(public/private, experience/nature, community/individual, etc., etc.) that irreducibly can't be unified; and, 2) Dewey's efforts at this unification are mysterious, vague, face practical difficulties, and have not fully succeeded (and don't say enough about sex and inner life!). Ryan provides no arguments to support his complaints, but, beyond this, he is mistaken in viewing Dewey as a "cosmic optimist" (rather than a this-worldly meliorist). Dewey recognized the obduracy of institutions as well as individuals, and believed that action might--and only might--bit by bit and incompletely lead to change. The fact that there is no guarantee in any of this does not render this view mysterious or vague--unless one finds it mysterious to know the results of action and experiment only after that action. In the end, Ryan admits that Dewey was right about this, but adds that Dewey made it sound too simple. Here I confess that intelligent social reconstruction has never struck me as simple---much less too simple. Still, in this light, Ryan's extremely clear account of Dewey's political philosophy and American politics may help us locate the "high tide of American liberalism" not in the past but in the future. In the meantime, we're on the beach, high and dry.

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Arguing against both those philosophers who confidently have viewed consensus as a central fact of human life and those philosophers (in particular Habermas and Rawls) who hopefully have viewed consensus as a prerequisite of successful societies, Nicholas Rescher claims that we should abandon the centrality of consensus. In its place, he proposes a pluralism that rejects both relativism and absolutism and is, Rescher claims, more pragmatic. Opposed to consensualism ("dissensus avoidance") in all its forms, this pluralism ("dissensus management") emphasizes: legitimate diversity in cognitive, evaluative, and practical matters; restrained dissonance and a harmony of differences; the acquiescence in difference that this would require; and, respect (rather than mere toleration) for the autonomy of others within the limits necessary for communal order.

Rescher distinguishes consensus about beliefs (his main focus), consensus about actions, and consensus about values, and examines (in chapters 1-3) a spectrum of strong and weak consensus theories. In all these cases, however, he argues that efforts to establish the rational necessity of consensus simply beg the question by building a commitment to consensus into a notion of rationality. His central point (in chapter 4) is that the diversity of experience undermines the commitments of all consensus theorists. "Empiricism entails pluralism," Rescher states succinctly (and absolutely).

What sort of pluralism? Rescher distinguishes (in chapters 5 and 6) four versions of pluralism about beliefs, and much of the book consists of his arguments for the fourth type: skeptical pluralism that holds that no position is justified and so no position should be accepted; skeptical pluralism that holds that all positions are justified and that all must be accepted by some juxtaposition or combination; indifferent, relativistic pluralism that holds that only one position should be accepted although this acceptance cannot be justified on rational grounds; and, perspectival or contextualistic pluralism that holds that only one position should be accepted and that this acceptance can be justified (only) on perspectival, contextualistic bases. On the basis of
this contextualistic pluralism about beliefs, Rescher holds (with Mill in chapter 7) that pluralism about actions and values is neither irrational nor necessarily socially damaging, argues (against Habermas in chapter 8) that communication does not require consensus, and explains (against Rawls and contract theorists in chapter 9) that consensus is not required for a benign social order. In terms that are surprisingly unstartling, Rescher concludes (in chapter 10) that consensus is a good, but a limited good, for which there is, accordingly, no general imperative to pursue or promote.

This book raises many central philosophical questions, and addresses them in a very clear and carefully argued manner that reward equally careful attention. In the end, many philosophers largely sympathetic to Rescher's pluralism may be unconvinced by his arguments. For example, in the first place, he seems surprisingly unaware of the tension between his own brand of pluralism and his strong claim that empiricism "entails" just this version of pluralism. Here his account of empiricism appears to presuppose his pluralism in just the same way that he claims consensualists' accounts of rationality presuppose their consensualism. In the second place, his arguments against relativistic pluralism (a view he ascribes to Nietzsche, James, Rorty, and many other diverse thinkers) again beg the question about the nature of rationality given diversity of experiences and contexts. At the very least, Rescher misses an opportunity to engage fully the pluralism of James on this point. Moreover, the pragmatic difference, if any, between relativistic pluralism and contextualistic pluralism is simply never made clear. Finally, Rescher's anti-consensus attacks on Habermas and Rawls may strike many pragmatists as rather hollow and empty. Here again Rescher misses an opportunity to consider the nature and importance of consensus in the context of pragmatist concerns with the social self, the public, and communities. Still, this book positions us well to explore further just this sort of "cognitive diversity"--an undertaking at the heart of Rescher's timely message.

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