

Kvantifikator för en Dag

Essays dedicated to Dag Westerståhl on his sixtieth birthday



Respect for Logic

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Abstract

Trivially, respect for logic has another object than respect for persons and respect for moral rules, but – non-trivially – it is also of another kind. In particular, it might be conflated with reverence-respect, which, in turn, is distinct from power-respect and esteem-respect. The peculiar kind of respect we find in respect for logic derives from the fact that such respect is conditional upon an interest in truth.

*Till vännen Westerståhl,
en Daglig logiker.*

1. Are there any reasons to be logical?

Most philosophers take it for granted that one should not contradict oneself. Disregarding situations such as teaching students what logical contradictions are and, perhaps, discussing paraconsistent logic, we should always try to be logical. But why should we? Logical laws and necessities are not like natural laws and necessities. As free agents, we can break these laws as easily, or as uncomfortingly, as we can break ordinary laws. Why not say as Walt Whitman does in his *Song of Myself* (poem 51)?

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself.

(I am large. I contain multitudes.)

Some people contradict themselves without noticing it, and I stumbled across an illustrative example when I was working on this paper. I received a mail advertising a book by some Harun Yahya entitled *Matter. The Other Name For Illusion*. The advertisement says:

All events and objects that we encounter in real life—buildings, people, cities, cars, places—in fact, everything we see, hold, touch, smell, taste and hear—come into existence as visions and feelings in our brains.

We are taught to think that these images and feelings are caused by a solid world outside of our brains, where material things exist. However, in reality we never see real existing materials and we never touch real materials. In other words, every material entity which we believe exists in our lives, is, in fact, only a vision which is created in our brains.

This is not a philosophical speculation. It is an empirical fact that has been proven by modern science. Today, any scientist who is a specialist in medicine, biology, neurology or any other field related to brain research would say, when asked how and where we see the world, that we see the whole world in the vision center located in our brains.

These paragraphs imply, to put it bluntly, (a) that everything we encounter in perception exists in an existing material thing called brain, and (b) that there exist no material brains. Why should we not allow such a contradiction between two propositions to be an argument against external world materialism? There seems to be no innate inclination always to be logical and, mostly, we have not much to fear from being a little illogical. One may even, with Mr Yahya, be allowed to publish books that rest on plain contradiction. Are there good reasons always to respect logic? And what does it mean to respect logic?

As there are three different ways in which a person can follow a moral rule, so there are three ways of being logical. Applying Kant's (1959) terminology for moral rules (*italicized*) to logical rules, one can say as follows. First, a person may be logical in the sense that s/he never makes speech acts that break logically valid inference rules even though s/he has never thought about such rules. S/he then talks *in accordance with* logical rules. Second, s/he may be logical because a teacher in philosophy has taught her/him the rules and said that one has to be logical; s/he then makes speech acts *on* (the basis of) logical principles. Third, s/he has grasped logic and what a logically valid inference rule is, and s/he speaks logically because of this insight. Such a person makes speech acts *for* (the sake of) logical principles. The only motive s/he needs for trying to be logical is the respect for logic that comes with this insight. But what kind of respect is this?

Respect for logic has of course another object than respect for persons or respect for moral rules, but I will argue that it is also of another kind. There are several kinds of respect, and I will start by distinguishing between *power-respect*, *esteem-respect*, and *reverence-respect*. Where the first two have persons as their objects, the third has moral rules.

2. Power-respect and esteem-respect for persons

Often, respect for a person is respect only for this person's more powerful position, if not for the latter's sheer physical strength; but such power-respect is distinct from what I call esteem-respect. In prototypical cases, the former is asymmetric, whereas the latter is symmetric.

It is an empirical fact that personal respect often emerges as a result of a fight or some kind of competition. In such cases, when the struggle is (at least for the time being) over, the persons involved distance themselves from the struggle and ascribe each other a certain degree of excellence in a capacity that was essential to the struggle. Politicians belonging to different parties can in this way respect each other as politicians; philosophers of different opinions can respect each other as philosophers; boxers can respect each other as boxers; etc. And this can happen even if they dislike each other as human beings. If they don't, they may become friends in spite of continuing competition. This kind of respect, esteem-respect, often emerges between very young children, too. At the extreme, as history tells us, we can even find people who respect each other despite the fact that only a short time ago they were trying to kill each other; they then feel esteem-respect for the other's capacity as a warrior or soldier.

Esteem-respect comes close to admiration, but is different. Admiration is (like power-respect) asymmetric, but esteem-respect is symmetric. Esteem-respect is respect among equals. It focuses on a capacity that the respected person has, but it may spread to the person as a whole. When one says that one respects a person *as a person*, one normally means that one respects this person's moral integrity, i.e., his moral capacity.

Of course, esteem-respect can emerge between logicians that are fiercely debating some problem in logic, but such respect should not be identified with respect for logic itself. Rather, unless they all respect logic, no esteem-respect can arise between them.

3. Reverence-respect for moral rules

What then is reverence-respect for a moral rule? Since one moral rule may be derived from another moral rule, the most interesting question relates to moral rules that one regards as being basic, i.e., rules that appear in life (rightly or wrongly) as categorical imperatives. I think that, in a special way, the answer can be found in Kant. Not that I believe in his defense of *his* categorical imperative; to the contrary, I think he fails completely. My point and conjecture is that, nonetheless, his description of what he experienced when he was confronted with what he took to be the basic moral rule fits every *reflective* apprehension of a norm as being a basic norm. In other words, Kant gives a good *phenomenological description* of what it means to respect a basic moral rule. Such respect can arise independently of whether the rule is regarded as grounded in a transcendental faculty (as Kant has it), in a transcendent God (as religious Christians, Muslims, and Jews have it), or in something spatiotemporally immanent (as I, like Thomas Nagel (1997, chapter 6), would have it). Reverence-respect for a rule arises when a rule is regarded as ending the request for normative justification. If ethical subjectivists and nihilists experience it, they will have to regard it as a kind of hallucination.

As soon as one accepts that moral precepts can be broken by free agents – something which every law court all over the whole world takes for granted – one has also to accept that no such precept can create a *conscious* instance of itself (be acted *on*) without a self-legislating person who says: “Yes, this moral precept applies to me here and now.” On pain of an infinite regress, all *reflective* ethical (generalist) objectivists have to stop in front of some rule(s) and say that they ought to conform to the rule(s) whether or not they benefit from it. When so they do, they will reverence-respect the norm. Ethical particularists will in this way have to reverence-respect situation-bound categorical precepts.

According to Kant, all rational persons who clearly see the content of The Categorical Imperative will (i) freely *choose* to be conquered by it, and (ii) get a peculiar feeling of both wanting to cling to the imperative and to get away from it. Reverence-respect (“Achtung” or “Ehrfurcht”) for a moral rule contains two features:

What I recognize directly as a law for myself I recognize with respect, which means merely the consciousness of the submission of my will to a law without the intervention of other influences on my mind. The direct determination of the will by the law and the consciousness of this determination is respect; thus respect can be regarded as the effect of the law on the subject and not as the cause of the law. Respect is properly the conception of a worth which thwarts my self-love. Thus it is regarded as an object neither of inclination nor of fear, though it has something analogous to both. The only object of respect is the law, and indeed only the law which we impose on ourselves and yet recognize as necessary in itself. As a law, we are subject to it without consulting self-love; as self-imposed on us by ourselves, it is a consequence of our will. In the former respect it is analogous to fear and in the latter to inclination. All respect for a person is only respect for the law (of righteousness, etc.) of which the person provides an example. (Kant 1959, pp. 17-18)¹

When we stand in a relation of reverence-respect to a moral rule, we freely subordinate ourselves to the rule. The rule becomes, in Kant's words, "self-imposed on us by ourselves", and it is "a consequence of our will". Also, respect for logic, whatever its true whole Gestalt looks like, has to have this first feature of reverence-respect as one of its constituents. Logic puts constraints on our speech acts, constraints that we are able to neglect, but out of free will we choose as philosophers to subordinate ourselves to logic. It is quite possible to study logic and cognize its necessary relations and truths, but then consciously neglect these when one is making speech acts. A logical person does at least two things simultaneously. S/he both cognizes logically necessary relations and chooses to adhere to them.

However, the second feature of reverence-respect is not a constituent of respect for logic. Certainly a logically valid inference rule is, like a basic moral rule, never "regarded as an object of inclination or of fear". But *unlike* a basic moral rule it does not have "something analogous to both". Kant claims that there is in his reception of the categorical imperative something that – at one and the same time – both inclines his will in the

¹ Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated by L.W. Beck. I have consciously chosen a translation where *Achtung* is translated with 'respect' instead of the other alternatives, 'reverence' and 'awe'. In *Foundations*, Kant is reluctant really to admit that respect is a feeling (the quotation comes from a footnote), but later in *Critique of Practical Reason* (part I, book I, chapter 3) he admits it. He claims, however, that respect is the only feeling that is caused by the causality of freedom.

direction indicated by the imperative and makes him in some sense fear the imperative. Reverence-respect contains a contradictory-like duality that is structurally similar to what we find in phenomena such as hate-love.² Probably, from a causal point of view, the fear-like moment arises because norm breaking is associated with punishment; whether the association is to external punishment, to internal punishment from a bad conscience (as religious people have it), or internal punishment from the super-ego (as many modern secularists have it).

Since, as now explained, respect for logic differs in kind from respect for basic moral rules, we cannot speak of *logic for logic's sake* in the way true Kantians speak about duty for duty's sake. Logic does not present us with any *categorical* imperatives. In my opinion, it presents us with *hypothetical* imperatives, and we ought to talk about *logic for the sake of truth*. And when this view is spelled out in some detail, one finds what is specific to respect for logic.

4. The peculiarity of respect for logic

Despite the proliferation of non-classical and deviant logics, I still think that logic in its centre rests on the view that logically valid inference rules are truth-preserving. Logical rules of inference guarantee that truth is transferred from true premises to conclusions. Without a notion of truth that is independent of the notion of “logical truth”, the centre of logic would disappear, and logic itself would collapse. On this view of logic, respect for logic is essentially respect for truth-preserving inferences. But such inferences are of course only of interest in contexts where one is interested either in finding non-logical truths or in finding new logical truths with the help of those already available. Therefore, respect for logic must be conditional upon an interest in empirical, metaphysical, or mathematical truths. This fact, I think, is what gives this kind of respect its special flavor.

There is no unconditional norm that demands respect for truth and truth telling. Poets who want to express complex feelings, emotions, and sentiments have no reason to constrain themselves to making only true statements. And it is now and then morally acceptable to tell so-called white lies. In such contexts, therefore, there is no ground for a general respect for logic. But where there is a dedicated interest in truth, as there should be

² I have worked out this view in section 7 of (Johansson 1999).

in law courts and scientific communities, there should be a general respect for logic. Logical reasoning is one of many means used in the search for truths, but it is a very special means. It cannot possibly be exchanged for a better means of the same kind.³ We cannot possibly, as already Aristotle observed, do without the principle of non-contradiction. Therefore, the following is the case: *we do not have to subordinate ourselves to truth, but when we are interested in truth, then we have to subordinate ourselves to logic*. This explains the peculiar feeling one can have of both having to follow logic and not having to follow logic.

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³ For more about the special character of logic that I believe in, see (Nagel 1997, chapter 4).

