Reply to Symposium Participants

Nicholas Rescher

In my reply to the participants in this symposium, I respond to the contributions of Richard Gale, Larry Hickman, Michele Marsonet, Cheryl Misak, and Alexander Pruss.

1. Reply to Richard Gale

I much appreciate the gracious words of my old friend Richard Gale, and am also grateful to him for affording me an opportunity to further explain and clarify my position.

Gale’s critique focuses on what he calls the problem of the middle man – the question of what sort of intermediation one is to envision as obtaining between us humans and the reality we aspire to cognize. As Gale sees it, I am enmeshed by the Middleman Problem confronting the “epistemic gap theorists” who believe that there is some sort of fundamentally epistemic process of evidentiation – presumably “induction” – for effecting a safe crossing from our belief inclinations to the world’s actual arrangements. On such an approach substantial difficulties are bound to arise as to how such a transit from subjectivity to objectivity can possibly be validated.

However, as I see the gap at issue, however, the problem is configured differently. It roots in what is basically a linguistic or assertoric separation between the information (meaning-involvements) at issue with any objective claim on the one hand, and on the other hand the sum-total of information that is – or ever could be – at appropriately claimed those who undertake to make or endorse those objective claims. The disconnect at issue is that between the content of claims of various sorts: between what those claimants can actually obtain, and what their claims affirm in their full meaning.

As long as we are empiricists in relation to factual knowledge about the world, our linguistic use conditions will have to operate within the orbit of the discernible features of our experience. But of course the truth conditions of our claims regarding matters of objective fact have to go far beyond this. To begin with, it is clear that, as we standardly think about things within the conceptual
framework of our fact-oriented thought and discourse, any real physical object has more facets than it will ever actually manifest in experience. Every objective property of a real thing has consequences of a dispositional character, and these are never surveyable in toto because the dispositions that particular concrete things inevitably have endow them with an infinitistic aspect that cannot be comprehended within experience.¹ This desk, for example, has a limitless manifold of phenomenal features of the type: having a certain appearance from a particular point of view. It is perfectly clear that most of these will never be actualized in experience. Moreover, a thing is what it does: entity and lawfulness are coordinated correlates—a good Kantian point. And this fact that real things involve lawful comportment means that the finitude of experience precludes any prospect of the exhaustive manifestation of the descriptive facets of any real things.²

The world’s concrete furnishings not only have more characterizing properties than they ever will overtly manifest, but they also have more than they ever possibly can manifest. This transpires because the dispositional properties of things always involve what might be characterized as mutually preemptive conditions of realization. A cube of sugar, for example, must as such have the dispositional property of reacting in a particular way if subjected to a temperature of 10,000°C and of reacting in a certain way if emplaced for one hundred hours in a large, turbulent body of water. But if either of these conditions is ever realized, it will destroy the lump of sugar as a lump of sugar, and thus block the prospect of its ever bringing the other property to manifestation. The perfectly possible realization of various dispositions may fail to be mutually compossible, and so the dispositional properties of a thing cannot ever be manifested completely—not just in practice, but also in principle. Our objective claims about real things always commit us to more than we can actually ever determine about them. The actual gap that I take to be at issue is thus not so much epistemological as assertoric—a gap in making those objections assertoric we claim more than the information at our disposal does—or indeed ever can—manage to underwrite. It is, in sum, an inferential gap between the ever-available information and the claims we purport to base upon it. Seen from this angle, the issue does not root in the theory of demonstration or evidentiation, but rather to the theory of communication.

Now as I see it, the issue of validation enters the pragmatic domain at this point. After all, communication is a practice, and a practice can and should be validated through the nonavailability of a superior alternative and retrovalidated by noting that it works reasonably well in realizing the purposes and goals for which the practice is instituted.

The pragmatic approach that I favor sees the bridge between experience and (warranted) belief as a matter not of evidentiation but in considerations