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Commentary on Godden

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In Response To: David Godden's [Psychologism in contemporary argumentation theory](#)

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David Godden sounds a salutary warning for those working in argumentation theory: to beware of the return of forms of psychologism that were thought banished for good by Frege, Russell and others early this century. Of the cases he cites I will concentrate on the discussion of feminist claims for alternative 'female' logics. But I will begin with the question of what is wrong with psychologism. Godden cites Hacker and Baker's definition of psychologism, in which the danger of psychologism lies in the reduction of logic to (psychological) laws of thought. Frege's own anti psychologism was more general - as Dummett (1973,495) puts it 'the interpretations of terms.. as standing for mental images or other results of mental operations'. Why should psychologism of either sort be a problem? Because - at least on Dummett's post Wittgensteinian version of Frege- a psychologistic theory of meaning fails to explain the fact that we can communicate, and share meanings. A psychologistic account of inference, on the other hand, makes validity a matter of psychology, rather than of objective truth. That way lies a particularly virulent form of relativism - in the case of logic, logical relativism: that the truths of logic are determined by psychology, either at the level of the individual or the group. What Godden points out is that while relativising validity to individual psychological states is no longer fashionable, a version which relativises validity to group rhetorical practices has come into vogue.

Logical relativism has been less fashionable than the analogous forms of linguistic and ethical relativism. Logic is fundamental to the very practice of argument, so that the dangers of self contradiction in arguing for logical relativism are particularly obvious. It is this argument strategy which Godden, quite properly, in my view, directs those who relativise logical validity to group behaviour, or rhetorical strategies. If there is no more to validity than the tendency of a group to treat a claim as valid, under whatever rhetorical rules the group abides by, then Godden suggests, the notion of validity does not have the normative force it should.

Godden's argument here is not with those who, for logical reasons, want to alter the formal definitions of validity for internal logical reasons, as for instance, paraconsistent or relevance logicians do, presumably using only paraconsistent or relevant steps. I assume he might well accept logically motivated differences in logical practice, so long as they are argued on logical grounds. This does not mean there is no problem in justifying deductive practice: for in virtue of what is any justification justified? Recall Lewis Carroll's "What the Tortoise said to Achilles". While such accounts are not Godden's target, however, the problems of justifying deductive practice might explain why rhetorically based accounts are in vogue. Not only do rhetorical accounts connect argument practice with formal schemes: they seem to offer a stopping

point on Carroll's regress: the bedrock of sheer behaviour.

Note first that even Quine's (1970 et passim) view is that logical rules are themselves a matter of convention. His holistic image is of a network of interlocking beliefs, of which logical beliefs are themselves members. Revision of logic would then theoretically be a possibility, but, according to Quine, our current logical practice is enshrined in so far as it is the simplest and best logic. Note that, paradoxically, Quine's view is not inconsistent with logical relativism, since the simplest apparatus to articulate the web is the one true logic for the community. Others, such as Dummett (1975, 1977) insist that there can be genuine debate about logic.

Dummett's argument strategy is controversial, and opposed to holistic views, but it brings out another conception of the way in which our understanding of logic is dependent on our understanding of language. While logic serves to articulate the web of belief in the Quinean model, in Dummett's approach, the logical operators are themselves part of the practice of language. The practice of language so conceived is essentially public and interpersonal, for familiar Wittgensteinian reasons, and understanding must be manifestable. If logical truths - and more generally, reasoning - is part of linguistic practice then logical truths derive their force from practice. Linguistic practice is the benchmark. Logical practice can itself be criticised. If we wish to allow debate about logical principles and their justification, we need to assume a particular logical framework in which to conduct the debate. But this does not yet mean we have to impose a global and objective logical model, based on, say, the Predicate Calculus or classical deducibility. The debate may itself need to be framed in particular logical frameworks, but so long as there is debate, there is room for discussion.

The difficulty of justifying deduction is in part the difficulty of searching for a transcendent level from which to assess logical practice. As Carroll pointed out, that way leads to paradox or regress. But if we turn back to the very practice of discussion between participants, then what counts as justified deductive practice will be tantamount to what moves are acceptable within the discussion. There may be no universal set of norms for logical constants which apply regardless of the participants, but in so far as a discussion is possible it will be in terms of shared logical norms - and there are surely general principles which are conducive to 'reasonable discussion'.

Such is an attempt to give the sorts of reasoning which might be used to rescue a rhetorical basis for logic. What then of the feminist accounts? My own most unfashionable view on this is, in fact, the precise reverse of the strategy I have just suggested, and agrees with Godden's approach. We have well documented evidence that there are gendered patterns of linguistic. Jennifer Coates summarises the evidence in her book, *Women Men and Language* (1986). Women - and girls - speak a language which is distinctive from that of men at each level of linguistic description. At the phonetic level, women tend to standard or dominant forms, while men tend to use dialectal

variants. At the level of vocabulary, women tend to use standard or socially acceptable words, while men tend to older forms. At the level of syntax, women's language differs substantially from men's. Robin Lakoff's classic (1975) study of English, *Language and Women's Place* shows that women use far more tag questions in statements than men. Thus, for instance, we find forms like:

"The weather's been wonderful, hasn't it?"

where the final tag asks for confirmation. While men also use these forms, women use them far more frequently, possibly indicating a need for confirmation. Women are less likely to use the unmodified imperative ("Do ...!"), but prefer modalised forms ("We could do ..."). In rejecting others' claims, they use concessive phrases, such as "I think.." rather than bold negations. Perhaps the most interesting and evocative work in the analysis of gender based distinctions in language use is at the higher level of discourse structures. Deborah Tannen's book *You Just Don't Understand* (1991) argues that women and men talk differently, women preferring self disclosure in their intimate conversations, whereas men talk aggressively, in order to dominate conversations.

Sociolinguists have documented a range of conversational strategies which differ from men to women and which are liable to cause miscommunication. Coates (1986, 152-155) lists a number of causes of miscommunication. For instance, there are differences in the meaning of questions for men and women. For men, questions are seen as direct requests for information, whereas women use and interpret questions as facilitating the flow of conversation. There are differences in links between speaker turns: men break in with their own opinions or even new topics, whereas women tend to acknowledge previous contributions and listen to others as they take turns. There are differences in attitudes towards self disclosure, which is an exception in male-male conversation and normal in female-female talk. Coates summarises the differences by classifying men's talk as competitive and women's talk as cooperative.

My own view is that very often what appears to be a gender based difference of logical behaviour is better interpreted as the same logical move made in other words. If I say:

‘Well I wonder whether you might look at that differently...’

I might well have just as forceful a knockdown argument as a man who says:

‘Hah , caught you - here’s a counter example’

We need to interpret as best we can the differing utterance style, and impose a logical order. I think there are linguistic reasons for arguing that the same logical utterance might be made very differently by different genders. If that is so, we may not need to revise logic for rhetorical reason – perhaps we could

have a good and non *ad hoc* theory of how the same logic can look superficially very different in different conversations. Indeed I think that this is the most productive way of dealing with the moral issue of feminine views of reason.

The tradition of regarding women as weak in reasoning skills, and indeed of defining the feminine in opposition to the analytic and the rational has been documented by Gennie Lloyd in *The Man of Reason* (1984). Lloyd shows how discussions of reason have, implicitly or explicitly, excluded the feminine, making reasoning a public, objective, impersonal activity not open to the private, intuitive female, embedded in the personal social structures of the home and family. There are two diametrically opposed reactions to such evidence. On the one hand, we can argue that analytic talk is phallogentric and bad, and that the 'intuitive' female logic is to be preferred. On the other hand, we can argue that the alienation of women from the tools of analytic thought, such as higher mathematics, is a socially engendered iniquity which needs to be remedied. Lloyd's view is attractive:

"The claim that Reason is male need not at all involve sexual relativism about truth, or any suggestion that principles of logical thought valid for men do not also hold for female reasoners.....Philosophy has defined ideals of Reason through exclusions of the feminine. But it also contains within it the resources for critical reflection on those ideals and on its own aspirations." (1984,109)

We need not be rhetoricians or go in for psychologism to reflect on our own practice, but we had better be aware that it might be fallible.

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