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## Presumption and the Practices of Tentative Cognition

Presumption is a remarkably versatile and pervasively useful resource. Firmly grounded in the law of evidence from its origins in classical antiquity, it made its way in the days of medieval scholasticism into the theory and practice of disputation and debate. Subsequently, it extended its reach to play an increasingly significant role in the philosophical theory of knowledge. It has thus come to represent a region where lawyers, debaters, and philosophers can all find some common ground. In *Presumption and the Practices of Tentative Cognition*, Nicholas Rescher endeavors to show that the process of presumption plays a role of virtually indispensable utility in matters of rational inquiry and communication. The origins of presumption may lie in law, but its future is assured by its service to the theory of information management and philosophy.

Nicholas Rescher is University Professor of Philosophy at the University of Pittsburgh. The recipient of many academic distinctions, including seven honorary degrees, he is a prolific author on philosophical topics.

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NICHOLAS RESCHER

*University of Pittsburgh*



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*For Timo Airaksinen  
in cordial friendship*

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## Preface

“Dr. Livingston, I presume” runs the famous exclamation with which H. M. Stanley greeted the long-lost explorer. And in saying this he as much as said that “this is what I am going to take to be the case unless and until further developments should show that it is not.” That is just exactly how presumption works.

The topic of presumption encompasses a wide range of practices within our quest for informative knowledge and practical decision. These particular resolutions, however, have a tentative quality in being taken to hold not with categorical assurance but rather provisionally and pro tem until such a point when (if ever) sufficiently strong counterindications come to light. Such presumptions carry a burden of proof that inclines upon anyone who is disinclined to accept them.

The practice of presumption arose initially in the law but subsequently became operative in virtually every area of rational endeavor, for presumption is a remarkably versatile and pervasively useful resource. Firmly grounded in the law of evidence from its origins in classical antiquity, it made its way in the days of medieval scholasticism into the theory and practice of disputation and debate. And it subsequently extended its reach to play an increasingly significant role in the philosophical theory of knowledge. It has thus come to represent a region where lawyers, debaters, and philosophers can all find some common ground.

This book has been conceived and written in the conviction that the epistemology of what might be called the lesser degrees of cognitive



warrant is an area of considerable promise and potential. For there is good reason to think that this domain of the “inferior” generally discounted grades of knowledge is indispensable for an adequate theory of knowledge. And, as this book will endeavor to make abundantly clear, this is particularly the case with those low-grade data that may be characterized as *presumptions*. Unfortunately, however, their foothold in epistemology is still rather insecure, and it is the author’s hope that this book will contribute toward remedying this shortcoming. For as this book’s deliberations endeavor to show, the process of presumption plays a role of virtually indispensable utility in matters of rational inquiry and communication. The origin of presumption may lie in the law but its future is assured by its service to the theory of information management and the philosophy of science.

Chapter 1 sets the historical stage. Chapter 2 coordinates presumption with burden of proof. Chapters 3–4 explore the theme of cognitive presumption that amounts to policies, deemed effective in gaining knowledge: practical policies (with pragmatic justifications) that we tentatively accept, *faute de mieux*, in order to progress in our thinking. Chapter 5 continues the argument for pragmatic justification of presumption, situating it in our ongoing choice between accepting points about which we are not certain or alternatively accepting a skepticism that admits defeat. Chapter 6 is devoted to presumption in default reasoning and Chapters 7–8 explore its role in making sense of what is left unsaid. Chapter 9 is devoted to presumption in sciences such as physics. One presumption in a natural science such as physics is explored in Chapter 10 – namely, that specific information (as in an experimental observation) generally overrules a general hypothesis. Chapter 11 focuses on a very special case of presumption in our planning for the future, which in some cases dismisses extremely rare possibilities from the reckoning on the basis of what, in effect, are “judgment calls.”

The range of issues that join together under the rubric of presumption collectively captures some of the complications and unkindness of our efforts to be rational and reasonable. For in the end these are not matters of mere logic alone but of a broadly “economic” striving to make the most effective possible use of our resources to meet the demands imposed by our needs.

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Historically, the tendency of work in epistemology since Descartes has focused on certain knowledge, creating a tradition that ignores or at best slights the kinds of provisional and conjectural focus of epistemic endorsement on whose basis both our theorizing and our acting in the world generally proceed. Attention to the role of presumption in inquiry counteracts this tendency and reveals the inadequacy of fundamentalist epistemologies to provide alike a faithful departure of the practice of human inquiry and a cogent theoretical validation for its proceedings.

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