Ethical Egoism, Utilitarianism and the Fallacy of Pragmatic Inconsistency

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How art thou out of breath when thou hast breath
To say to me that thou art out of breath?
William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet.

But when I tell him he hates flatterers,
He says he does, being then most flattered.
William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar.

ABSTRACT: In this paper I shall consider the difficulty for Ethical Egoism, Act Utilitarianism and later what I shall call Cumulative Effect Utilitarianism, that they both commit the fallacy of pragmatic inconsistency. I shall distinguish various forms of the fallacy of pragmatic inconsistency; in particular I shall distinguish between the fallacy of direct and indirect pragmatic inconsistency, and shall argue that though both Ethical Egoism and Act Utilitarianism probably commit both, Cumulative Effect Utilitarianism does not.

KEY WORDS: Act utilitarianism, cumulative effect utilitarianism, ethical egoism, pragmatically inconsistent, rationality

(I) THE FALLACY OF PRAGMATIC INCONSISTENCY AND ORDINARY INCONSISTENCY

Bertrand Russell once wrote about a lady who had recently become persuaded of the truth of solipsism, and professed herself to be surprised that more people besides herself did not believe the same. The lady was committing the fallacy of pragmatic inconsistency. What someone asserts when he or she is pragmatically inconsistent is not inconsistent. There would be no inconsistency involved in this lady's being the only person in the world. The "inconsistency" lies in her behaving as if what she was asserting was false, as one would be if one proclaimed to others what one took to be the fact that the universe contained no one but oneself. Pragmatic inconsistency commonly occurs when one is putting forward a philosophical view which is unnecessarily paradoxical. Though the fact that it is pragmatically inconsistent to put a view forward does not show that it is wrong, it often indicates that the person putting it forward does not really believe what he himself says. Bertrand Russell's lady did not really believe that she was
the only person in the world, and was for this reason betrayed into acting as if what she herself was saying was false, which, indeed, it was.

Similarly, though there is nothing inconsistent about one’s not existing, it is pragmatically inconsistent to assert that one does not exist; one is doing something that one could not do if what one said were true. And though there is nothing inconsistent in the assertion that all Cretans are liars – someone other than a Cretan could assert this very same thing without any problem – when a Cretan asserts that all Cretans are liars he is behaving in a way in which he could not behave if it were true, i.e., asserting something true. This means that though it itself does not entail its own falsity, this statement, together with the fact that it is asserted by a Cretan, does entail that what the Cretan asserts is false.

There is no reason why a remark should not both be inconsistent and my making it pragmatically inconsistent. Were I to say that I both did and did not exist, what I said would be inconsistent, but my saying it would also be pragmatically inconsistent.

(II) EXAMPLES OF PRAGMATIC INCONSISTENCY

There are, of course, unphilosophical examples of pragmatic inconsistency, such as the original Catch 22, applying to leave the American Air Force on the grounds that one is insane, which is supposed to demonstrate that one is sane. But pragmatic inconsistency is a way of scoring own goals to which philosophers seem especially prone. They assert as truths propositions to the effect that all propositions are false. They accurately reveal the fact that nothing can be accurately revealed (Richard Rorty in Consequences of Pragmatism, University of Minneapolis Press, Minneapolis, 1982). They attempt to prove that nothing can be proved, and claim to know that there is no such thing as knowledge. They obstinately refuse to revise their opinion that all opinions are subject to revision (Willard van Orman Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”, in From a Logical Point of View, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1953). Many are certain that nothing is certain. Some believe that belief is impossible (Stephen Stich, in From Psychology to Cognitive Science The Case Against Belief, Clarendon Library of Logic and Philosophy, Oxford, 1975); others think that there is no such thing as thought. They authorise the translation of learned philosophical works that claim that translation is impossible, and write with the greatest lucidity words that mean that there is no such thing as meaning. They eloquently describe the ineffable. Some advance good inductive evidence for thinking that science may proceed counter inductively (Paul Feyerabend in Against Method, outline of an anarchist theory of knowledge, Verso, London, 1979); and others give reasons for thinking that though the past is no guide to the future, there is every reason to suppose that a hypothesis that has once been refuted will