

XVIII
The Philosophical Significance and Inevitability of
Paraconsistency

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1. Introduction

Paraconsistency strikes at the root of principles which are fundamental to, and entrenched in, much philosophy. It is therefore bound to be philosophically problematic and to have important philosophical ramifications. In this introduction we will try to chart and analyse some of these issues. By its nature, this will require us to deal with a number of separate and not otherwise connected issues. However, we will start by looking at some important points raised by the arguments for paraconsistency in chapter v, section 1 above. We will then go on to investigate some of the philosophical consequences of paraconsistency.

2. Reasons for paraconsistency

In ch. v, sect. 1 we gave two reasons for studying paraconsistency. The first, and weaker, was that some theories are inconsistent but non-trivial; the second was the truth of certain contradictions. Both of these claims are bound to be hotly contested, especially the second; for this reason we now consider them in greater depth.

2.1. There are natural inconsistent but non-trivial theories

No one would deny that we can construct purely formal, uninterpreted calculi which have as theorems formulas of the form 'A' and '~A', but which are not trivial. If paraconsistency is to have real interest, it must be possible to do more than this: we must be able to find real life, philosophical or scientific examples of inconsistent but non-trivial theories. A number of these were suggested in ch. v, sect. 1.1. Let us look at these more closely.

2.1.1. *Inconsistent bodies of law and the like.* One example of an inconsistent corpus from which non-trivial conclusions are drawn concerns certain bodies of law. Now it is not difficult to find bodies of law which are *prima facie* inconsistent. But it will undoubtedly be claimed by some—the “friends of consistency” we will encounter again and again—that the inconsistencies are only *prima facie*, that when properly understood the law is consistent. The obvious move is to suppose that one or more of the laws which produce inconsistency contain implicit exceptive clauses which prevent them from being applied in the contradiction-producing case. For example, it is often pointed out that laws can be ranked in increasing order of strength through common law, statute law, constitutional law, etc. This may suggest that if a lower ranking law contradicts a higher ranking law, it *ipso facto* ceases to be applicable. Another way in which we may try to make good the idea that a law has implicit exception clauses is this. The preamble of the bill which passes a piece of legislation may make the intentions of the legislators quite clear. It may then be said that although a particular case falls under the act as literally worded, it was never really meant to apply to this kind of case. The intentions of the legislators therefore provide implicit exception clauses. (This is a somewhat problematic point however, since a judge will often uphold the letter of the law, even when it is clear that doing so goes against the intentions of the legislators.)

Moves of the above kind can sometimes be reasonable. However, someone who denies the occurrence of inconsistent bodies of law must do more than claim that this or that manoeuvre is *sometimes* performable. He must claim that it *always* is. And put like this, it seems most unlikely. A case may easily arise where both of the contradiction-producing laws have equal rank, where the intentions of the legislators are lost in the mists of time, are moot, or are even downright inconsistent, where there is no precedent for waiving one law rather than the other, etc. In short there is no objective situation which can be used to underpin the claim that one law has implicit exceptive clauses or takes precedence over another. In such circumstances to insist that nonetheless one law has implicit exceptions is mere whimsy; there may well be much more to the law than what is literally written in a parliamentary bill, but to suppose that something can be a fact of law when it is grounded in no aspect of the legal process is baseless obscurantism.

Of course, when a contradiction of the kind we have pointed to becomes important, there are procedures for resolving it. The matter goes to court where a judge makes a decision. Since there are, *ex hypothesi*, no legal reasons for deciding one way or another, the judge will decide on extra-legal (socio-political) grounds. However, the important point here is that the judge is not trying to find out what the (consistent) law is, but is himself *making* law. What the judge decides just is the law and that is that (until and unless the legislature decides to change it or a higher court, if any, amends it). In this situation there is no way in which a judge can be wrong

i.e. make a ruling which is incorrect.¹ Thus the judge, by making new law, is changing the corpus of the law. His action provides the basis for the law, henceforth, to be considered to have an exceptive clause, and hence after his ruling the corpus of law may no longer have this inconsistency. But this does not change the fact that before the ruling the corpus was genuinely and not just *prima facie* inconsistent. Thus there can be genuinely inconsistent bodies of law.

What holds of law applies also, given appropriate adjustments, to like bodies of (partly prescriptive) doctrine, such as those applied by morality or religion. Again there are evidently or demonstrably inconsistent bodies of doctrine whose inconsistency cannot be satisfactorily explained away. Important examples are offered by irresolvable moral dilemmas.²

2.1.2. *Inconsistent theories in philosophy and the history of ideas.* A major reason for taking the paraconsistent enterprise seriously is that inconsistent but putatively non-trivial theories abound in intellectual endeavours. Indeed much of our intellectual history is composed of such theories. This is particularly true of our philosophical heritage,³ where it is not entirely implausible to advance the following (classically preposterous) thesis:

TH1. *Any sufficiently complex and interesting philosophy will be inconsistent.* There are several ways of arriving at, and supporting, this large thesis. One is by direct argument from the character of such philosophies, another weaker but persuasive argument is by induction from the inconsistent nature of major philosophies. The themes used in the induction are of much independent interest, namely:

TH2[M]. All [most of] the major philosophical positions, from the history of philosophy, are inconsistent.

TH3. No philosopher has succeeded in avoiding inconsistencies of a fundamental kind, those encountered in achieving the complex aims involved in working out a fairly comprehensive philosophical position.⁴ In each case the themes concern major, complex or comprehensive theories. (Without doubt there are, or can be designed, miniature philosophical theories which are consistent, e.g. simple nominalist theories or theories pegged to a consistent segment of the cumulative hierarchy of sets.)

The latter themes give the appearance of being much more factual than the initial theme, which also makes predictions about future, and indeed merely possible, philosophies. But the appearance is something of an illusion; a variety of less factual and overtly normative considerations enter into attempts to show that the positions of given philosophers are inconsistent. For this reason, establishing TH2 and TH3, and even the weaker TH2M, is far from straightforward and cannot be achieved with any high degree of certainty. Open to the friends of consistency are always too many

escape routes from (apparent) inconsistency, such as those that "interpretation" of a philosophy can supply.

Fortunately, then, a much weaker thesis will serve very well for paraconsistent purposes, namely,

TH4. Some major philosophical positions, which are not trivial, are inconsistent. Rather surprisingly, given the dominance of philosophical positions (often ideologies) which entail that all inconsistent theories are trivial, TH4 is a thesis to which many philosophers will assent at once. Indeed, they will frequently go further, with a little or no prompting, and propound theses like TH1-TH3. Yet practically no-one believes that major philosophical positions which are inconsistent are trivial, or thereby trivialized. Accordingly, the situation cannot be accounted for under the usual (classical-type) methodology of philosophical theories. In short, thesis TH4 leads to the further thesis

TH5. The theory of philosophical theories must be paraconsistent; no other type of theory is adequate to cope with the data; in particular, no classical account of philosophy will do.

The main detailed work which follows will concentrate on establishing the thesis TH4, that some major philosophical theories are inconsistent *but* non-trivial, that underpins TH5. Naturally, derivation of TH5 involves further assumptions, such as that philosophical theories are theories; that is to say, are at least deductively closed.⁵ That this holds can be argued as follows: *x*'s philosophical theory is given by what *x* is committed to philosophically. But if *x* is committed to A, and B is deducible from A, then *x* is committed to B, whether or not he asserts it. Thus philosophical theories, as encapsulating philosophical commitments, are closed under deducibility.

Similar points serve to distance a philosopher's theory from what the philosopher asserts. The separation is familiar from discussion of criteria for ontological commitment. There are analogous, but even more complex, problems in determining criteria for philosophical commitment. However, assertion, without (later) amendment or withdrawal, is normally sufficient for commitment; this (qualified) sufficient condition is crucial for the exegesis of positions from philosophical texts, and will be applied in what follows.

By no means all inconsistent theories are trivial. But recent philosophical theories which are inconsistent and also incorporate classical or intuitionist logic—or, more accurately, the theories of logical consequence these logics supply—are trivial, and accordingly are worthless *unless* repaired. Such theories, while they are relevant to theses TH3 and perhaps TH2, are not germane to TH4, and so will receive only brief presentation and exemplification. Such theories trivialize because, of course, they supply spread laws such as $A \ \& \ \sim A \vdash B$. Examples are theories of Frege, Russell, the early Wittgenstein⁶ and Quine. Main inconsistencies detected in these theories

are not, however, tied essentially to the underlying (classical) logic, so they have a wider interest.

Frege's theory, and likewise a transitional position of the early Russell, is inconsistent because of the logical paradoxes (to say nothing of the concept *horse* and the like). It is not merely that Frege's theory succumbed to the Russell paradox, but that his suggested amendment to avoid that paradox left him open to the derivation of further paradoxes.⁷ Many philosophical theories seem indeed to succumb to logical or semantical paradoxes. Cantor's theory, if that is accounted philosophical, is one; Aristotle's theory with its (apparent) acceptance of the Liar at face value as both true and false⁸ is another. Whether these theories are trivial or not turns on the question of what their underlying logics look like. More generally, paradoxes of one sort or another are a prime source of inconsistency not just in logical theories but in philosophical theories.⁹

Dealing with Russell introduces a complication already hinted at which is very important, both as regards determining what a philosopher's theory is, and as regards enabling a philosopher to escape from inconsistency; namely, the change or adjustment of theories over time. Russell, to take a more extreme example, did not develop a single philosophical theory: rather, he went through a sequence of somewhat different theories with significant common elements. In chapter I, section 5.4, we observed the phenomenon of theory change on a smaller scale (in terms of a number of changes) with Wittgenstein. Frequently, of course, inconsistency in a previous position is a major reason for moving on to a new one; and often this would take the form of inconsistency with—sometimes presented as inability to account for—data the position was supposed to comprehend. A somewhat Hegelian account of philosophical motion, or "progress", must be a *proper* part of any adequate theory of philosophical theory dynamics, especially of the theories of one individual or school.¹⁰

Inconsistency was certainly a moving force in Russell's development. He discarded several of the earlier positions he had held because, in large measure, of inconsistencies, e.g. "naive" logicism, the "naive" theory of denotation. He was halted entirely in his attempt in 1913 to work out a theory of intentionality by inconsistency,¹¹ and forced thereby into extensional reduction in the form of logical atomism. This theory not only proved, rather quickly, inconsistent with much rather evident data, but was internally inconsistent. For example, Russell's logical atomism was inconsistent as to the existence of facts. On the one hand, the world consists, according to the theory, entirely of simples (including relations). On the other, inconsistent, hand, sentences are true only by virtue of appropriate facts, which are not however conveyed by any listing of simples—so that facts also demand, and obtain, basic ontological status:

... facts, which are the sorts of things you express by a sentence, ... just as much as particular chairs and tables, are part of the real world.¹²

But also,

... facts ... are not properly entities at all in the same sense in which their constituents are. That is shown by the fact that you cannot name them. You can only deny, or assert, or consider them. But you cannot name them because they are not there to be named ...¹³

Russell's later work contains many lesser inconsistencies. One example (developed elsewhere¹⁴) concerns negation, where Russell both sponsors a classical theory and also elaborates an account which leads to a non-classical model of negation.

Russell's multiple relation theory of belief leads to inconsistency: logical forms both are and are not constituents of judgement complexes.¹⁵ Wittgenstein's first criticism of the theory also pointed to a connected inconsistency, that 'Socrates and Mortality are of the same type ... This directly contradicts Russell's claim ... that universals and particulars are of different logical types' (Griffin, p. 173). As Griffin goes on to remark, this 'is a new version of an old problem: namely the problem in *The Principles of Mathematics* of the verbal noun which occurs as a logical subject, and which Russell wanted to be the same as the verb which occurs as relating relation' (pp. 173-4).

Discovery of contradiction in his earlier position was a major source of motion for Russell from one position to a later. Thus he abandoned 'the relational theory of space together with Bradleyan monism' because of contradictions deriving therefrom.¹⁶

There was a further major inconsistency in Russell's 1913 research program, brought out by Wittgenstein's second criticism of Russell's theory of judgement which was (see *Tractatus* 5-5422) that 'the correct explanation of the form of the proposition 'A makes the judgement p' must show that it is impossible for a judgement to be a piece of nonsense (Russell's theory doesn't satisfy this requirement)'.¹⁷ (Griffin explains in detail the tensions in Russell's 1913 program: for a summary see p. 180, from which it follows that the combination of theories Russell proposed to combine is inconsistent.)

Most larger philosophies contain a good many minor inconsistencies; such appears certainly to be the case with the theories of Russell, Wittgenstein and Quine. A "minor" example from Quine concerns the proposition "God exists", which is rendered true by the theory of descriptions Quine adopts, but false by Quine's overall atheistic physicalism which leaves no existential place for God.¹⁸ Such an example is minor because it can be avoided by a relatively minor change in the underlying theory of descriptions (as it is, Quine advances mutually inconsistent theories of descriptions). The fact that this example is "minor" and thus comparatively easily rectified does not imply that it does not have a devastating impact on the theory as given, since classically any contradiction is a catastrophe.¹⁹

To obtain examples of inconsistent philosophical theories which are not trivial without change of logical base, it is not necessary to proceed backwards in time to periods before the ascendancy of classical logic—especially since non-classical theories are now being developed, as by isolated philosophers who were never caught in the classical trap, and as in this book—but it is advantageous to do so, especially if major philosophies are to provide examples. There are several well marked ways in which a philosophical theory can end in inconsistency, whether unintentionally or not; for example, by inclusion of sufficient self-referential apparatus for the formulation of paradoxes, by other paradoxes of a variety of types, through involvement in an infinite regress, by self-refutation of one sort or another, and so on. But as there is so far no very worthwhile classification of these ways to inconsistency (a thoroughly effective classification is not to be expected however), the preliminary grouping that follows is rather rough and ready. So also the selection of further philosophers we now present as having inconsistent theories is not at all systematic, nor is the particular selection of inconsistencies from the philosophers cited systematically determined. We set down what we fell over that was solid enough to trip us up. More exactly, we list examples of inconsistencies we managed to recall or came across or that others pointed out, where we thought we could make the claims good enough to stand up on their own.

Important sources of inconsistency in recent philosophy closely tied up with both features of mathematical objects and the logical paradoxes are (insufficiently qualified) characterization postulates, that is, postulates which assign objects characteristics which serve to identify and distinguish them, such as that the object characterized as *f* is indeed *f*. The most famous modern examples are the inconsistencies concerning the round square and the existent King of France, that Russell located in the theory of objects of the Meinong school at Graz.²⁰

More generally, comprehensive theories of abstract objects are especially liable to upsets of one sort or another, arising from characterization postulates (inevitable for such objects) and ending in inconsistency. The stock example is Plato's theory of forms, which is revealed as inconsistent, for instance, by the problem of self-prediction and through the Third Man Argument.²¹

Another connected source of inconsistency to which philosophical theories, including recent theories, are especially prone derives from self-refutation. Inconsistency frequently emerges in this sort of way: According to the theory *t*, (a) All philosophical [metaphysical, etc.] theories are of kind *k*. But (b) *t* itself is a philosophical [metaphysical, etc.] theory, at least according to its own lights, (c) *t* is not of kind *k*. One famous example concerns logical positivism, which can be represented as a metaphysical theory to the effect that all metaphysical theories are nonsense. One of the damaging inconsistencies in Wittgenstein's early work is of this type, and

issues in the proposed throwing away of the ladder or theory by which one has ascended.²² Wittgenstein's later theory is in a similar predicament, with its theme to the effect that all philosophical theories are mistaken, or else that there are none.²³ Much the same applies to Collingwood's absolutist theory of metaphysical presupposition, where kind *k* amounts to involving metaphysical presuppositions. Because of their metaphysical presuppositions no philosophical theory can be taken as true or rejected as false; but this depends on the theory of metaphysical presuppositions itself being taken as true.²⁴ As regards the history of philosophy, Collingwood's theory leads to derivative inconsistency, such as that some historical theories (e.g. Collingwood's) are both criticizable and not.

The trouble with Collingwood's theory resembles, in its self-refuting aspects, the trouble with Protagoras' 'man is the measure of all things' doctrine of more than 2,000 years before (at least as that doctrine is interpreted by Plato). To engage properly in discourse at all, as he does, Protagoras has to assert something to be the case; yet he renounces the claim to be able to assert true statements, in his teaching that no one can inform one of anything.²⁵ In this way Protagoras' position leads to inconsistency (in fact of the general form already given above). Other positions of a thoroughgoing relativistic or sceptical cast do also.²⁶

Inconsistencies over knowledge or belief, common among philosophers, sometimes arise, as in scepticism, out of self-refuting theses, sometimes not. It is not clear which mechanism is operative in Lao Tse, whom Bose has accused of inconsistency over knowledge. According to Lao Tse, it is both wise (sensible) to know the laws (of nature) and also not wise to know anything.²⁷ The situation looks a bit like the Socratic "paradox", that Socrates' wisdom consists in his knowledge that he knows nothing. Socrates is also inconsistent. For $K_s(p)(p \rightarrow \sim K_s p)$. But if this proposition, *q*, is true then it follows, since $(p)(p \rightarrow \sim K_s p)$ (by $K_s r \rightarrow r$), that $\sim K_s q$, i.e. $\sim K_s K_s(p)(p \rightarrow \sim K_s p)$. But in the case of such conscious knowledge, it seems certainly true that $K_s r \rightarrow K_s K_s r$ (i.e. an S4 principle holds²⁸). So $\sim K_s(p)(p \rightarrow \sim K_s p)$, establishing inconsistency as regards *q*.

Bose goes on to charge that 'Locke and Rousseau are "bogged in inconsistencies"', but he unfortunately supplies no details. According to Passmore, however, who does give details, the inconsistencies in Locke are quite blatant. One instance is this: 'An idea, let us say, is whatever lies before the mind, and yet we can have before our mind the idea's capacity to represent what is not an idea.'²⁹ Locke is, so Passmore contends, not inconsistent in an uninteresting way, for instance out of carelessness, or because he has not entirely overcome an older position he is working away from. Such inconsistency is not deep and is easily rectified, for instance, by minor adjustments to the theory or the restatement of certain themes or claims, so removing inconsistencies while remaining faithful to the original.³⁰ No, Locke is inconsistent because he has to be, to establish what

he wants to establish: that is why he is inconsistent about ideas and about our power over our beliefs, and why that inconsistency is deep in his theory and not easily excised. Thus

there can be no doubt that Locke would have liked consistently to maintain two theses, the first that rational human beings will regulate their degree of assurance in a proposition so that it accords with the evidence... The second, that human beings are so constituted as naturally to do this, were created rational, that they go wrong only where some of the evidence is not before them. But he finds it impossible to reconcile this second with his experience of the actual irrationality of human beings...³¹

Consistency of his belief with the evident data is never satisfactorily achieved, with such results also that there is not a uniform picture of belief in Locke but competing inconsistent theories, modelled on knowledge and, differently, on desire. The account of belief as an important surrogate of knowledge³² is one source of a serious inconsistency in Locke's ethics of belief: On the one hand, he maintains, on several occasions, that 'to believe this or that to be true is not within the scope of the will', is not a voluntary matter. On the other hand, he also maintains, and is theoretically committed to maintaining, that belief ought to be, can be, and is often a voluntary action.³³

Inconsistency was not confined to seventeenth and eighteenth century empiricists, such as Locke and Hume. It much afflicted the rationalist alternative as well. Spinoza's *Ethics*,³⁴ in particular, appears to be riddled with inconsistencies, many of which seem sustainable, for example, the following, concerning God and the notion of love. On the one hand God loves himself (an immediate consequence of proposition 35, book 5), whence, by the definition of love (p. 130: love is pleasure accompanied by the idea of an external cause, Definition of Emotion 6: see p. 172), God has emotions, and God is affected with the emotion of pleasure. On the other hand, 'God is free from passions, nor is He affected with any emotion of pleasure or pain' (proposition 17, book 5). Derivatively then, God, an already perfect being, sustains both increases and also, worse, decreases in perfection.

Another deep inconsistency arises from Spinoza's strong determinism. Spinoza is committed, in the *Ethics*, to these theses:

- (1) Δp (everything is non-contingent)
- (2) $\Box p \supset p$ (whatever is necessary is true)
- (3) $\Box p \supset Pp$ (what is necessary is permissible)
- (4) $(\exists p)(p \ \& \ \sim Pp)$ (non-permissible acts occur)