CHAPTER 5

INCONSISTENCY, RATIONALITY AND RELATIVISM

It is the aim of this paper to answer the question: Is it a fault to hold inconsistent beliefs and if it is, how serious a fault is it? The bulk of the paper will be devoted to arguing for three points: that (a) inconsistency is indeed a fault, (b) that it need not, however, be a serious fault and (c) that sometimes the most rational course is to subscribe to beliefs which form an inconsistent set.

My interest in these questions is motivated by claims made in the informal logic/critical thinking literature to the effect that (a) the practice of critical thinking requires the rejection of relativism because (b) the adoption of relativism involves one in inconsistency or self-contradiction and (c) any view whose adoption involves one in inconsistency ought to be rejected by practitioners of critical thinking. I seriously doubt that (a) is true, I am inclined to think that (b) is true and therefore I am interested in challenging the truth of (c).

1. WHY IS INCONSISTENCY A FAULT

Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then I contradict myself, 
(I am large. I contain multitudes). 

Poets, apparently, are issued licenses to do things the rest of us are forbidden to do. Assume for the moment that as a poet Whitman is permitted to wallow in self-contradiction. What about the rest of us?

Since we are talking here about persons contradicting themselves or being inconsistent, I submit the following definition as useful for our purposes (‘AC ‘stands for ‘absence of consistency’):

\[ \text{AC} \quad S \text{ is guilty of inconsistency if and only if there is a set } K \text{ of propositions such that (i) } S \text{ believes every member of } K \text{ and (ii) it is impossible that all the members of } K \text{ are true (i.e., necessarily at least one member of } K \text{ is false).} \]

I can think of three reasons logicians might offer for saying that inconsistency so defined is a Bad Thing, i.e., is something to be avoided. Two of the three don’t seem to me very good reasons; the third seems to me quite solid.
The first two reasons invoke the principle that a contradiction entails every proposition, that is to say (‘EFQ’ stands for *ex falso quodlibet*),

**EFQ** If $K$ is a set of propositions and if it is impossible that all the members of $K$ are true, then for any proposition $P$, $K$ entails $P$ (or again, the argument from $K$ to $P$ is deductively valid).

Though a few logicians would dispute the truth of EFQ, I have no desire to dispute it here.

*Reason #1.* With EFQ in mind, someone might argue that if it is permissible to have inconsistent beliefs, then it is possible (or permissible) to prove anything. For persons with inconsistent beliefs can always form an argument whose premises consist of some inconsistent subset of what they believe and whose conclusion is any arbitrarily chosen proposition. Given EFQ, such an argument would be deductively valid. And, as long as inconsistency is not a fault, its premises would have to be judged acceptable, and so the argument would have to be judged a good one.

But the reasoning behind this objection is seriously flawed. For from the assumption that inconsistency as such is not a fault, it does not follow that we can’t object to the use of inconsistent premises in an argument. If a premiss set is *demonstrably* inconsistent, we can condemn any argument from that set as unsound, since it can be demonstrated that not all its premises are true.

In other words, from the thesis that it isn’t a fault for a *person* to be inconsistent it doesn’t follow that *arguments* with demonstrably inconsistent premiss sets are OK. And therefore it doesn’t follow that anything and everything can be proved (where a proof is a deductively valid argument that does not beg the question and that has acceptable premises).

*Reason #2.* Consider the suggestion that if $P$ entails $Q$ then any person who believes $P$ also believes $Q$—the suggestion, in other words, that a person’s beliefs are closed under entailment. Virtually everybody concedes that application of deductive closure in such bald form is an implausible constraint on belief: people often don’t see what the consequences of their current beliefs are and hence don’t always embrace them. Nevertheless, there is a weaker version of the deductive closure principle that’s not so obviously implausible:

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1 It is clear to me that any argument whose premiss set is *demonstrably* inconsistent is a bad argument. I am not sure what to say about cases in which the premisses of an argument contain an inconsistency that has not been detected, and especially the cases in which such inconsistency is very difficult to detect and where each premiss appears plausible when taken singly. My inclination is to judge this last sort of argument cogent but unsound.

2 Those who construe the objects of belief as sets of possible worlds have a problem in avoiding the conclusion that deductive closure is a constraint upon belief. See for example Robert Stalnaker’s discussion of the deduction problem in Stalnaker 1984, Chapter 5; Stalnaker’s contention is that deductive closure is a rationality condition but not a defining condition of acceptance states (where belief states constitute one variety of acceptance states). Compare also the lengths to which Hintikka must go to avoid the conclusion that deductive closure applies to beliefs; see Hintikka 1975, pp. 475-484.