

# Logical Pluralism and Normativity: Conflict and Collapse

## 1 Introduction

Many hold that the way in which logic is *normative* rules out the logical pluralist view that there is more than one equally good logic.<sup>1</sup> The aim of this paper is to bring out a general challenge to anti-pluralist arguments of one kind, by building on a point made by Gillian Russell. I also object to anti-pluralist arguments of a different kind.

Here is the plan. First, I give a general characterization of logical pluralism. Next, I introduce a standard argument against it of the “normative conflict” kind. I then consider Russell’s reasons for thinking that all such arguments must fail, and point out that they seem oddly irrelevant. Next, I explain how Russell’s key idea does, in fact, generate a serious challenge to normative conflict arguments against pluralism. Finally, I explain why arguments of the “normative collapse” kind do not seem any more promising than normative conflict arguments.

## 2 What Is Logical Pluralism?

Today, logic is usually regarded as the study of logical validity, and logical pluralism as the thesis that there is more than one kind of logical validity.<sup>2</sup> But this conception of pluralism has two drawbacks.

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Priest 2006, Read 2006, Steinberger 2019, Stei 2019.

<sup>2</sup>i.e.: Beall and Restall 2000: “Logic has a chief subject matter: Logical Consequence. The chief aim of logic is to account for consequence, to say, accurately and systematically, what consequence amounts to, which is normally done by specifying which arguments...are valid.” Logical pluralism is, in turn, the idea that: “there is more than one genuine deductive consequence relation.” (Beall and Restall 2006, 25) Talk of consequence and validity are interchangeable: an argument is logically valid if and only if its conclusion is a logical consequence of its premises. I assume here that arguments are lists of propositions, the last of which is the conclusion and the rest of which are the premises.

1. Normally when there are different kinds of the thing that a discipline aims to study, practitioners seek a single theory which has a place for all of them. (i.e. Cetologists seek a theory that has a place for all the kinds of whales.) But pluralists emphasize that logicians do not seek a single theory that has a place for all the different kinds of validity; rather, these kinds of validity are equally-good *alternatives: rivals* for what a logical theory might be about.<sup>3</sup> Our characterization of pluralism should make it clear in what sense they are “rivals”.
2. It is only relatively recently that logic has come to be regarded as specially concerned with *logical validity*. But many considerations for and against pluralism can be appreciated on other conceptions of logic, too.<sup>4</sup> Our characterization of pluralism, then, should not assume that logic is about validity.

So as not to lose touch with current discussions, our conception of pluralism should also enable us to understand how the idea that there are different kinds of validity can qualify as a kind of logical pluralism.

We find such the characterization we need by approaching logical pluralism from a general perspective. Pluralism in any theoretical discipline is the claim that two significantly different but wholly correct theories can equally well fulfil the *central task* of the discipline: whatever it is that the discipline is supposed to do. We can cash out “significantly different” by noting that the central task of a discipline will divide the claims that make up its theories into *central claims*, which directly fulfil the central task, and auxiliary claims, which help to generate the central ones. We can then say that pluralism requires a difference in the *central claims*. (E.g.: Suppose the central task of physics is to state all the physical laws. The central claims of a physical theory will then be statements of such laws. Physical theories might also include evidence for such laws—say, claims about what is observed in a particular cloud chamber—but it is not enough to be a pluralist about physics to hold that different sets of observations could establish the same laws; one must hold that there are two equally correct sets of claims identifying the laws themselves.) Logical pluralism, then, is the idea that two logical theo-

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<sup>3</sup>See, e.g., Stei 2019, section 2: “The view that there is some kind of rivalry...among the correct logics can be found in almost any formulation of logical pluralism.”

<sup>4</sup>For example, as Beall and Restall 2000 note, at one point “logic was dominated by the Frege-Russell picture which treats logical truth as the lead character and consequence [or validity] as secondary.” Now, consider the motivation for pluralism that it “affords a more charitable interpretation of many important (but difficult) debates in philosophical logic than is otherwise available.” (Beall and Restall 2006, 31). This motivation applies to debates conducted in the more traditional terms just as well as in terms of validity.

ries might differ in their central claims, even though each is wholly correct and satisfies the central task of logic equally well.<sup>5</sup>

This characterization allows logicians with different conceptions of the central task of logic to appreciate considerations for and against pluralism. It also makes the sense of rivalry clear: since each theory *wholly* satisfies the task of logic, we only need one, though both are equally good. Finally, we see how the claim that there are different kinds of validity qualifies as pluralism if we fill in the right formulation of the central task of logic in terms of validity. The pluralist should identify the task of logic this way: to *choose a kind of logical validity, and then sort all arguments into those which exhibit it and those which do not*.<sup>6</sup> The pluralist identifies various constraints on what it takes for some feature to be a *kind* of logical validity—for example, it must be, in some sense, *impossible* for the premises of an argument with the feature to be true and the conclusion false.<sup>7</sup> Non-pluralists need not quarrel with this description of logic’s task—though they may, of course, insist that there is only one kind of logical validity to choose from. But if two different features meet all the relevant constraints, as the pluralist holds, then it is possible for there to be different sets of central claims that are wholly correct and fully satisfy the task of logic, though each makes use of a different kind of logical validity to sort arguments. The central claims of a theory will identify particular arguments as having or lacking the kind of validity under discussion.

### 3 A Normative Conflict Argument

Suppose the task of logic is the one just described, and that one of the constraints on being a kind of logical validity is this: if an argument *has* this feature, then the corresponding inference is permissible, and if it *lacks* it, the inference is *impermissible*.<sup>8</sup> This would rule out pluralism in a fairly obvious way. The argument below

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<sup>5</sup>Steinberger 2019 seems to have something like this in mind when he characterizes pluralism as the idea that “the core function of logic can be fulfilled by more than one logic.” (8).

<sup>6</sup>Something like this is a reasonable way to understand the task of, say, taxonomic biology, which is a discipline for which pluralism is plausibly true. It is unlikely that there is a single best system for classifying organisms. But the goal of taxonomy is not to study all possible ways of sorting them: once we have one admissible way of sorting them, we need not be interested in the potentially infinite variations. The task of taxonomic biology is wholly satisfied once we pick an admissible classification scheme and use it to sort all the organisms.

<sup>7</sup>See Chapter 2 of Beall and Restall 2006 for other such constraints. This idea is often implemented along with the idea that “logically valid” can be used by different theorists with different *meanings*, to refer to the various features. This yields the “structural meaning-variance pluralism” described by Steinberger 2019, 8-9.

<sup>8</sup>I take “inference” to be a mental activity—a transition between sets of propositions. Each inference has one and only one corresponding argument. This sort of claim, and the anti-pluralist

brings out, in an abstract way, which aspects of logic and its normativity lead to a contradiction when combined with pluralism. (The parenthetical remarks explain how the contradiction is generated on the particular assumptions just sketched.)

For some normative statuses  $N_1, N_2 \dots N_n$ :

- P1: Together, the central claims of a logical theory imply that various things have statuses  $N_1, N_2 \dots N_n$ , and if two sets of such central claims are different, there is at least something such that one of the sets implies that it has one normative status, and the other set implies that it has a different one. (On our assumptions, this is true where the normative statuses are *permissible* and *impermissible*. The central claims of a particular logical theory must say, of *every* argument, whether it exhibits the relevant kind of validity or does not. In doing so, these claims imply, of every inference, that it has one or the other normative status. Two different sets of central claims concern different kinds of validity, and no two kinds of validity are possessed by all and only the same arguments; so there will be some inference such that one of the sets implies that it is permissible and the other that it is impermissible.)
- P2: Nothing has more than one of  $N_1, N_2 \dots N_n$ . (On our assumptions, this means that nothing is both permissible and impermissible.)
- S: Suppose there are two logical theories,  $\mathcal{L}_1$  and  $\mathcal{L}_2$ , which make *different* but *equally correct* central claims, thus satisfying the central task of logic equally well. [The pluralist view, assumed for reductio.]
- C1: For something  $t$ ,  $\mathcal{L}_1$  implies that  $t$  has one of  $N_1, N_2 \dots N_n$ , and  $\mathcal{L}_2$  implies that  $t$  has a different one. (On our assumptions, this means that for something—i.e., some inference—one theory implies that it is permissible, the other that it is impermissible.) [From P1 and S.]
- C2:  $t$  has more than one of  $N_1, N_2 \dots N_n$ . (On our assumptions, something is both permissible and impermissible.) [From C1 and S, since both sets of claims are correct.]
- C3: The supposition must be rejected. [Since C2 and P2 conflict.]

The argument seems valid, and on the suppositions above, its premises seem true.

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argument built around it, derives from Priest 2006 (203): “Are we, or are we not entitled to [do a certain thing]? Either we are or we are not: there can be no pluralism about this.”

## 4 Russell's Argument

Gillian Russell claims that “logical pluralists needn't worry about objections from the normativity of logic”. Russell does not consider the details of any such objection, but gives a general reason why pluralists needn't worry: “logic isn't normative.” In saying this, Russell reserves the term “normative” for claims like “We ought to do x”, which *explicitly* tells us what to do, and for claims like “x is obligatory for us” which imply, all on their own, claim that explicitly tells us what to do—in this case, “we ought to do x.” Unlike normative claims, her point is that central logical claims must combine with general “background norms” to imply explicit guidance.<sup>9</sup> Her point, then, is this:

1. Central logical claims are not normative. *And if central logical claims are not normative, then there can be no argument against logical pluralism from the norms they imply (or the way they imply them).* Therefore, there can be no argument against logical pluralism from the norms central logical claims imply (or the way they imply them).

This is puzzling. No step in the argument above obviously requires the central claims of a logical theory to be normative (in Russell's sense). The premises state only that central logical claims *imply* certain norms; it is irrelevant if they do so only through in combination with “background norms”.<sup>10</sup> Why, then, accept the italicized conditional?

Some remarks in Russell's paper, also emphasized in a similar context by Ivor Labukt, suggest a reason to accept it. If logical claims aren't normative, then a logical theory implies norms not in “a distinctive way”, but only in “a way that it shares with arithmetic and physics”—indeed, with “most or all intellectual disciplines”.<sup>11</sup> This suggests an argument for the italicized claim:

2. If the central logical claims themselves are not normative, then there is nothing distinctive about the norms they imply (or the way they imply them). But if there is nothing distinctive about that, then either pluralism

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<sup>9</sup>As she puts it: “Claims about validity” neither explicitly say “what we ought to do,” nor imply such claims “all on their own”, “taken in isolation”, but only by combining with “background norms” about “the relations between belief, reasoning, and truth.” (Russell 2017, 15, 18.)

<sup>10</sup>As Stei 2020 puts a closely related point: “As long as...logic has normative consequences, even if they arise from general principles...the collapse of logical pluralism is an imminent risk.” Note that it can be a constraint on an admissible conception of logical validity that it imply norms, even if claims about logical validity are not normative; the constraint is satisfied even if they do not imply these norms “all on their own”.

<sup>11</sup>Labukt 2019, 2; Russell 2017, 17.

is ruled out in *every* discipline, or it is not ruled out in logic. And pluralism is acceptable in some disciplines. Therefore: *if the central logical claims are not normative, then there can be no argument against logical pluralism from the norms they imply (or the way they imply them).*

But the underlined claim is false.<sup>12</sup> The idea behind it is: where could distinctive features come from, if these norms result from combining logic's non-normative central claims with "background norms" which also imply norms in combination with the central claims of *every* discipline? But the obvious answer is: from the fact that the central claims of logic are different from those of every other discipline. This might well allow them to imply norms with distinctive features, even when combined with a general background norm.<sup>13</sup> And this distinctive feature might make P1 true for logic and not for another discipline. Russell's point that logic is not normative, then, still seems irrelevant to the anti-pluralist argument above.

## 5 A General Challenge

Consider how Russell's point fits with the assumptions that motivated the anti-pluralist argument. We supposed that the central claims of a logical theory sort arguments into those that exhibit (one kind of) logical validity and those which do not. We also supposed that such claims imply that the corresponding inferences are permissible or impermissible. But Russell's point implies that for both to be true, there must be some general "background" norm that connects them.

What "background norms" are there? Here is one: *it is impermissible for anyone to believe what is not true.* If this were the only one, the only normatively relevant aspects of central logical claims would be those which bear on what is not true. Assuming that *if something is true, its negation is not true*, it is relevant that each central logical claim is itself true: each implies that it is *impermissible to believe its own negation.* More interestingly, since one constraint on kinds of logical validity is that it be (in some sense) impossible for the premises of logically

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<sup>12</sup>One might also deny that pluralism is *ever* acceptable, but see footnote 6 above.

<sup>13</sup>For example: on the assumptions about logic's task made above, the central logical claims concern arguments, and together, they concern *all* arguments. The claims of most disciplines do not. In connection with a background norm about arguments, this might enable logic to imply norms that those of other disciplines cannot. Sher 2013 (192) makes this point in claiming that the norms of logic have a specially broad "scope" due to the subject matter of its central claims: "although the source of logic's normativity...is the same as that of other disciplines, this does not mean that logic's normativity is the same as theirs in other respects as well. [For example,] the normativity of logic has a broader scope than that of physics."

valid arguments to be true and their conclusions false, every argument exhibiting any kind of logical validity must be such that *either one of its premises is not true, or its conclusion is true, or both*. For any logically valid argument, then, either a premise or the negation of its conclusion is not true—so to *believe* the premises and the negation of the conclusion is to believe something not true. In combination with the background norm, then, those central claims which classify an argument as logically valid imply that it is *impermissible to believe all its premises and the negation of its conclusion*.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, since the truth-values of claims that make up logically invalid arguments can vary independently of one another, this background norm yields no similar implication when combined with the central claims which classify arguments as not valid.

If that is the only background norm, then, central logical claims *cannot* have the normative implications that we supposed they did. Their implications are limited to deeming certain things *impermissible*, never that anything is *permissible*.<sup>15</sup> P1 of the anti-pluralist argument becomes false: it is no longer true that “if two sets of...central claims are different, then there is at least some member of K such that one of the sets implies that it has one normative status, and the other set implies that it has a different one.” On our current assumptions, if one theory classifies an argument as valid and another as not valid, the first assigns “impermissible” to a certain combination of beliefs, while the second assigns no normative status at all to that combination. The normative conflict is gone.

Can an anti-pluralist recover the normative conflict by adding other background norms about permissibility? She might try adding: *whatever is not impermissible is permissible*.<sup>16</sup> But this will not help. When a logical theory does not imply that a belief-state is impermissible, it does not imply that it is *not* impermissible. (It might be impermissible for other reasons.)

A crafty anti-pluralist might suggest norms concerning special notions—“logical impermissibility” and “logical permissibility”—and claim that whatever logic does not imply to be logically impermissible is automatically “logically permissible.” But Russell’s point is that logical norms must be derived from *general* “background” norms: ones which also imply norms in connection with the truths of

<sup>14</sup>This is, more or less, the “Wo-” principle endorsed in the influential MacFarlane [unpublished] (If C is a logical consequence of A and B, then “you ought to see to it that if you believe A and you believe B, you do not disbelieve C.” (7)) and Beall and Restall 2006 (“It is a mistake to assert the premises of a valid argument while denying the conclusion.” (16)).

<sup>15</sup>Their implications also concern only beliefs, not inferences—although if we added norms of the means-end variety, norms about impermissible belief-states would plausibly yield norms for inferences. (We ought not infer in a way that leads to a belief we ought not have.

<sup>16</sup>Of course it would not help to add that *it is permissible for anyone to believe what is, in fact, true*. Calling an argument invalid still would not imply that the relevant combination of beliefs has any normative status.

other disciplines. They cannot, then, concern any special sort of “logical permissibility”.<sup>17</sup>

The anti-pluralist might keep looking for background norms, or even suggest a different conception of what the central claims of logic are. But we can now state a general challenge to any “normative conflict” argument against pluralism. To ensure that there is a case of conflict, logical claims must assign normative statuses to *every* member of some mental kind, and these statuses must *conflict* in the way “permissible” and “impermissible” do. Moreover, logic must assign these statuses only through combination with “background” norms which also imply norms in combination with other disciplines. These requirements are in some tension. If logic could assign one or the other status to *everything* of the relevant kind in connection with the general norm, then it is hard to see how there could be anything left for other disciplines to teach us in connection with that same background norm.

## 6 A Normative Collapse Argument

Russell’s point, then, makes it difficult to see how normative conflict arguments could succeed. It is worth briefly considering why a different sort of normative anti-pluralist argument is no better off. This argument centers not on normative conflict, but on a kind of *normative collapse*, by which one theory must emerge as better than the others. It is sometimes held to succeed even on the picture of logic that we have been working with, given only the single, uncontroversial background norm we first identified.<sup>18</sup>

For some normative status N:

P1\*: Together, the central claims of any logical theory imply that various things

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<sup>17</sup>Something like Russell’s point is required for more familiar objections to the conception of logic’s normativity that we used to motivate the anti-pluralist argument. Harman 1986, for example, would object to that conception. (Are inferences whose corresponding arguments are logically valid really always permissible? What about when the conclusion conflicts with something we directly perceive? And the others always impermissible? What about when trained biologists immediately infer that something is a mammal from the fact that it is a whale?) But if logic were said to imply norms concerning a special *sense* or permissibility and impermissibility, we might well suppose that they do have such implications.

<sup>18</sup>This style of argument is found in Read 2006: its central move is that one logical theory must emerge as *better* than the other, because it “answers a crucial question which [the other] does not.” Since the central moves are different, I think it is important to distinguish the collapse argument from the conflict argument, even though Read himself, along with Stei 2020 and Steinberger 2019, seem to treat the collapse argument as a version of the conflict argument of Priest 2006.



have N, and two different sets of central claims differ in which things are implied to have N. (On our current assumptions, this is true if N is *impermissibility*. Validity claims imply that belief-states are impermissible, and different sets of central claims differ in what they say about at least one argument.)

P2\* A logical theory which correctly implies that something has normative status N satisfies logic's task better than one which does not.

S: Suppose there are two logical theories,  $\mathcal{L}_1$  and  $\mathcal{L}_2$ , which make *different* but *equally correct* central claims, thus satisfying the central task of logic equally well. [The pluralist view, assumed for reductio.]

C1\*: Either  $\mathcal{L}_1$  or  $\mathcal{L}_2$  correctly implies that something has N, and the other does not. (On our assumptions: one correctly implies that a certain belief-state is impermissible, and the other does not.) [From P1\*, S\*.]

C2\*: Either  $\mathcal{L}_1$  or  $\mathcal{L}_2$  satisfies logic's task better than the other. [From C1\*, P2\*.]

C3\*: The supposition must be rejected. [Since C2\* and S\* conflict.]

The deepest problem is that P2\* is false. Implying more true normative claims is just *one* way for a logical theory to satisfy its task—to choose a kind of logical validity and sort all arguments into those which exhibit it and those which do not—well.<sup>19</sup> A theory which implies fewer normative claims might be, on the whole, just as good as one which implies more, as long as it exhibits other theoretical virtues.<sup>20</sup>

Noting this problem, Steinberger aims to remove the different dimensions of evaluation by “the...assumption of epistemic value monism...there [is] but one fundamental epistemic value.”<sup>21</sup> But suppose we grant the assumption, and hold that the only fundamental epistemic value is, say, *the badness of believing untrue things*. It would then follow that the only fundamental dimension of evaluation for how well a theory performs its task is how well it helps us avoid believing untrue

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<sup>19</sup>Another problem is that two logical theories might each assign the normative status to things that the other does not; in that case, P2\* would imply, impossibly, that neither is as good as the other. Anti-pluralists hope that additional assumptions will ensure that there is always a theory that has all the normative implications of the others. (E.g. Steinberger 2019, fn 45: “I am assuming that logics are ordered by inclusion over their consequence relations.”)

<sup>20</sup>Beall and Restall 2006 (94) reply this way. Stei 2020 claims that this reply is “at odds with the general pluralist spirit. If all logics are supposed to be equally correct, it is not clear in what way one may be better than the other in the relevant sense.” But this is precisely the general pluralist spirit: a pluralist about art, say, might well hold that the major art movements are equally good, each in its own way. (Perhaps Classical art is more pleasing, modernist art more interesting, etc.) It applies directly here: relevance logicians claim that relevant arguments are especially good in certain ways, and a theory focussed only around them good in related ways, and a pluralist can agree.

<sup>21</sup>Steinberger 2019, 13.

things. But this still does not help. Implying true claims about what we ought not do is not the same thing as preventing us from doing it. So it still does not follow that the best way to fulfil logic's task is to imply the *most* claims about what we ought not believe. Implying fewer such claims, but in a different way, might help us avoid false beliefs equally well.<sup>22</sup>

Collapse arguments, then, do not seem any more promising than conflict arguments.

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<sup>22</sup>Suppose our task is to shoot down enemy planes: one person spots the planes and tells another where to shoot. Suppose the only fundamental value for this activity is the badness of these planes getting by, so the fundamental dimension of evaluation for plane-spotters is how well they prevent planes getting by. Still, plane-spotters who point out more planes are not automatically better than those who point out fewer. One who points out more planes might overwhelm the shooter, who will be unable to shoot them all, while a spotter who notices fewer planes flying in predictable patterns might enable the shooter to hit the same number as the more exhaustive spotter.

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