ways in some contexts.

48 See especially Herrmann 2003, Brunsveld 2012. I discuss the relevance of Putnam’s and Rorty’s versions of pragmatism to issues in pragmatist philosophy of religion in Pihlström 2013, chapter 3.

49 For Putnam’s most recent discussions of why he moved back to realism, even metaphysical realism, and gave up the verificationism associated with internal realism, see Putnam 2012, 2015.

50 See Vihalemm 2012; for other recent contributions (including my own reflection on “Pragmatic Realism”) to the on-going discussion of the relation between realism and pragmatism, see Westphal 2014.

51 This is what I suggest in several previous writings, including Pihlström 2009.

52 I would like to thank Cheryl Misak for first inviting me to contribute this chapter to this volume that was initially supposed to be edited by her but ended up being edited by me. I presented a fragment of this essay at the International Congress of Logic, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science 2015 in Helsinki. Along with honoring Professor Rescher’s achievements as a realist and pragmatist, I would like to dedicate this piece to the memory of my practical realist friend Professor Rein Vihalemm (1938-2015), whose views on realism and pragmatism were in many ways strikingly similar to Rescher’s.