

**Nicholas Rescher**

*Aporetics: Rational Deliberation in the Face of Inconsistency.*

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Rescher's *Aporetics* is an essay in philosophical methodology with much to recommend it. In addition to being eminently readable (on account of both its style and its length) it is also timely. Philosophy as a discipline is now so fractured and divided that one often wonders what it is that unites its practitioners within a single intellectual enterprise. In such circumstances a return to metaphilosophical and methodological questions is entirely appropriate. Rescher's efforts are also to be welcomed because of his admirable grasp of the entire history of the discipline. *Aporetics* will find favour particularly amongst those who believe that philosophy did *not* begin with Descartes, let alone with Frege, but extends back to the Ancient Greeks and even embraces the Scholastic Middle Ages. The result is an ecumenical metaphilosophy that allows room to diverse methodologies while offering an account of what it is that unites these within a single intellectual enterprise.

While *Aporetics* can be read with profit in isolation, it is best seen as developing an overarching metaphilosophy introduced in previous work. In his 2006 monograph, *Philosophical Dialectics: An Essay on Metaphilosophy*, Rescher claims that '...the aim of philosophy is to provide cogent and convincing answers to "the big questions" that we humans have regarding ourselves and our place in the world's scheme of things' (13). In good Aristotelian fashion he uses this aim as the standard by which to evaluate methods and rules of practice: 'Any rule of practice or procedure is to be evaluated not in the range of true-false but in the range of effective-ineffective with respect to its efficacy in relation to the purposes of the practice at issue' (12). The idea is that philosophers must know what they are trying to accomplish if they are ever to be in a position to know if they have succeeded, and to be able to identify those practices that have led to success or failure. At issue then is the particular contribution philosophers can make with respect to achieving cogent and convincing answers regarding reality and our place in it. It is here that aporia come to the fore.

Rescher implies that specifically philosophical reflection is required in our efforts to find our way around in the world because humans are prey to 'cognitive overreach' (*Aporetics*, 2). That is, to economise on intellectual effort we make the most of our limited cognitive achievements by extending our knowledge claims beyond what the evidence strictly warrants. This tendency to 'hypertrophy' is often useful in practice; but when we consider our belief system as a whole we notice that cognitive overreach has led to contradictions. The result is that we find ourselves holding beliefs which are individually plausible but mutually impossible. Such cognitive dissonance constitutes an apory. It is the business of philosophy to resolve aporia (the metaphilosophical claim), and aporetics is the study of apory management and resolution (the methodological claim).

Rescher provides many examples of apory to fix ideas. Consider the following set of theses accepted by many 20th-century philosophers:

1. A cognitively meaningful statement must be verifiable in principle.
2. Claims regarding what obtains in all times and places are not verifiable in principle.
3. Laws of nature characterise processes that obtain in all times and places.
4. Statements that formulate laws of nature are cognitively meaningful.

This is one of countless aporiae Rescher mentions, and he shows that puzzles of this form can be found in and across all sectors of the intellectual economy.

The bulk of *Aporetics* is devoted to laying out a particular procedure for resolving aporia based on considerations of plausibility. One is to begin by gathering all the relevant ‘data’, i.e., the considerations that have led one to accept the propositions of the aporia in the first place. Then one is to draw up an inventory of the available conflict-resolving options. These always amount to dropping at least one of the initial propositions. Finally, one chooses between these options by using ‘plausibility considerations’ (23). The leading idea is that ‘the chain of inconsistency is to be broken at the weakest link’ (3). The essay is devoted to spelling out these steps and providing illustrations of the method across a range of topics.

Central to this methodology is the account of plausibility. And it is here that non card-carrying pragmatists will balk at Rescher’s suggestions. At issue is deciding which of a set of propositions is the least plausible. Rescher suggests three considerations ought to guide our choice: (1) the relative strength of the empirical evidence in favour of each proposition; (2) the explanatory power of each proposition; and (3), since (1) and (2) involve a trade-off, we also want a judicious balance of empirical evidence and explanatory power. The question is which of these desiderata to emphasise on any given occasion. His advice is to consider the context: ‘the rationale for a particular mode of prioritization lies in the specific goal and purpose of the domain of deliberation at issue. Just this essentially *pragmatic* consideration must be allowed to determine the correlative principle of prioritization’ (139).

This will strike some as unsatisfactory. First, as Rescher’s own examples illustrate, aporia frequently involve claims from disparate domains with different goals and purposes. Second, even when a single domain is at issue, it is not clear that Rescher’s advice addresses the problem at hand. The problem is to find a way of distinguishing the more from the less plausible. But identifying a goal or purpose for a domain does not allow one to make this adjudication. Our goals reveal something about our desires and intentions; but the plausibility of a proposition is a function of how we take extra-mental reality to be configured. So while Rescher’s account of the philosophical enterprise and his three-step procedure are important achievements, the challenge of prioritization has yet to be met because pragmatic considerations do not address the issue of relative plausibility in any obvious way.

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