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Other Logics: Alternatives to Formal Logic in the History of Thought and Contemporary Philosophy

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Criticism of formal logic is a familiar topic from the history of philosophy, where it has often been coupled by constructive proposals advocating either replacement or supplementation. The essays collected in Other Logics provide historical as well as contemporary examples of both criticism and construction. While the authors are critical of a number of deep-seated ideas about what logic is, they seek to challenge these ideas, not just by criticism, but also by exploring contexts that formal logic tends to leave out. This, at any rate, is what the reader is led to expect by the introduction. What one actually gets is a collection of essays that offers little by way of thematic unity.

The introduction, by the editor Admir Skodo, argues that philosophical thinking about logic continues to be dominated by certain well-entrenched ideas about its nature: that logic is inherently formal; that it constitutes a self-contained system, rather than existing in concrete human acts and their contexts; that formal logic provides the best conception of thinking and that it is the duty of logic to replace the multiplicity of imperfect ways of reasoning with the one true logic. This is backed up by a discussion of two recent handbooks on the history of logic (Gabbay and Woods 2004, Haaparanta 2009). These books, it is argued, propagate just such contextually and historically insensitive conceptions. A quick look at Gabbay and Woods 2004 gave me a very different impression. For instance, Skodo gives a seriously misleading picture of the chapter on Kant’s logics that Mary Tiles contributed to that volume.

The introduction is followed by five chapters on the history of thought and seven chapters on contemporary perspectives. First comes an essay by Christopher Watkin, who explores Quentin Meillassoux’s reworking – and strengthening, in Meillassoux’s view – of Aristotle’s negative demonstration of the principle of non-contradiction. Watkin argues that Meillassoux’s indirect proof is itself subject to a disproof, a claim that he substantiates through a discussion of Jean-Luc Nancy’s reflection, inspired by Plato’s Symposium, on love and its relation to thought. Love is neither an object for reflection, nor is it ‘the other of thought’ (p. 27) or of logic, but that which invites or provokes thought. Being the movement or the imperative of the thought, love is what first establishes the categories of logical thought, including the opposition of contradiction and non-contradiction.
Hence, Meillassoux can have his presuppositionless proof only through a strategic act of forgetting, namely, forgetting his own ‘desire to establish the indirect proof in the first place’ (p. 30).

Admir Skodo explores F. C. S. Schiller’s pragmatist criticisms of the orthodoxies of formal logic as well as Schiller’s own ‘humanist logic’, which affirms the ‘primacy of the concrete, historical, and social self’ (p. 36). In so doing, it adopts a specifically historical mode of thinking about logic; since the self is ‘radically malleable’ (p. 38), logic, too, must renounce any pretense to completeness, universality, or even to fixed standards. Rather, logic must describe the social function of thinking and ‘aid in refining such thinking for social uses’ (p. 47). This contrast gives rise to several more specific criticisms, which we may, perhaps, sum up by saying that formal logic has a potentially pernicious influence on a sanely progressive social order. Putting aside this fanciful notion, Schiller’s conception might be of interest to a historian of logic, as it provides an example of a traditional line of thought that pops up occasionally even today, to wit, that formal logic results from an illegitimate process of abstraction.

Aaron James Wendland addresses Heidegger’s conception of truth as unconcealment and of how our practical engagement with the world constitutes, by making aspects of that world manifest, the background against which all understanding, interpreting and communicating takes place. While Heidegger argues that ‘[t]he idea of “logic” itself disintegrates in the turbulence of a more original questioning’ (quoted on p. 54), this does not mean, according to Wendland, that logic itself is replaced by something more original; what it does mean is that logical structures – for instance, the subject–predicate structure – as well as their formalization presuppose the practical activities of human beings.

Ervik Cejvan discusses Jacques Lacan’s notion that the ‘real’ ‘resists symbolization’ as it lies outside language; this resistance extends to modern logic, which, in Lacan’s own words, ‘reduces logic to a correct handling of what is simply writing’ (quoted on p. 73).

Christopher Fear focuses on two aspects of Collingwood’s logic of question and answer (LQA). First, there is Collingwood’s criticism of logicians’ habit of focusing on the ‘proposition’ rather than the genuine unit of knowledge, which consists of a proposition plus the question that it is meant to answer. This gives rise to mistaken theories of truth and knowledge, which fail to consider the actual construction of knowledge, and to an erroneous conception of logic, which does not see the rules of logic as abstractions from actual processes of inquiry. This leads to Collingwood’s second point, to wit, how the giving of reasons varies historically and how logic, rather than ‘governing’ discussion, should be seen as ‘informing’ it.

Frank Ankersmit’s chapter is concerned with the logic of historical representation (HR). An HR is a finite set of (true) singular statements about the past, and Ankersmit advances several claims about its logical status. In particular, Russell’s theory of definite descriptions does not apply to HRs, a feature which, the author argues, constitutes the logical ground of the distinction between the sciences and humanities – on this point, I must admit, I found Ankersmit’s argumentation rather elusive. This feature aligns HR with Aristotelian logic, as discussed by Cassirer in his Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff. But HR has affinities with relational logic as well, for the meaning of an HR is determined by its relations to other HRs, which together tend to form meaning-determining clusters. Ankersmit’s construction of HR, then, seems to be a sort of textual counterpart to a Leibnizian (complete) individual concept.

Alessandra Tanesini defends logical pluralism, which is the view that there are several mutually incompatible but equally acceptable logics. Her position contrasts not only with logical absolutism, which holds that there is one correct logic, but also with the sort of pluralism about logic that is advocated by J. C. Beall and Greg Restall (PBR). Tanesini
criticizes PBR on two grounds: first, that it does not sufficiently appreciate the notion that if there is a plurality of logics, then these are in some sense incompatible or rivalries; and second, that PBR fails to abide by the constitutive relation that logic bears to thinking. Furthermore, she criticizes Putnam on the (un)revisability of logical laws, as well as James Conant’s argument, derived from Frege’s discussion of logical psychologism, against the possibility of logical aliens. While Tanesini’s paper is rich and provocative, there remain some worries. Here I mention just one, a variation of a theme that is familiar from discussions of metaphysical pluralism, namely the difficulty of seeing in what sense logics can be ‘incompatible but equally acceptable’. If L1 and L2 are two logics that are ‘strongly incompatible’ in the sense that a sentence S is a logical truth in one and the negation of S is a logical truth in the other (p. 135), then there is no sense in which they are equally acceptable. If, on the other hand, L1 and L2 are ‘weakly incompatible’ in the sense, roughly, that they result from variation of meaning or of concepts (pp. 135–6) – and this appears to be the crucial case for Tanesini’s version of pluralism – then it is not clear in what sense they are incompatible. In her view, logic is concerned with logical consequence, and there is a plurality of logics because ‘logical consequence’ is a family resemblance concept. Incompatibility in the weak sense, however, presupposes a shared core meaning, and it remains unclear what that sense might be.

Thord Svensson’s essay is about metaphysical pluralism or the view that there can be a plurality of incompatible but equally acceptable conceptual schemes. He explores two recent arguments for it, one by Michael P. Lynch, the other by Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons. Svensson is particularly concerned with what Lynch has dubbed the ‘consistency dilemma’, which seeks to establish that metaphysical pluralism is either flat-out false or true in an uninteresting way. While Svensson’s discussion is not without interest for friends and foes of metaphysical pluralism, the author does little to forge a connection between it and the theme of ‘other logics’. That really is a pity, for the topic is of considerable interest.

Karim Dharamsi offers a criticism, inspired by Act I of King Lear, of Ralph Wedgwood’s normative judgment internalism (NJI). Cordelia’s silence, Dharamsi argues, signals a misplaced intrusion of the moral demand of a self-legislative will into a sphere constituted by norm and custom; misplaced if seen in light of a conception of the self-legislative will as ‘free only insofar as it is appropriately responsive to’ (p. 170) social-cum-historical order. NJI, on the other hand, is the view that normative judgments bear an internal connection to practical reasoning and motivation. I admit I failed to figure out how the lesson that Dharamsi derives from King Lear is meant to bear on NJI. The target appears to be the view, endorsed by Wedgwood, that there is a general sense of ‘ought’, which relates to practical deliberation and is neither narrowly prudential nor narrowly moral. But that there is such a sense is quite intuitive, quite apart from NJI. Moreover, acknowledging the general sense does not entail, contrary to what Dharamsi seems to think, that the deliberating self operates somehow outside ‘history’ and ‘custom’.

Anders Kraal argues in his chapter that classical theistic doctrines of divine nature are not amenable to philosophical analysis by means of standard first-order predicate logic. The reason for this is that they presuppose the doctrine of divine simplicity, which, Kraal argues, is excluded by predicate logic. He argues for two further conclusions: first, that there are more appropriate frameworks for formal analysis of these doctrines, such as Leśniewski’s ontology; and second, that such doctrines are in fact best expressed in what he calls ‘non-formal logic’. It seems clear that the doctrine of divine simplicity presupposes a quite radical ontological or ‘onto-theological’ framework. Unfortunately, Kraal gives little indication of how such a framework is to be incorporated into this non-formal logic.
Johan Modée’s chapter explores conceivability arguments and their application to discussions about the possibility of an afterlife. He raises a number of familiar difficulties for conceivability arguments in general and argues that the soul hypothesis is counterintuitive in many ways. The generality of Modeé’s conclusion suffers from the fact that he does not consider alternative conceptions of afterlife; one could argue, in particular, that the only tolerably coherent notion of surviving death involves the Christian or Jewish idea of resurrection of the body. More importantly, Modée says nothing about how his discussion of conceivability arguments relates to the topic of other logics.

Finally, Giuseppina D’Oro addresses the so-called logocentric predicament, which arises from the fact, as Henry M. Sheffer put it, that ‘in order to give an account of logic we must presuppose and employ logic’ (Sheffer 1926, p. 228). It is commonly observed that the predicament raises a major issue for the justification of both inductive and deductive logic. D’Oro argues that Collingwood’s LQA escapes the predicament. This, in a way, is scarcely surprising, as LQA is a sort of meta-inquiry into the ‘absolute presuppositions’ of a given first-order discipline and is therefore not at all concerned with the validity or truth of these presuppositions. So the procedure is analogous to the application of a piece of deductive logic to a given subject matter to tease out consequences; only here the concern is not with consequences but with presuppositions. But what happens if LQA is applied to itself, to discover its own absolute presuppositions? Perhaps this is quite unproblematic, but D’Oro does not mention the issue.

Other Logics is a heterogeneous collection of essays of somewhat uneven quality. It is informed by an exceedingly broad conception of logic, a feature that in my view undermines the book’s critical aim. Its value lies in some of the individual essays – I have in mind, in particular, the chapters by Fear, Tanesini and D’Oro – that are well worth reading by anyone with an interest in their topics.

References

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