BOOK REVIEW


The collection The Logical Alien. Conant and His Critics arises out of a conference held at the University of Porto in 2011 (The Logical Alien at 20) centred around James Conant’s 1991 seminal paper ‘The Search for Logically Alien Thought’, which investigates whether sense can be made of the idea that there might be forms of thinking (logical aliens) governed, to use Frege’s phrase, by laws of thought contradicting ours. Conant’s paper explores how this idea, ‘the possibility of illogical thought’ (p. 27), and the very notion of logical necessity, are played out in the history of modern and contemporary analytic philosophy, particularly in Aquinas, Descartes, Leibniz, Kant, Frege, Wittgenstein, and Putnam.

Part I comprises an introduction by Charles Travis and Sofia Miguens, Conant’s original paper, and eight essays, by Jocelyn Benoist, Matthew Boyle, Martin Gustafsson, Arata Hamawaki, A. W. Moore, Barry Stroud, Peter Sullivan, and Charles Travis, which critically address some of its central ideas. Part II occupies more than two-thirds of the book; after an introduction by Sofia Miguens, a note by Conant (section I) warns that his current views have shifted significantly from his 1991 ones (so his replies are not attempts to defend his former self), and, secondly, that the rest of the book (sections II–XV) forms a whole: sections II–VI contain five historical essays by Conant that ‘bring out what now seems to [him] skewed in the account offered in the original article’ (p. 322), and thus set the stage for his replies to the aforementioned authors (sections VII–XV), each of which ‘builds on its predecessor’ (ibid.). This format, while making it difficult ‘for the casual reader to delve selectively into the replies, [...] enables the serious reader to penetrate more deeply into the philosophical issues under discussion’ (ibid.).

A review must by its very nature be selective; a review of a book of over a thousand pages must a fortiori be so. My focus will thus be limited to the discussions in this volume of four historical figures, Descartes, Kant, Frege, and Wittgenstein, in relation to the question of the possibility of logically alien
thought. This is a \textit{significant} limitation, as this is much more than a book on ‘the logical alien’; it addresses as diverse topics as ‘the nature of modality, the nature of logic, philosophical skepticism, the nature of representation, linguistic and conceptual relativity, perception and judgment, and questions of philosophical method’ (p. 296).

**DESCARTES**

According to 1991 Conant’s Descartes, though logical laws (the eternal truths) are necessary \textit{for us}—because ‘our minds are so constituted that we cannot help but think in accordance with them’ (pp. 39–40)—they are not necessary for God, because they do not constrain God’s thought and freedom. God could make contradictions true. So, God’s thought embeds the possibility of illogical thought. ‘I would not dare to say that God cannot make a mountain without a valley, or bring it about that 1 and 2 are not 3’ (p. 40).

While Moore agrees with 1991 Conant that Descartes answers the question ‘Could God have made a pair of contradictories true together?’ in the affirmative, he claims that that is a \textit{lapse} (p. 103) and that he \textit{ought to have} claimed that even God’s freedom is constrained by the laws of logic, because his anti-sceptical project depends on us being entitled to rely on our human concepts in making conclusions as to what is possible or impossible \textit{tout court}, not just \textit{for us}. On Moore’s view, this is ultimately not a limitation to God’s omnipotence (p. 106), because the laws of logic delimit what is possible, and what is logically impossible is \textit{not} a further realm precluded to God. Thus, Moore’s Descartes ought to have held a position similar to Aquinas’, for whom ‘everything that does not imply a contradiction […] is numbered among those possibles in respect of which God is called omnipotent; whereas whatever implies contradiction […] cannot have the aspect of possibility’ (p. 29).

On Conant’s new interpretation, articulated in sections VI and VII, Descartes rejects the terms of the question above altogether (p. 562), because answering it, Conant now thinks, presupposes we \textit{understand} God’s creative power and understanding, and thus presupposes an anthropomorphic conception of God as a ‘person-like agent’ (p. 559) that is alien to Descartes. So, on Conant’s new interpretation, while Descartes recognizes that, which is \textit{absolutely} impossible (p. 570), he refuses to say whether that is impossible even for God.

**KANT**

In striking contrast with Descartes, 1991 Conant argues, Kant sees the laws of logic as ‘constitutive of the possibility of thought’ (p. 59), as necessary laws for \textit{the} understanding (cf. A52/B72), and not just, like in Descartes, for our, human,
understanding (p. 53). Illogical thought is therefore altogether impossible. But Kant also thought that logic provides norms for how we ought to think. Although 1991 Conant calls the latter a ‘salient feature’ (p. 57) of Kant’s conception of logic, it is not one that figures prominently in his paper. I suspect the reason is that the latter view seems to sit uneasily with the view of logic as constitutive of the possibility of thought, because, contrary to it, it presupposes the possibility of (at least occasional) illogical thought.

Boyle’s contribution finds 1991 Conant’s account ‘in need of supplementation’ (p. 143) and thus, while sympathetic to it, it stresses aspects of Kant’s thought on logic that are not foregrounded in Conant’s discussion (p. 119). I think Boyle’s reading supplements Conant’s perfectly, because it shows that Conant’s stress on Kant’s ‘constitutivist’ view of the relations between logic and the understanding is fully compatible with Kant’s view that logic plays a normative role for thinking. While the understanding proceeds essentially logically when nothing interferes, our capacity for judgement is constantly prone to the influence of sensibility. Because of this, once applied to human thinking, logic takes a normative role, issuing in imperatives for how our execution of judgements ought to be performed (see pp. 128–30). It is unclear, however, that Conant fully appreciates this aspect of Boyle’s reading, because in his reply he seems to assume that Kant’s applied logic is part of psychology, of an empirical and ultimately descriptive study of human cognition (see p. 606), which I believe is a misreading of Kant’s conception of logic.

FREGE

Stroud takes issue with 1991 Conant’s claim that ‘Frege inherits the Kantian idea that accord with the laws of logic is constitutive of the possibility of thought’ (p. 59), because, first, he takes Frege to be ‘noncommittal’ (p. 176) about whether logically alien thought is indeed possible; in the introduction to the Basic Laws of Arithmetic, Frege remarks that logical aliens are simply wrong in their judgements and inferences (thus stressing the normative, rather than constitutive, role of logic for thinking) (p. 178). Secondly, Stroud argues that logic’s (alleged) constitutivity for thought does not amount to an explanation of the ‘ground’, or ‘source’, of logical necessity (p. 180).

Conant’s reply is instructive in clarifying the role that, according to 1991 Conant, the logical alien scenario plays in Frege, and how it anticipates Wittgenstein’s philosophical methods; what it shows is not ‘something to be possible that is impossible, but that [. . .] envisioning this supposed alternative form of thought threatens to become an empty exercise’ (p. 803). As soon as we try to take seriously the idea of thinking governed by illogical laws, we start losing touch with the very notions of ‘dis/agreement’, ‘judgement’, ‘content’, and so forth. So, the logical alien scenario has in 1991 Conant’s
reconstruction a ‘therapeutic’—what Sullivan calls critically a ‘negative’ (p. 189)—role, which foreruns Wittgenstein’s dissipation, rather than solution, of the problems of philosophy. Although I think Conant successfully neutralizes Stroud’s second worry above, the first one remains, as for Stroud’s Frege logically alien thought does not represent an impossibility at all, but simply a case of ‘madness’, or ‘disturbed thought’ (p. 82).

WITTGENSTEIN

Of the three contributions addressing Wittgenstein—by Gustafsson, Travis, and Benoist—only the third one has a direct bearing on the question of the possibility of logically alien thought. Benoist generalizes (p. 282) Conant’s therapeutic reading of Frege’s logical alien scenario to Wittgenstein’s ‘wood-sellers’, beings that show a ‘mathematically alien practice of calculation’ (p. 1005), in his Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics, where Wittgenstein explicitly references Frege. For Benoist, the wood-sellers represent what he calls ‘alienated meaning’ (p. 291), meaning that is divorced from its application: they seem to mean by the word ‘calculating’ just what we do, but their applications of it are radically alien to us. Benoist argues that Wittgenstein’s point is that there is no way to separate meaning from its applications (p. 288), for that would imply meaning is lost.

Although this reading seems sound as far as Wittgenstein is concerned, it leaves unexplained the likely critical (and admittedly cryptic) reference to Frege in section 151, where Wittgenstein writes: ‘Frege never said what this “insanity” [logically alien thought] would really be like’. For, if Frege’s point is to show (therapeutically) the emptiness of the logical alien hypothesis, then to specify what that is really like is just what Frege tries to show us to be an empty exercise. So, this is either a misguided criticism of Frege on Wittgenstein’s part (and not the only one, if Sullivan and Travis are right), or Frege’s views of logically alien thought are more accurately captured by Stroud’s interpretation (rather than Benoist’s and Conant’s).

CONCLUSION

The essays in this collection are of outstanding quality, and are exemplary in terms of philosophical rigour, depth, and meticulous scholarship. This is especially true of Conant’s replies, which engage deeply and extensively with each of the contributions to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the development of the history of philosophy from Descartes to Wittgenstein than the one presented in 1991, which is shown to suffer from many philosophical blind spots (see in particular section IV for a useful synopsis of the major
To appreciate the complexities of this reconstruction, and how it arises out of a sustained and thorough dialogue with the critics’ contributions, is the most rewarding (though demanding) aspect of reading this book, an aspect to which this review can scarcely be said to give justice.

However, as a collection about (primarily) the possibility of logically alien thought, this book seems to me to lack a contribution that—perhaps in agreement with ‘not-so-recent Putnam’ (p. 42) (who, incidentally, is the only prominent figure in Conant’s original paper whose work is not substantially addressed in any contribution)—is sympathetic to the logical alien. Recent, and less recent, developments in philosophy of logic have indeed reacted against traditional views of logic as having a special role in delimiting the boundaries of what is thinkable or conceivable; dialethists reject the view that thinking in accordance with (classical) logical laws is part of the constitution of our minds, while logical pluralists argue that there is more than one correct logic, and logical antiexceptionalists find logic to be fundamentally on a par, in terms of methods and criteria of revisability, with other scientific theories. At least some of these views have elements in common with the naturalist traditions that Leibniz, Kant, and Frege, among others, opposed. It would have been a good complement to this collection to have this side of the story explored as well.

Department of Cognitive Sciences, College of Humanities and Social Sciences,

United Arab Emirates University, UAE

Daniele Mezzadri