The Cognitive Pragmatism of Nicholas Rescher

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In *Cognitive Pragmatism* Nicholas Rescher attempts to lay to rest the perennial problem concerning the epistemic gap between what is directly given to us and the reality-claims that we base upon this. It is found that he offers many different candidates for what is this mental middleman that stands between us and reality, and that none of them is above suspicion. His resolution of the epistemic gap problem is, in effect, a dogmatic rejection of the meaningfulness of the philosophical language-game in which it is raised.

Nicholas Rescher’s recent book, *Cognitive Pragmatism*,1 has all of the virtues that we have come to expect from a Rescher book. It deals with big and important problems in a bold, original, honest, and appealing manner and, moreover, in lively prose with references to a very wide diversity of philosophers. Rescher’s ability to span different periods and movements within philosophy is remarkable: he has to be the most catholic of contemporary philosophers. This paper will attempt to critically evaluate the position worked out in *Cognitive Pragmatism*. Since the plan of this symposium includes Rescher’s responses, I will attempt to provide him with ample opportunity for writing such a response. I trust that the polemical nature of my critique will be taken as an expression of my admiration for the book and especially for the man, since it indicates that the book deserves to be taken with the utmost seriousness.

The biggest and most important problem that Rescher considers is “How could we ever validly claim that our thought corresponds with thought-external reality so as to get at the real truth? How can we get there from here” (5). “How we can possibly manage to unite ... factual authenticity and epistemic warrant” (8). Herein Rescher is aligning himself with the epistemic gap epistemologists in holding that there is a logical gap between what we immediately experience and the objective existential claims that we make on the basis of this experience. There are long-standing in-house disputes as to the nature of this experiential middle-man between us and objective reality. Often it has been claimed to be an idea, impression, sense-datum, a being sensorily
appeared to in a certain manner, or a seeming to one that she perceives something, and the like. Before considering Rescher’s pragmatic solution to the epistemic gap problem, it is important to get clear on just what sort of a middleman he places between us and reality. For, as John Austin showed in his classic work, *Sense and Sensibilia*, it is exactly at this point that the epistemic gap philosopher becomes most vulnerable. Maybe Austin’s head-em-off-at-the-pass strategy can be deployed against Rescher.

Rescher begins by giving this formal mounting of the epistemic gap problem.

1. The truth must agree with reality.
2. Therefore, in order to determine the truth we must determine what is really so, that is, what reality is like.
3. We have no accessway to reality independent of what we take to be the truth about it (10; my italics).

Subsequently, Rescher gives a different characterization of this middleman when he writes that “we have no access to reality apart from what we think to be true about it” (16; my italics); for the italicized portion of 3 speaks of what we take to be true and the latter about what we think to be true. Taking is an intentional act whereas thinking is not. That is why taking (consenting to, granting) can figure in an explicit performatory utterance – “I hereby take proposition p to be true” – whereas thinking (believing) cannot, “I hereby think (believe) that p” being a misbegotten performatory utterance. Notice that one can take (accept, concede, assume, grant) that a proposition is true without thinking or believing that it is. This could happen if one were to take a proposition to be true just for the purpose of programming experiments or grant a proposition merely for the sake of argument.

It now will be argued that Rescher has failed to establish an epistemic gap or, as he puts it, “a gap between evidentation and actuality” (11), on either interpretation. First, consider the version that holds takings to be the middleman, which would make them out to be the evidence from which we must infer how reality actually is. When we think that we perceive a material object, we take ourselves to be so doing, and we use this taking as evidence for inferring that we succeed in doing so and thus that the apparent object of our experience actually exists. I know that in my own case, and I have no doubt that this also is true for other normal people (I am giving myself the benefit of the doubt!), when I think that I perceive a material object I do not perform any intentional action of taking myself to be perceiving this object and therefore do not use the fact that I take myself to be perceiving this object as evidence for the proposition that I am perceiving (in the existentially-committed success sense of “perceive”) this object.