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The Nature of Apories

▶ *What Is an Apory?*

In Greek, *aporia* literally means an impasse, a blockage where there is no practicable way to go forward. The word eventually came to characterize any thing, situation—and even person!—who is difficult to deal with. In philosophy, it came to mean a puzzle, a perplexity, an intractable or at least deeply problematic issue. For present purposes, however, the term will be used in a more specific sense to characterize any cognitive situation in which the threat of inconsistency confronts us. Accordingly, an apory will here be understood as a group of individually plausible but collectively incompatible theses.

A word on lexicography. In philosophical discussion, the Greek term *aporia* has been retained. This is a regrettable complication. For ease of usage, the term should be anglicized, along with harmony, symphony, melody, and, indeed, philosophy itself.

Note, for the sake of illustration, the following cluster of contentions constitutes an apory:

1. What the sight of our eyes tells us is to be believed.
2. Sight tells us the stick is bent.
3. What the touch of our hands tells us is to be believed.
4. Touch tells us the stick is straight.

Here each thesis may seem undividedly plausible, but they conjoin to issue in inconsistency. And owing to the contradiction that arises among them, these statements cannot be maintained together. The interests of mere self-consistency require that at least one of them has to be abandoned and replaced—or at least qualified. With apories we thus have not only a collective inconsistency but superadd to this a conception of plausibility that enables us to retain as much information conveyed by the conflicting propositions at issue as the logic of the situation and the cognitive possibilities at hand permit.

Or again concern the following claims:

- Every person has some weight or other.
- The weight of a person is given by a particular mathematical quantity.
- Every particular mathematical quantity is accurate to ten decimal places.
- The weight of a person is accurate to ten decimal places.

Here again, we have individually plausible contentions that are collectively inconsistent. And it is just this that constitutes an apory.

Situations of this aporetic nature arise in very different contexts of application. In addressing cognitive problems we seek to maximize our opportunities by pressing matters to the limits. We thus embark on speculations that not only reach but also overreach, and thereby plunge into inconsistency. This process reflects a general—and understandable—tendency to hypertrophy that manifests itself in many areas as populations or organizations grow to a point that threatens their very viability. And just this is a phenomenon that we encounter in various cognitive contexts; for our inclinations to ac-

cept, or to conjecture, and even merely to suppose, often plunge us into inconsistency. Just here is the explanation for the pervasive proliferation of aporetic situations across a varied range of information-management settings.

The resolution of apories calls for a plausibility analysis that enables the chain of inconsistency to be broken at the weakest link. The fact is that any and every apory can be resolved by simply abandoning some (or all) of the commitments whose conjoining creates a contradiction. In principle, the apory management is thus a straightforward process that calls for appraising the comparative plausibility of what we accept, and then restoring consistency by making what is less plausible give way to what is more so. It is this generic and uniform structure of inconsistency management that paves the way to that single overarching discipline of aporetics.¹ The exploration of this domain is the principal task of the present book, whose central thesis is that there indeed is such a general and uniform approach to the rational management of apories.

Use of this aporetic method does not issue in a guarantee of truth. All that the analysis is able to do for us is optimize—that is, to maximize plausibility via considerations of systemic coherence in matters of question-resolution. Aporetics is thus less a method of innovation than of regimentation: its task is not to engender new insights but to bring systemic order and coherence into those we already have. In Leibnizian terms, it is not an *ars inveniedi* but an *ars componendi*.

► *What Does Confronting an Apory Require?*

The prime directive of cognitive rationality is to maintain consistency and consequently to restore consistency to inconsistent situations. To be sure, it is a *possible* reaction to paradox simply to take contradictions in stride. With Pascal, we might accept contradictions for the sake of greater interests and say that “à la fin de chaque vérité, il faut ajouter qu’on se souvient de la vérité opposée” (after every truth one must be mindful of the opposite truth).² The Greek philosopher

Protagoras (b. ca. 480 B.C.), the founding father of the Sophistic school,³ notoriously held that the human situation was in this way paradoxical throughout, and that *anything and everything* that we believed could be argued for *pro* and *con* with equal cogency.⁴ But this sort of resignation in the face of inconsistency is hardly a comfortable—let alone a rational—posture. Even if one's sympathies are so inordinately wide, inconsistency tolerance should be viewed as a position of last resort, to be adopted only after all else has failed us.⁵ For once consistency is lost, how is it to be regained?

When confronted with an apory there is no rationally viable alternative to rejecting one or more of the theses involved, since accepting all results in inconsistency. Here our cognitive sympathies have become overextended, and we must make some curtailment in the fabric of our commitments. So doing nothing is not a rationally viable option when we are confronted with a situation of aporetic inconsistency. Something has to give: some one (at least) of those incompatible contentions at issue must be abandoned. Apories constitute situations of *forced choice* among the alternative contentions.

Consider a historical example drawn from the Greek theory of virtue:

1. If virtuous action does not produce happiness (pleasure) then it is motivationally impotent and generally pointless.
2. Virtue in action is eminently painful and should provide a powerfully motivating incentive.
3. Virtuous action does not always—and perhaps not even generally—produce happiness (pleasure).

It is clearly impossible—on grounds of mere logic alone—to maintain this family of contentions. At least one member of the group must be abandoned.

But of course if we are going to be sensible about it, we will be under the rational obligation to provide some sort of account—some rationale—to justify this step. Whatever particular exit from inconsistency we adopt will have to be accompanied by a story of science,

and that justifies this step. And so with the preceding virtue illustration we face the choice among the following alternatives:

1. Abandonment: Maintain that virtue has substantial worth quite on its own account, even if it does not produce happiness or pleasure (Stoicism, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius).
2. Abandonment: Dismiss virtue as ultimately unfounded and unrationalizable, viewing morality as merely a matter of the customs of the country (Sextus Empiricus) or the will of the rulers (Plato's Thrasymachus).
3. Abandonment: Insist that virtuous action does indeed always yield happiness or pleasure—at any rate to the right-minded. Virtuous action is inherently pleasure producing for fully rational agents, so that the virtue and happiness are inseparably interconnected (Plato, the Epicureans).

When an apory confronts us, a forced choice among the propositions involved becomes unavoidable. We cannot maintain the status quo but must, one way or another, “take a position”—some particular thesis must be abandoned as it stands.

► *There Are Always Multiple Exits from Aporetic Inconsistency*

There are always alternatives for removing aporetic inconsistency by curtailments. It lies in the logical nature of things that there will always be multiple exits from aporetic inconsistency. For whenever such conflicting contentions confront us, then no matter which particular resolution we ourselves may favor, and no matter how firmly we are persuaded of its merits, the fact remains that there will also be other, alternative ways of resolving the inconsistency. For a contradiction that arises from overcommitment can always be averted by abandoning different candidates among the conflicting contentions, so that distinct awareness to averting inconsistency can always be found. Strict logic alone dictates only *that* something must be abandoned; it does not indicate what. No particular resolutions are imposed by abstract rationality alone—by the mere “logic of the

situation.” (In philosophical argumentation one person’s *modus ponens* is another’s *modus tollens*.) It is always a matter of trade-offs, of negotiation, of giving up a bit of this in order to retain a bit of that. Accordingly, aporetics is not only a matter of logic but calls for good judgment as well. Thus consider the following aporetic cluster:

1. Some facts can be explained satisfactorily.
2. No explanation of a fact is (fully) satisfactory when it involves unexplained facts.
3. Any satisfactory explanation must be noncircular: it must always involve some *further* facts (facts distinct from the fact that is being explained) to provide materials for its explanatory work.

Premise 3 indicates the need for unexplained explainers. Premise 2 asserts that the presence of unexplained explainers prevents explanations from being satisfactory. Together they entail that there are no (fully) satisfactory explanations. But premise 1 insists that satisfactory explanations exist. And so we face a contradiction. A forced choice among a fixed spectrum of alternatives confronts us. And there are just three exits from this inconsistency:

1. Abandonment: Explanatory skepticism. Forgo the explanatory project altogether.
2. Abandonment: Explanatory foundationalism. Insist that some facts are obvious or self-evident in a way that exempts them from any need for being explained themselves and make them available as “cost-free” inputs for the explanation of other facts.
3. Abandonment: Explanatory coherentism. Accept circular explanations as adequate in some cases (“very large circles”).

We have the prospect of alternative resolutions—but over a well-defined spectrum of alternatives. The range of choice before us is limited.

As such examples show, any particular resolution of an aporetic

cluster is bound to be simply *one possibility among others*. The single most crucial fact about an aporetic cluster is that there will always be a variety of distinct ways of averting the inconsistency into which it plunges us. We are not just forced to choose, but specifically constrained to operate within a narrowly circumscribed range of choice.

The theory of morality developed in Greek ethical thought affords a good example of such an aporetic situation. Greek moral thinking is inclined to view that the distinction between right and wrong:

1. Does matter
2. Is based on custom (*nomos*)
3. Can only matter if grounded in the objective nature of things (*phusei*) rather than in mere custom

Here, too, an aporetic problem arises. The inconsistency of these contentions led to the following resolutions:

1. Deny: Issues of right and wrong just do not matter—they are a mere question of power, of who gets to “lay down the law” (Thrasymachus).
2. Deny: The difference between right and wrong is not a matter of custom but resides in the nature of things (Stoics).
3. Deny: The difference between right and wrong is only customary (*nomoi*) but does really matter all the same (Heracleitus).

We have here a paradigmatic example of an antinomy: a *theme* provided by an aporetic cluster of propositions, with *variations* set by the various ways of resolving this inconsistency. There will always be alternatives here since the objective of consistency resolution is something which, in principle, can always be accomplished in very different ways.

► *The Mission of Aporetics*

When confronted with an aporetic situation, we of course can, in theory, simply throw up our hands and abandon the *entire* cluster of

theses involved. But this total suspension of judgment is too great a price to pay. In taking this course of wholesale abandonment, we would plunge into vacuity by foregoing answers to too many questions. We would curtail our information not only beyond necessity but beyond comfort as well, seeing that we have some degree of commitment to all members of the cluster and do not want to abandon more of them than we have to. Our best option—or only sensible option—is to try to localize the difficulty in order to save what we can. In this way aporetics is, in effect, a venture in cognitive damage control in the face of inconsistencies.

The mission of aporetics is thus to provide a practicable means for coming to terms with inconsistency. Particularly prominent among the situations in which inconsistency arises are:

- Conflicting information that arises from discordant sources in matters of empirical inquiry
- Conflicts that arise when new information disagrees with the old
- Conflicts of putative fact with speculative supposition in thought experimentation and hypothetical reasoning, counterfactual conditionalization, and *ad absurdum* and *per impossible* reasoning
- Paradoxes in matters of theoretical deliberations where some of our belief-inclinations disagree with others in speculative conjecture regarding history
- Conflicts arising in philosophy through the clash of doctrines and contentions

The ensuing deliberations will address all of these issues.