CHAPTER 7

On Logical Aliens

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1 Introduction

Frege wrote about the laws of logic that “they are the most general laws, which prescribe universally the way in which one ought to think if one is to think at all.”¹ Hence, for Frege the laws of logic are the laws of thought. They are not psychological laws which describe the mental processes that occur when one is thinking. Instead, these laws stipulate how one ought to think. They are constitutive of rationality, and consequently they are what makes thought possible at all.² Further, Frege claims that these laws have universal application. Every thinking being is a being whose thought is governed by the same logical laws.

Frege's view exemplifies a position which I call logical absolutism. This is the view that there is only one correct logic whose application is universal. This position is almost universally accepted, presumably because its denial, logical pluralism, appears to be a non-starter. Logical pluralism, as I understand it, is the view that there is more than one, mutually incompatible but equally admissible, logic. Or to put the matter differently, there could be beings who are capable of thought*, but whose thoughts* are governed by laws of logic* which are incompatible with our own.³ In other words, logical pluralism entails the possibility of logical aliens. In this paper I explain and defend

² The claim that for Frege the laws of logic are necessary conditions for the possibility of thought has an obvious Kantian flavour. This Kantian aspect of Frege's account of logic has been discussed by James Conant, “The Search for Logically Alien Thought: Descartes, Kant, Frege, and the *Tractatus*,” *Philosophical Topics* 20 (1991), 115–180; see especially 134–137. I shall not address the issue as to whether the laws of logic are the sole necessary conditions for the possibility of thought.
³ I use the asterisk to indicate that in so far as the laws of logic are constitutive of thought, aliens cannot think. However, they could think*. That is to say, they could engage in a law-governed activity which plays in their lives a role that is not dissimilar from the role that thinking plays in ours. The same considerations apply *mutatis mutandis* to logic*, belief*, judgement*, etc. Hereafter, I sometimes use “logic” to refer to logic proper but also logic* and to thought proper but also thought*. What is meant should be clear from the context.
logical pluralism and the possibility of aliens. In my view logical absolutism is incompatible with a proper understanding of the normativity of logic given the fact of human finitude. For this reason, I conclude one must accept both pluralism and the possibility of alien thought*.

This chapter consists of four sections. In the second I explain what I mean by logical pluralism and contrast my view with the kind of logical pluralism proposed by J.C. Beall and Greg Restall. I also argue that their position cannot do justice to the normativity of logic as the set of laws governing human thought. In the third section, I discuss in some detail an argument offered by Hilary Putnam against the view that all logical principles can be revised. Putnam derives from this argument a further conclusion which is tantamount to a denial of logical pluralism. I argue that Putnam’s argument that there are at least some unrevisable laws of logic fails. I also show that even if the argument were successful, it would not warrant the further conclusion that wholesale logical disagreement is impossible. In the fourth section I consider an argument which has been developed by James Conant. Conant extracts this argument from some of the considerations offered by Frege against the psychologistic logician. The argument is best seen as directed against all forms of logical pluralism, rather than merely as an argument against psychologism in logic. I show that, even if the argument might be successful against psychologism, it fails to refute logical pluralism. Since none of these arguments are in the least convincing, I conclude that logical pluralism has not been refuted.

2 Logical Pluralism

The position occupied by the logical pluralist should not be confused with that occupied by the deviant logician. Supporters of deviant logics typically are logical absolutists. They believe that there is only one correct logic; or, at least, only one correct logic for any given region of discourse. Some deviant logicians support a global reform of logic, others are in favour of a local reform. For a good discussion of these issues, see Susan Haack, *Deviant Logic, Fuzzy Logic: Beyond the Formalism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 42–46.