

On the Importance of Logic

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THERE ARE more things in our philosophy than the rebuking poets suspect. They have, for one thing, greatly misprised Logic. With all their power of intuition they have missed the quality of beauty and significance in thought when it is going true to itself and to the nature of things. They have conceived of Logic only as a pedantry of rules, or as a restraint upon fancy: the necessities of reason seem purely coercive and joyless things, inimical to the winged spontaneities of creative genius.

The poets' sentiments echo in all of us. In our hearts we tend to disparage logic. This is a little inconvenient to admit publicly, for there are always watchful persons around who will make too much capital of any open profession of that sort. These individuals, by the way, are the very ones who most hurt logic's repute in the eyes of men,—these professed logicians and guardians of the public mentality. Scarcely anyone can escape the experience, in this world of men, of being held to strict account by a troublesome fellow who talks about our "not sticking to logic." He is the kind who insists that we must follow the argument of our own words, the thoughts to which *they* commit us. And we, since we do intend to convey sense and not nonsense, feel an obligation to adhere to the meaning of our verbal utterance. Yet this is often awkward and really false to our intention. What *we* mean is not what our words mean, and we find ourselves forced to commit ourselves to ideas that are concluded only from the accidents of imperfect speech. No one likes to be compelled to opinions by anything that seems external—and logic far too often appears in that guise of being a necessity of our words rather than of our own reason or mind. The logicians and pedants who get us into such predicaments are therefore unwelcome figures in our social landscape. They frequently practice their game of mental accounting in the company of other people where they may indulge their childish desire to exhibit their superiority and win a victory of word-wit. Even when they are just quietly critical, showing, as we say, a "logical mind," even then they take the joy out of our social intercourse. Their making us so conscious of propriety in language, and so attentive to logical consistency stifles in us all impulse to give that dramatic beginning and middle and end to our thoughts which makes them the personal expression of our sense of life and values. The laws of poesy have a right in conversation as well as the laws of logic. It is very imperfect communication of one person with another when the careless rapture of poetry is disallowed by an ever-measuring, censorious reason. Feeling this we resent the presence of the logician who has an interest only in thought's being square with itself, and none in its disclosure of personality. This aversion we have come to feel about logic itself. Let anyone speak well of poetic imagination and we turn gladly to him believing him to be in an affirmative mood;

let him mention logic with praise and we want to hear no more, fearing negative suggestions and some unwelcome application of that gloomy science of verbal proprieties.

There are, as a popular philosopher suggests, "fine mansions of philosophy"; but that of logic, with all its straightness, and severity of line, and measured economy of spaces, is not congenial to our taste. No one cares to live in it. However, we cheerfully recommend it to others, when we see the mote in their mind's eye. Logic is a good house of correction, a place good for other persons, like most disciplines. The sole value recognized in it then, is that it corrects, straightens out, and subdues and drills the mind. Logic applies the rule and the rod to men's thoughts. But it itself engenders no thoughts, nor any new visions. It is not associated, in our tradition, with thinking as a *fine art*.

Now Philosophy has always believed in Logic, as profoundly as in herself. Of course the philosophers individually have railed a-plenty against formal logic since the beginning of history. The contemporary writers who say we do not think in syllogism are not so modern as they fancy—the same was said by Aristotle who developed the theory and practice of syllogistic reasoning. The first writers in modern philosophy, Francis Bacon and Descartes, repeated the charge made by the Greeks, and we go on repeating it as if we were telling something new. Old Socrates, and Plato and Aristotle fought hard against a vile thing called 'logistic'—and that is the same thing for which we have developed so set an aversion today. No thinker tolerates chaining the mind to the mere words by which it expresses its meaning; everyone clamors for a release of the imagination. Yet, in doing so, the masters of philosophy have never once abandoned logic, as if it were contrary to this liberation of thought. They have invariably set out, every time they repudiated formalisms and restraints, to exalt some new method of reasoning; they wanted new organons for old,—but organons still, that is, Logic.

Those who read deeply the words and the lives of wise philosophers will learn, indeed, that logic is in very truth their most cherished art and possession. Logic is to the philosopher what the sonnet is to the poet. The economy of language, the rigor of the form, the great concentration of thought constitute a challenge to which the mind of every genius arises. Such an one considers that unless his reflections and views have, at some place, a severely rational ordering and formulation, he is not whole and sound in thought, and not in possession of the truth. He seeks the logical form because he prizes truth more than rhetoric or persuasion. His mind does not fret over that confinement, nor does it feel itself restricted to narrow convent walls. Through his logical thinking there comes intelligence of whole orders of experience unthought-of before, precisely as the fourteen lines will open to the poet a magic case-