
Error: On Our Predicament When Things Go Wrong

Nicholas Rescher

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This is a short, dense book of philosophical argument concerning error, its nature and function in an obvious epistemological context, but also in relation to morality and metaphysics.

Rescher is one of our most venerable and prolific living philosophers, known chiefly for his contributions to logic and his writings on process philosophy and pragmatism. I get the sense that this is a “little book” for him, i.e., that it’s among the several books in his extensive bibliography that are not directly focused on the main themes of his work, yet serve as extended footnotes to that work. Throughout this book Rescher reminds us that humans are limited creatures situated in a particular historical epoch and that our propensity to err is a central part of our situation. I’m sensing this is something that figures prominently in his larger work. Halfway through the book he nicely captures this as it relates to error:

There is, of course, nothing whatsoever desirable about error in itself. But, nevertheless, in the larger scheme of things something positive can be said on its behalf. For, in a way, error is a blessing in disguise; it is the price to be paid for the realization of a larger good. Knowledge progresses via error: we are, or should be, engaged in an ongoing process of learning from our mistakes. And on the side of praxis it is a pervasive reality that the path to more adequate performances is paved with less adequate ones. For finite beings like ourselves, mistakes are integral to and inseparable from the learning process. And so it is sensible to regard error not as an unqualified negativity but, rather, given the inexorable realities, as constituting the inseparable dark side of positivity (Rescher, 2007, 50).

The book begins with a meditation on “The Ways of Error”, making important distinctions between cognitive, practical and evaluative error and errors of omission and commission. The next chapter, “The Dialectic of Ignorance and Error”, should have been called “Error and Communication” because it focuses on the fact that we can indeed communicate concepts about which we are in error. However, recognizing error in this respect points to the notion that there is something objective with which we are trying to make contact. We recognize that our communication is in error, yet this recognition itself means we have a shared, tacit conception of what “it” is we are trying to communicate in the first place. Again and again, error points to its opposite. This, naturally, has ramifications, for as Rescher elaborates in other chapters of the book, epistemology (Scepticism and the Risk of Error), moral philosophy (Error and Morality), and metaphysics (Error and Metaphysics). In this last chapter, Rescher riffs on Plato and Josiah Royce and puts forward a putative slam-dunk argument for metaphysical realism: If we acknowledge we are frequently in error about the world – and it’s hard to see how we could not acknowledge this – then this presupposes a state of affairs where we are correct about the world, otherwise we could not make the distinction. This is a sort of transcendental argument for the existence of a real world based on our acknowledgement of the existence of error. As Rescher conversely and concisely states: “For error to be possible, there must be something distinctively objective and real to be wrong about.”

The most technically challenging chapter in the book concerns “Error and Oversimplification”. Rescher is quick to point out that simplification is not the same as oversimplification. Oversimplification is simplifying something, a concept, a problem, a process, until some relevant and important part or aspect of it is left out. Thus is created an error condition, i.e., a mismatch between our oversimplistic conceptions and their mapping to a more complex reality. In this chapter, Rescher quickly provides examples and illustrations of how oversimplification/omission can lead to errors of commission; how more oversimplification doesn’t necessarily lead to more error; an enlightening discussion of the history of scientific progress and the increasing complexity of our theories and scientific views of the world; examples of the consequences of two particular forms of over-

simplification: confusion and conflation; and several other examples of oversimplification in action.

Overall, the book is a tough go, yet surprisingly rewarding. There is an impressive analytic grind here, and as you bump along Rescher keeps evoking “a ha!” moments with his sensible prose. Insofar as the topic of the book is so generic that it is relevant to most any area of inquiry, it can be read profitably by philosophers in all subdisciplines.