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REVIEW

FLUORESCENT APORETICS

Nicholas Rescher, *Aporetics: Rational Deliberation in the Face of Inconsistency*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press. 2009.

Pp. 161. £26.50 HB.

By Peter Vickers

How should we proceed if we find ourselves with good reason to believe conflicting theses? We have all been in such a position at one time or another. Such conflicts immediately call for resolution, and we feel compelled to reject one or another assumption as soon as possible. Often such a conflicting set of beliefs isn't merely annoying, but actually dictates that we should carry out two contrary actions. For example, depending on what assumption we reject, we might turn left or right at a T-junction. Relevant situations crop up everywhere; for a soldier, such a decision might well be a matter of life and death (there is good reason to believe the map, but also good reason to believe the guide: what to do?). And there are many famous examples in the history of science, where the decision can affect our vision of how the world works, which explanations and predictions we infer, and even how we should build instruments and conduct experiments.

With his latest book *Aporetics*, Nicholas Rescher puts forward a suggestion for how we should reason in such situations. He describes a set of 'individually plausible but collectively incompatible theses' as an 'apory' (p.1), and spends the majority of the book considering different *types* of apory that can crop up, and how we should proceed in these cases. Crucially, his goal is not to guarantee 'the truth', but rather to 'maximize plausibility' (p.3). The truth may be preferable, but in cases where the truth

eludes us (possibly forever) one need not be forever stumped. Rescher provides us with good reasons (in many cases, at least) to proceed in one way rather than another.

The central problem in reasoning with inconsistent assumptions is that, by the rules of classical logic, one can derive any conclusion one wishes, and no conclusion has priority. Since the 1950s an increasing number of philosophers have opted for one or another paraconsistent approach, where the rules of logic are changed to avoid this awkward result. Rescher is strongly opposed to such a 'logic-driven' solution. Instead he favours what John Norton has dubbed a 'content-driven' approach, where one decides how best to proceed by considering the material content of the assumptions in question. Rescher's particular version of this approach is to apply one of several rules of thumb when faced with inconsistency. One rule to which Rescher returns on several occasions is the 'Principle of the Conservation of Information' (p.82). This dictates (for example) that one should favour more general claims over more specific claims if one can, since if we reject a specific claim we reject one thing, but if we reject a general claim we implicitly reject many specific things too (all those which fall under the general claim). However, which rules should be favoured depends upon the context of enquiry. Sometimes the 'weakest link' in an inconsistent set will be a *general* claim, because sometimes (eg. in the context of empirical enquiry) what matters most is how much *evidence* we have for our claims, and general claims are usually more speculative than specific claims. A particularly nice example on p.46 shows us how the rule to be applied changes depending on whether we are considering a factual conditional ('Since John is not a bigamist...') or a counterfactual conditional ('If John were not a bigamist...'). Finally, in certain contexts, one should decide what to prioritise based not on evidence or 'conservation of information', but on 'coherence/systematicity' considerations (pp.133-134). On p.136 the main lessons of the book are summarised in table form: the rules of aporetic reasoning which should be applied in various different contexts of enquiry are listed. As Rescher puts it, '[W]eakest link determination functions rather differently in different areas of inquiry.' (p.41).

One notices early on in the book that apories often differ markedly from ‘genuine paradoxes’. It is immediately obvious in many of the cases that nobody in their right mind would accept all of the inconsistent assumptions in play. For example, Rescher’s first apory (p.2) consists of four assumptions: (i) the stick looks bent, (ii) things are as they look, (iii) the stick feels straight, (iv) things are as they feel. From these assumptions one can straightforwardly infer the contradiction that the stick is both bent and not bent. But, quite obviously, anyone would reject (ii), and say instead that things are *usually* as they look. Assumption (ii) does not seem to be even individually plausible, which raises the question of whether this example should be called an ‘apory’ at all. And the book is littered with similar examples.

However, this may well be a pedagogical tool. Instead of being stuck with difficult paradoxes and asking what the best ‘way out’ is, with examples like that of the bent stick we can see immediately how best to resolve the inconsistency, and go on to ask general questions about *why* that is the best way out. The lessons learnt from such easy cases might then be applicable to ‘real paradoxes’ (which are themselves a *type* of apory). But if this is an intention Rescher does not explicitly state it; instead he explains his approach in a different way. He argues that we don’t always believe the assumptions we ‘entertain’ (p.27) and reason with, taken literally, but we nevertheless *act* upon such assumptions. For example, although we believe ‘things are *usually* as they look’, we actually act out our lives on the assumption that ‘things *are* as they look’. Fred Muller (‘Inconsistency in Classical Electrodynamics?’, 2007) has recently made a similar claim in the context of theoretical physics: physicists use equations all the time with equals signs where what they *really* believe would use approximately-equals signs. The reason is that equations become essentially useless when approximately-equals signs are used, because we can no longer tell what follows from them. Scientists act *as if* the equations are true, even though they often don’t consider them to be the best candidates for truth.

However, there are many cases where we find that the things we actually do want to *believe* (and not just ‘entertain’) are inconsistent. In the end it is frustrating that no

current, genuine paradoxes are considered in any detail in the book. The reader is given example after example of ‘quasi’ paradoxes, where the way out of inconsistency is immediately obvious. But there is no extended discussion of a real-life paradox, presented to the reader as genuinely cognitively frustrating, and then submitted to ‘aporetic reasoning’. I for one would very much like to have seen Newcomb’s Paradox, or The Surprise Test Paradox, or the Paradox of Musical Works carefully tackled. A 2nd edition of the book would benefit greatly from a new chapter consisting of an extended case study.

However, there are already hints within the book that Rescher’s approach, at least at its current level of explication, would not be especially helpful for such genuine “live” paradoxes. On pp.43-44 we are introduced to an apory where ‘there is no weakest link’. In other words, Rescher accepts that sometimes we can’t decide how to proceed, even using his rules of thumb. On p.95 this conclusion is described as a ‘disjunctive resolution’: we should simply conclude “This *or* this *or* this *or* ... should be abandoned”, which is of course useless if a decision *has* to be made. And it seems that there is plenty of scope for interpreting the rules in different ways. On pp.93-94 another example makes clear the difficulties of deciding which propositions ‘have priority’. Rescher notes in footnote 7 that a theist and an atheist would have very different takes on how to diffuse the ‘paradox of evil’. And on p.118 he writes that ‘rival “schools” resolve an aporetic cluster in different and discordant ways... Alternative positions make different priorities.’ But then there seems to be a conflict between aporetic reasoning as a prescription, a way to proceed in the face of inconsistency, and accepting that different people who apply aporetics will proceed in different ways.

The tension is resolved if one accepts that aporetic reasoning is *not* always intended to provide a single way forward, but merely to help different people decide how *they* want to proceed (depending, perhaps, on their background beliefs). However, it is then in danger of becoming a rather empty prescription. Faced with a dilemma we will not be able to come to an agreement with others, but will merely (at best) be able to decide

how *we* want to proceed (and even that is not guaranteed). In addition, despite the somewhat ambiguous nature of aporetics, there are sometimes exceptions to the rules. On pp.47-48 Rescher considers a case where the obvious way forward goes against the recommended rule. It's an open question whether there are many cases looming where the favoured rule would lead us astray.

However, despite these criticisms, there is much that I admire in the book. It is extremely rich, containing much which might inspire others to expand upon the ideas, and potentially answer the concerns noted above. The sheer number of examples of 'apories' is an important resource for research in this area, and the general content-driven (as opposed to logic-driven) approach is surely correct (although it is unfortunate that no reference is made to the previous content-driven approaches of John Norton and in particular Joel Smith).

Aporetics is to be praised for striking the right balance between prescribing *general* reasoning techniques, and insisting that there will always be considerations specific to the particulars of an individual case. It does not attempt to provide a succinct 'theory of inconsistency', and that is exactly right: unlike many articles, it respects the complexity and diversity of inconsistencies. Without doubt, it is a valuable addition to the literature.

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