

Common-Sense: A New Look at an Old Philosophical Tradition by Nicholas Rescher. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2005. Pp. 270. \$20 (cloth).

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Nicholas Rescher continues his prodigious output with this book a product of his 2005 Aquinas Lecture. Rescher's aim is to consider the proper place of common sense in philosophy. He accomplishes this with a wide ranging survey of issues common sense may bear on. Rescher's overall conclusion is that common sense has important bearing on philosophical doctrine and method.

In the first chapter *Common-Sense Knowledge and its Nature* Rescher presents his view of the nature of common sense. He distinguishes between common sense principles and common sense judgments. Common sense judgments need to be grounded in a general common sense principle (p. 38). A common sense principle is a general rule governing the determination of common-sense truths (p. 36). The common sense principle is likewise a matter of common sense. The key feature of these principles is that they reflect "the general experience of mankind in meeting human needs" (p. 38). Rescher views common sense as inherently pragmatic. He writes that the aim of common sense is "to achieve a rationally grounded commonality (uniformity) of opinion and evaluation in a commonality of agents dependent on cooperative and collaborative action in meeting human needs" (p. 42).

In chapter two *The Rationale of Common-Sense Knowledge* Rescher explains that the domain of common sense facts is limited to our pre-theoretical view of the world and our place in it (p. 52). This point follows naturally from his pragmatic conception of common sense. The authority of common sense lies in the fact that common sense is a useful guide to life and has proven a useful guide to life for many other individuals both in the past and in the present (p.

63). Rescher here advocates a view similar to critical commonsensism (p. 59). He avers that the claims of common sense are not irrefragable certainties. They are powerful presumptions that should be abandoned only in “very unusual conditions” (p. 57). He closes the chapter with passing responses to objections to common sense (pp. 64-9). One of the objections he doesn’t consider here is that common sense is inconsistent. He briefly considers this earlier alluding to an article by Peter Unger on common sense. Interestingly Rescher doesn’t dispute that common sense is inconsistent. He instead observes that inconsistency afflicts rational inquires in general and thus concludes that “common sense is at no disadvantage vis-à-vis the products of rational inquiry in general” (p. 55). Perhaps Rescher’s point is that the mere presence of inconsistency isn’t a sufficient reason for the wholesale rejection of common sense.

In the third chapter *Certainty and Skepticism in the Light of Common Sense* Rescher addresses the skeptical argument that since we can not be certain that skeptical possibilities fail to obtain we cannot know matters of common sense. Rescher agrees with an assumption of this argument that knowledge implies certainty (p. 72). He explains, though, that certainty can be understood in two senses: certainty beyond any reasonable doubt and certainty beyond any possible doubt (p. 76). It is not clear from Rescher’s exposition whether he thinks that ‘certainty’ is contextual or whether there are two different concepts of *certainty*. His response to the skeptical argument goes through more smoothly if he takes the contextualist route. On this route skeptical possibilities do not get a grip. I can know there is a chair in the room because I am certain that plausible falsifying circumstances don’t obtain. I just walked over to the chair and sat down. After this response to the skeptic Rescher appears to switch gears to consider another response to skepticism appealing to economic rationality. He reasons that we are economically rational in proceeding on the assumption that skeptical possibilities don’t obtain

(pp. 83-7). The appeal to economic rationality here is puzzling. If it's certain that skeptical possibilities obtain then we needn't justify common sense by appealing to cost-effective concerns. The appeal to economic rationality treats the skeptical possibilities as live options whereas common sense completely dismisses skeptical scenarios.

In chapter four *Common Sense, Trust, and Communication* Rescher provides an economic rationale for our trust in common sense and for the presumptions involved in communication. The overarching theme is that cost-benefit considerations and not factual considerations underwrite our basic trust in our senses and other people (see pp. 98 & 126). This chapter exhibits a similar oddity with the last several pages of the previous chapter. The oddity is that Rescher's economic defense of common sense is unnecessary given his earlier response to skepticism. Once skeptical worries are adequately addressed we needn't belabor the point common sense is largely accurate. Yet there is a deeper peculiarity with the chapter that lies in Rescher's claims that factual considerations don't underwrite our trust in common sense (pp. 98 & 126). It's peculiar because factual considerations do underwrite this trust. That I receive a good report from the ophthalmologist underwrites my trust in relying on eyesight.

The fifth chapter *Science and Common Sense* argues that common sense and the deliverances of science are not incompatible. Rescher stresses that common sense is distinct from common belief. The widespread belief in the pre-Copernican era that the sun rotated around the earth is merely a common belief; it is not "ground[ed] in a general principle that reflects the general experience of mankind in meeting human needs" (p. 38). Rescher then reasons that common sense is inexact (pp. 140ff). The correctness of common sense lies in its indefiniteness (p. 141). As I understood it the inexactness and indefiniteness of common sense claims is that they have little content. The actual content of common sense claims is weak

enough so as to be compatible with most—if not all—developments in science and every serious philosophical position.

In the sixth chapter *Universality and Common Sense in Moral Matters* Rescher argues that fundamental moral considerations—*respect persons, don't inflict needless harm, etc.*—are common sense. Moreover, he argues that these principles are inherent in moral concepts (p. 173). The person who abandons such principles is not engaged in the moral enterprise for conceptual reasons (p. 173). It is not clear what the argument is for this claim. Furthermore, it is unclear why we need this conceptual defense of morality. Rescher begins the chapter with the challenge of moral relativism. It is sufficient to respond to that challenge by noting that the alleged claims made by relativists do not actually support relativism (a strategy Rescher employs throughout the chapter). Thus moral relativism does not conflict with common sense.

In the final chapter *Common Sense in Philosophy* Rescher evaluates the role common sense plays in philosophical deliberation. The upshot of this chapter is that common sense provides a weak constraint on philosophical deliberation, ruling out neither Berkeleyan idealism nor Humean skepticism. Furthermore, Rescher doesn't endorse Moore's use of common sense to rule out non-trivial philosophical positions. In this context Rescher's insistence that common sense "plays a significant role in philosophical deliberations" (p. 234) appears exaggerated. The constraint common sense provides is merely that language must be used conformably with usage and that departures from common sense are justifiable only when only when there are very good reasons to do so (p. 209).

The most interesting aspect of this study on common sense is Rescher's appeal to economic considerations to justify common sense. This strategy seems right insofar as one is concerned with utility maximization. Yet the epistemic issue remains. What epistemic rationale

is there for thinking that matters of common sense tend to be correct? It is not clear how Rescher's economic justification of common sense bears on this question. Moreover, the issue of epistemic reasons apropos common sense can be raised for the utility assignments Rescher uses to provide the economic defense. Given such and such utility assignments it's economically rational to depend on the deliverances of common sense. Yet, one may wonder, what are the epistemic reasons for thinking that those are the right utility assignments? Rescher does not tell us. Nevertheless Rescher's economic approach is appealing and it deserves a good run for its money.