

This is an electronic reprint of the original article. This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Review of Miguens, Sofia (ed.), *The Logical Alien: Conant and His Critics*

Strandberg, Hugo

Published in:
Philosophical Investigations

DOI:
[10.1111/phin.12310](https://doi.org/10.1111/phin.12310)

Published: 01/01/2021

Document Version
Accepted author manuscript

Document License
Publisher rights policy

[Link to publication](#)

Please cite the original version:
Strandberg, H. (2021). Review of Miguens, Sofia (ed.), *The Logical Alien: Conant and His Critics*. *Philosophical Investigations*, 44(2). <https://doi.org/10.1111/phin.12310>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

REVIEW

Sofia Miguens (ed.), *The Logical Alien: Conant and His Critics* (Harvard University Press, 2020). 1080 pp, price £47.95 hb.

Hugo Strandberg, *University of Pardubice*

Could there be a logical alien? The upshot of Jim Conant's way of dealing with this question is that it should be answered neither in the affirmative nor in the negative. Imagining a logical alien is not to imagine something impossible; the problem is that those who have toyed with the idea have not made it clear what they are trying to imagine. The key idea in the so-called resolute reading of the *Tractatus*, of which Conant is a central advocate, is consequently that the Tractarian ladder is really thrown away: when the book has come to its end, no positive or negative conclusions are drawn, but the ladder has indeed been therapeutically instrumental in helping readers to get out of the impasse in which they were stuck.

This means that the notion of a logical alien, suitably defined, might after all be used.¹ At one point in *The Logical Alien* (p. 321), Conant says that he himself can be described as a "logical alien", in the sense of being a philosopher with a conception of logic that strikes most contemporary philosophers as alien.

Moreover, this book itself might make one inclined to describe Conant as a logical alien in another sense of the word. For what is most remarkable, unusual, indeed alien about this book is not so much its contents as its form. The idea behind the book is a very fruitful one: start with Conant's 1991 paper "The Search for Logically Alien Thought", have eight philosophers comment on the paper, and end with Conant's reply to his critics. When the section of comments ends on p. 292, the book has at times been very interesting, sometimes not so interesting, but not strange, although the difficulty of holding it in one's hands is indicative of what is to come: we still have almost 800 pages to go. Would anyone else than a logical alien reply to his critics at such length? In fact, doesn't Conant resemble Wittgenstein's wood sellers, discussed here and there in *The Logical Alien*?: "What if they spread out their thoughts horizontally and sold them at a price proportionate to the number of pages covered by the thoughts? And what if they even justified this with the words: 'Of course, if you buy more philosophy, you must pay more'?"²

¹ Cf. Wittgenstein (1961: § 5.473).

² Cf. Wittgenstein (1967: § I:148).

A review should contain some sort of summary of the book. This is, however, a very difficult task when it comes to a book of this length. The task would be somewhat easier if one problem or question held the book together. In Conant's original paper, there is such a question, the question of the logical alien. But, in fact, only two of the eight critics – Martin Gustafsson and Jocelyn Benoist – directly relate to this question (and this is the reason why I find these two contributions by far the most interesting). The rest of the critics principally discuss Conant's way of reading philosophers such as Descartes, Kant and Frege, sometimes without even mentioning Conant's original paper. Furthermore, Conant discusses a wide array of questions in his replies, often in stimulating ways, but these discussions are most of the time not of consequence for the understanding of the main question of his paper, only related to it; in reading the book, I often find myself having forgotten what it is supposed to be about. This is not meant as a criticism; one simply has to read the book knowing what to expect. The title of the book is hence somewhat misleading, but any title would be that tried to sum up its contents. Since the questions Conant discusses are so diverse – philosophy of logic, of course, but mainly the interpretation of Descartes, Kant, Frege and Wittgenstein, the ways they differ from and are related to each other, but also questions concerning scepticism and philosophy of perception – different readers will find different sections of interest. I, for one, found Conant's discuss of Descartes rewarding. The editor's introductions will be handy for readers trying to orient themselves in the book.

The reason why the questions discussed by Conant are so diverse is also a result of his way of replying to the critics. Although he spends many pages on clarifying where the critic in question, the Conant of 1991 and the Conant of today part ways, he seldom enters into direct dialogue with the critics. (However, Conant's replies are fitted to the level of abstraction of the papers they are replies to, and the level of abstraction of most replies is therefore very high.) For example, if I read Conant's reply to Charles Travis from Travis's point of view, I do not find anything specific that would make me revise my ideas. Rather, Conant's general strategy in his replies seems to be to try to bring about a Gestalt switch by approaching the issue in question from a different direction. This might also partly explain the length: what is needed is not a single argument, but to make the reader see things in new ways.

Conant ends the book with a discussion of something Wittgenstein says in relation to the example of the wood sellers: "A society acting in this way would perhaps remind us of the

Wise Men of Gotham.”³ Accordingly, Conant narrates this English folktale and uses it as the starting point for his concluding discussion. But here Anscombe’s translation has led him astray. For, in the German original, Wittgenstein writes, “Eine Gesellschaft, die so handelt, würde uns vielleicht an die ‘Klugen Leute’ in dem Märchen erinnern,” a reference to a fairy tale of the Brothers Grimm with the title “Die klugen Leute” (The Wise People).⁴ It is a disturbing story about stupid people being deceived by those who know how to exploit them. For example, it begins with a woman selling three cows to a cattle dealer. He accepts the price the woman suggests, but since he has forgotten his purse at home, he leaves one of “his” cows as a pledge and walks away with the other two without ever coming back. What would “a society acting in this way” be? It would be a society in which no one, neither fools nor shrewd cattle dealers, would understand the point of pledges; pledges would consequently not exist, and his way of deceiving her would not be possible.

Furthermore, describing the woman as stupid, as I just did, is perhaps to miss the point of the story. To be sure, she does not understand the point of pledges, but the one who is to blame is clearly the dealer, not she. What is most striking is that she does not realise that the dealer might try to deceive her, that is, she trusts him, and is that really a bad thing? The moral of the story concerns this ambiguity. After other examples of similar kinds of exploitation having been given, the story ends with one of the exploiters, a farmer, saying to himself, “If stupidity would always yield as much, I would gladly honour it,” after which the narrator states the moral of the story: “Thus thought the farmer, but to you the fools are certainly more dear.”⁵ In other words, the title of the story, “The Wise People”, is ironical. Is it really the exploiters who are “wise”? The exploited are fools in one sense of the word, but if anyone is wise here, it must be they.

Does this shed any light on Wittgenstein’s wood sellers? An outsider might try to exploit them, by stacking the wood as high as possible before buying, and spreading the logs out on the ground when selling. If he is successful, he will end up as owner of all the wood. But the fact that this is possible, that it is possible to derive a contradiction from the practice, as it were, does not need to be a problem. The problem exists for someone who is tempted to make

³ Wittgenstein (1967: § I:150).

⁴ Rölleke (2007: 791–794). Anscombe now and then replaces references to German culture in Wittgenstein’s works by English equivalents, no doubt a risky way of translating, for only when the philosophical point in question has been properly understood is it possible to determine what an equivalent would be. The most well known example is Wittgenstein (2001: § 39), where an allusion to Wagner’s *Der Ring des Nibelungen* becomes an allusion to the Arthurian cycle.

⁵ Rölleke (2007: 794). My translation.

such an attempt at exploitation, or for someone who is afraid that someone else will, but the people of Wittgenstein's example might not be like that. And this might be their wisdom.⁶

Much more needs to be said about this, but this review is not the place for it. What I have tried to indicate is that these questions of logic are intimately connected to moral questions. This is not news to Conant. His original paper ends with a story about a Pole trying to find out the secret of the Jews (p. 100). In the rest of *The Logical Alien*, this story is never discussed, commented upon or even mentioned. Perhaps many readers just see it as a funny way of ending the paper, but I think that the real philosophical depth of Conant's paper lies precisely here. *The Logical Alien*, for all its many pages, still leaves us with questions to think about when it comes to Conant's "The Search for Logically Alien Thought".⁷

Centre for Ethics

University of Pardubice

Studentská 95

CZ-53210 Pardubice

Czech Republic

hugo.strandberg@abo.fi

References

- Rölleke, H. (ed.) (2007). *Kinder- und Hausmärchen, gesammelt durch die Brüder Grimm: Vollständige Ausgabe*. Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag.
- Winch, P. (1972). *Ethics and Action*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1961). *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- . (1967). *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- . (2001). *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe. 3rd ed. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

⁶ Cf. Winch (1972: 25–26).

⁷ This publication was supported within the project of Operational Programme Research, Development and Education (OP VVV/OP RDE), "Centre for Ethics as Study in Human Value", registration No. CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/15_003/0000425, co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund and the state budget of the Czech Republic.