

The Yiddish Modus Tollens

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Volume 7 · Number 1 · 2023 · Pages 138 - 149

The modus tollens form is:

$$\begin{array}{l} P \rightarrow Q \\ \sim Q \\ \therefore \sim P \end{array} \left. \vphantom{\begin{array}{l} P \rightarrow Q \\ \sim Q \\ \therefore \sim P \end{array}} \right\} \begin{array}{l} \text{If } P \text{ then } Q \\ \text{not } Q \\ \text{therefore not } P \end{array}$$

I heard Dick Bernstein name the Yiddish modus tollens during one of his lectures. He was going back and forth about the idea of a philosophical ground or justification, and finally quipped: *If not this, then what else? It's the Yiddish modus tollens!*

Later, I read Dick's attribution of the Yiddish modus tollens to Sidney Morgenbesser. Dick wrote that Morgenbesser is merely "reported to have discovered" what Dick described as "a 'new' logical principle, which is very common in philosophical argument, and which is frequently used by naturalists—the Yiddish modus tollens: IF NOT THIS, THEN WHAT ELSE?"

That was from his Romanell Lecture on Philosophical Naturalism, delivered at the APA in San Francisco, in March 1995.¹ Dick mentioned the Yiddish modus tollens again in 2009, in an article for the *Journal of Religious Ethics*, where he was assessing Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*. In that work, Wolterstorff defends a hypothetical theistic grounding of inherent human rights. Dick wrote:

There is a serious danger that Wolterstorff's 'grand argument' really comes down to the affirmation of a credo: 'Here I stand.' This is what I believe! It begins to look as if his argument looks very much like a version of what Sidney Morgenbesser once characterized as the 'Yiddish modus tollens': 'If not this, then what else?' 'Or, if you don't accept the claim that God loves all of us in the mode of attachment equally and permanently, then how else can one justify the claim that there are natural inherent human rights?' Perhaps the proper response to this question is Rorty's: you can't.²

¹ Richard J. Bernstein, "Whatever Happened to Naturalism?" The Eighth Annual Patrick Romanell Lecture on Philosophical Naturalism, delivered at the American Philosophical Association, San Francisco, March 30, 1995; published in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, vol. 69, no. 2 (1995), 57-76.

² Bernstein, "Does He Pull It off? A Theistic Grounding of Natural Inherent Human Rights," *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 2009, vol. 37, no. 2, 236.

In these two published works, Dick is playing up the insolvency that the Yiddish *modus tollens* reveals. Like the argument from personal incredulity in informal logic, the Yiddish *modus tollens* asks how, if *I* cannot imagine something, it could ever be the case. Both forms imply that logical falsity is but a contradiction of personal expectation; both are invalid. But the Yiddish *modus tollens* delivers the blow comically, with a Brooklyn accent and squally gesticulation. The valid form of “denying the consequent” becomes an invalid mode of denying whatever fails to suggest itself to me—and that’s funny, actually. Identifying the Yiddish *modus tollens* in another’s line of reasoning is a way of associating the constructions of the logician or professional academic with our Bubbies and Zadies: they are peculiar, but endearingly so, because they fear the worst and just want everything to go well for us.

Jewish characters were on Dick’s mind in 1995, around the first time I heard him name the Yiddish *modus tollens*. He was then completing *Hannah Arendt and Jewish Question*. As he wrote in the preface, he undertook the project because, as he recalls: “I realized that there *was* a ‘Jewish’ book I wanted to write [...] I was struck by the fact that Arendt’s Jewish concerns, her own grappling with the Jewish question, left their mark on all her thinking. So, what started out to be a chapter in a book turned out to be this book itself.”³

Arendt, Dick tells us, personified the kind of honesty with which one lives in defiance of both a transcendent philosophical or theological ground and of its alternative, an allegedly pure empiricism or relativism. As a philosopher and as a political theorist, “Arendt refuses to be pushed to either extreme. She insists on what might be called the ontological openness that is quintessential to our being-in-the-world.”⁴ Dick quotes appreciatively from the opening pages of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where Arendt tells us that the book was “written against a background of both reckless optimism and reckless despair. It holds that Progress and Doom are two sides of the same medal; that both are articles of superstition, not faith.”⁵

Likewise, Dick appreciates Arendt’s insistence on experience as the source of thinking. Our thinking can only reflect what’s been done to us and what we’ve done; it derives its concreteness from the vibrancy of personal experience.⁶ Yet for Arendt, the *human condition* is by definition plural, and plurality is the *conditio sine qua non* not

³ Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996) ix-xi.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 135; Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1976), vii-viii.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 123.

only of a life of political participation but of individuality. Individual experience makes up the human condition as the “sum total of human activities and capabilities,” and it is always ongoing: we cannot appeal to it as a stable, external check on thinking, or as thought’s extra-conceptual ground. Moreover, even the most inward personal experience is situationally involved: no singular element of experience can be isolated, because we experience an active manifold, or as John Dewey shows, *seeing* is never just seeing, but *seeing that* something is a particular way; seeing something *as* something.⁷

Dick moves from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* to *The Human Condition* to underscore Arendt’s shrewdness about the pragmatic embeddedness of thought and experience. He quotes Arendt:

The problem of human nature, the Augustinian *quaestio mihi factus sum* (“a question I have become for myself”), seems unanswerable in both its individual psychological sense and its general philosophical sense. It is highly unlikely that we, who can know, determine, and define the natural essences of all things surrounding us, which we are not, should ever be able to do the same for ourselves—this would be like jumping over our own shadows. Moreover, nothing entitles us to assume that man has a nature or essence in the same sense as other things. In other words, if we have a nature or essence, then surely only a god could know and define it, and the first prerequisite would be that he be able to speak about a ‘who’ as though it were a ‘what.’⁸

Dick’s Arendt is philosophically pluralistic. In the way that she navigates political and intellectual alternatives, she is also patently willing to accept the existential absurdity of her position. Arendt didn’t try to jump over her shadow; she didn’t try to define a human essence or to sidestep the matter with “bald naturalism,” as Dick called it in the Romanell lecture. And this points to the other tone I hear in Dick’s intonation of the Yiddish *modus tollens*; the tone in which I took him to be speaking in the graduate class where I first heard him say it.

⁷ John Dewey, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1990), EW 5:96-110.

⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Enlarged edition: 2018) 9 - 10.

There is a kind of affable bravery, easily tipping into outright existential absurdity, that Dick celebrated when he talked about the modern condition as one simultaneously lacking any pre-given ground for knowledge and value, and yet resistant to relativism and cynicism. Dick grouped bald naturalisms among relativisms and cynicisms. He took bald naturalism to be a strain of scientism, promising to fully naturalize reason and thus “to *finally* clear up the mess called philosophy by sound scientific knowledge.”⁹ But the promise remains unfulfilled (predictably).

Dick’s Romanell lecture also serves as an extended book review of John McDowell’s *Mind and World*. McDowell, Dick says, is offering a new, “third way” of resisting the aporias of both bald naturalism and transcendent, non-cognitive fundamentalisms. Here, McDowell is doing for epistemology what Arendt does for political theory, and both endeavors are characteristically modern. According to Dick, McDowell sees us as oscillating:

...between two unsatisfactory and intolerable extremes. Either we are told that we have to simply give up on the idea that there is any rational constraint on our empirical thinking (there is only causal influence) or we are told that we will find such a constraint in what does not and cannot offer us a rational constraint i.e., a nonconceptual Given. So we oscillate back and forth between some version of the Myth of the Given and a coherentism that lacks any rational constraint or grounding.¹⁰

McDowell is offering “a way off the seesaw,” a “third way” that appropriates Kantian critical idealism but not bad idealism; Wilfrid Sellars’ notion of experience but not Richard Rorty’s “ironic bald naturalism.”

The Romanell lecture itself is a crest in twentieth century American philosophy, looking clearly back and judiciously forward; I’m not really giving it its due here. Instead, by highlighting Dick’s appreciation of McDowell’s book, I’m focusing on the argument—which Dick appreciated as a deeply Kantian argument—that intuitions, experience, and judgment are all of a piece conceptually. Intuitions and experiences can be subjected to judgments because they are not purely passive, but are intentional and situational. Embedded as they are in multilayered contexts (“seeing is

⁹ Bernstein, “Whatever Happened to Naturalism?” in *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, 58.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

always seeing *that...*”), even the most basic experiences are fixed with rational features.

Dick was making this point from his earliest study of Dewey and recognized it as it reemerged out of later 20th century philosophies across Pragmatic, Continental, and Anglo-American analytic approaches.¹¹ If experience and judgment are actively, necessarily interdependent, then the stark choice between naturalism and formalism must break down. But because of the human existential condition, our desire for a resolution to the problem of meaning, or for the verifiable source of our consciousness, never dims. It may be disavowed; it may be treated with avoidance, cowardice, or hollow assurances—but the desire for meaning endures with a genius for transformation.

Dick’s “if not this, then what else?” acknowledges the desire for meaning and our willingness to invest in possibilities to secure meaning. Dick wrote with nuance and wit about the productive tension in the *Either/Or* between an ultimate justification of human value and the decisive absence of such justification.¹² Even before that same tension allowed for his generous reading of McDowell’s “third way,” Dick gave voice to it as his “engaged fallibilistic pluralism” – a position as toughly late-modern as it is tenderly concerned with the human condition.¹³

Dick’s Yiddish *modus tollens*, intoned in the way I first heard it, is what his adored friend and colleague Agnes Heller called a “second order wager” or a “betting against the bet.”¹⁴ Where Pascal’s wager bets on God but allows for betting on God’s non-existence, one can also take a step back, *betting against the bet*. This second order wager acknowledges the sheer necessity of betting—where the wager is between meaning and meaninglessness—yet simultaneously commits to taking *necessary* responsibility for one’s own, otherwise *contingent* actions. For both Agnes and Dick, betting against the bet was a way of determining oneself to be particular ways, for

¹¹ See, for example, Bernstein, *John Dewey* (Washington Square Press, 1966) and *Pragmatic Naturalism: John Dewey’s Living Legacy* (New York: Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal, 2020).

¹² Bernstein, “Existential Choice: Heller’s *Either/Or*,” *Engaging Agnes Heller: A Critical Companion*, Ed. Katie Terezakis (Lanham, New York, London: Lexington Books, 2009) 87-100. The “*Either/Or*” of the title refers to Heller’s choice, but is also a reference to Kierkegaard. Dick is nodding to Agnes Heller’s love for Kierkegaard, and drawing from her reliance on the Kierkegaardian context of existential choice. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, eds. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

¹³ As he begins by saying here, Dick was already using this term in his 1988 APA Presidential Address: Richard J. Bernstein, “Epilogue: Engaged Fallibilistic Pluralism” in *Richard J. Bernstein and the Expansion of American Philosophy: Thinking the Plural*, eds. Megan Craig and Marcia Morgan (Lanham, New York, London: Lexington Books, 2017).

¹⁴ Agnes Heller, *A Philosophy of History in Fragments* (Oxford, Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993) 12-16.

example, determining oneself to be a good person. As an individual making this existential commitment, one chooses oneself under the star, as Agnes liked to say, of universality (to wit: 'it is not only generally possible but universally good to do this'). Yet when one bets against the bet, the star or universal remains but a projection: one commits with full awareness of the fact that the commitment is without guarantee of connection to any reality outside of one's decision. As such, the choice remains particular. The second order wager hovers between the necessity of betting and the impossibility of certifying any outcome.

To bet against the bet, though, is not merely to throw one's hands up ('if not this, then what else?'), but to distance oneself (by making-fun) from our shared urge to throw our hands up. To bet against the bet is to know, paraphrasing Kant, that, as a reasonable being, one will be perpetually drawn to questions one cannot resolve, including questions about the criteria we use to assess our most basic orders of experience.

Or, as Agnes put it:

We *know* that we are contingent, and it is because of this that our access to the Absolute is barred. We *know* that we are historical products and whatever we produce is of short-term relevance. We *know* we are complex ... all simple self-descriptions are lies. If we did not know what we know we would not be who we are. ... The consciousness of historical consciousness is the core of the spirit of our congregation; it is not its whole spirit. There is no 'knowledge' of the whole spirit, but we do perceive many aspects of it.¹⁵

Dick was familiar with Agnes's language of *betting against the bet*, but he preferred the specialized name *engaged fallibilistic pluralism* to refer to the position of the second-order wagerer.¹⁶ Because it "resists the dual temptations" of dismissing

¹⁵ Ibid., 198.

¹⁶ In the same spirit, the endeavor Dick calls, with Jürgen Habermas, *detranscendentalization* consigns itself to the necessary entanglement of subjects in our contingent lifeworlds. See Richard J. Bernstein, *The Pragmatic Turn* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), pp.170ff. Bernstein analyzes a number of Habermas's works in the chapter devoted to "Jürgen Habermas's Kantian Pragmatism." Here, the reference is to Habermas's *Truth and Justification*, trans. and ed. B. Fultner (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003), 88-9. For more on Bernstein and detranscendentalization, see my "The Philosophy of Action in John William Miller and Richard J. Bernstein," *Richard J. Bernstein and the Expansion of American Philosophy: Thinking the Plural*, 179-196.

others and of reinterpreting them in our own images, Dick argued that engaged fallibilistic pluralism is essential for cultivating a genuine democratic ethos, which today is “threatened in all sorts of invidious ways.”¹⁷

I hear Dick, playfully reciting “... it’s the Yiddish *modus tollens!*” as an invitation into engaged fallibilistic pluralism. If you get the joke, you get the invitation, because we all experience the temptation to settle, and we all keep being tempted, for as long as we have not settled yet. In the face of existential absurdity, endurance wavers, which is why we appreciate the empathy behind the joke—in fact this is the compassion animating what Agnes Heller identified as existential comedy altogether. As Agnes wrote, “Existential/absurd comedy confronts us with existence, with the human condition face to face, suddenly, directly ... [it] sharpen[s] our perception for a broader sense of the comic.”¹⁸

Allow me a brief intermission before the end. The Lydian Stone was a flat piece of basanite rock, akin to flint, that Iron Age people used to assess the quality of gold. Grazing gold across basanite volcanic stone, as in the way we use chalk on a chalkboard, produces a more or less yellow mark. The trained Lydian eye could probably assess the intensity of golden hue at first sight, but color charts for comparison existed as well. Allegedly, we take the term “touchstone” from the process, because the gold was touched to the stone—though “touch” was also a word in Middle-English meaning “test,” and it was the term in use during the fifteenth century when black quartz was used for the same purpose.

I insert this etymological reverie because of the way it asks us to imagine the actional, historical footing of the following term of choice. I would like to suggest that the Yiddish *modus tollens* is a kind of *touchstone*. But in so doing, I want to remember the Lydian stone, once magma, transformed through countless repeated actions into a common instrument of measurement. A touchstone allows us to differentiate and compare, and to organize spectrums ranking our comparisons. Against the spectrum it has generated, a touchstone allows us to determine quality, in terms of whatever element we are gauging.

This is something like the measuring and assessment McDowell has in mind, when he rejects the dualistic worldview “from sideways on”—and proposes instead the

¹⁷ Bernstein, “Epilogue: Engaged Fallibilistic Pluralism” in *Richard J. Bernstein and the Expansion of American Philosophy: Thinking the Plural*, p.226.

¹⁸ Agnes Heller, *Immortal Comedy: The Comic Phenomenon in Art, Literature, and Life* (Lanham, New York, London: Lexington Books, 2005) 94-96. See also Katie Terezakis “Existential Choice as Existential Comedy: Agnes Heller’s Wager,” *Critical Theories and the Budapest School: Politics, Culture, Modernity*, Eds. Jonathan Pickle and John Rundell (London and New York: Routledge, 2018) 217-238.

position Dick welcomes, a “third way” of understanding ourselves as “always already engaging in conceptual activity” and of understanding the world as integrated in the activity. Like the touchstone put to use by ancient Lydians, our touchstones have both histories and conceptual conditions. The rock called basanite might have remained unnoticed. Its potential to be an active touchstone in Lydian commerce might never be used, just as our more metaphorical touchstones might remain unnoticed. But once we have a touchstone and reflect on its use, we can plainly see both an object and the condition for assessing other objects. We have the grounds for evaluation, ideal and real.

Propositional logic, too, serves as a tool of measurement. If we are testing not for gold but for validity, it’s a tool we want. When Dick wrote about the Yiddish *modus tollens* serving to affirm one’s preferred credo, he played on the classical logical form to make fun of a tendency that is almost as common as it is invalid. But if we listen closer, Dick was also invoking a space we could share, wherein we are free of naive dependency on arguments from incredulity, yet might humor them from a distance. By laughing at the Yiddish *modus tollens*, we enjoy one shot of inoculation against the ongoing temptation to settle for prefabricated meaning. The Yiddish *modus tollens* is the touchstone; our mirth is its marking; and we, in whatever existential situation we happen to be, are the subjects tested.

I like to think that, for the several generations trained by Dick Bernstein and Agnes Heller (whether in person or through their texts) these ideas and images come as no surprise. We were trained, I think, to see philosophical gold as the hovering between naturalism and idealism, and between existential contingency and absolute justification. By doing philosophy in the ways they did, Dick and Agnes showed us how to spot the pretense in new scientisms and fundamentalisms, and where to look for their disavowed heritage. This is what we got instead of a system or an anti-system; it is our *what else*.

I would also like to think that those *in on* the Yiddish *modus tollens* joke are *in on* it not because it’s not potentially *on us*, but because we are still using it as a touchstone. The Yiddish *modus tollens*, in Dick’s banter, measures one’s resistance to the dual temptations of certitude and cynicism. That measuring conveys an ethos. Call the ethos *engaged fallibilistic pluralism* (with Dick), or *self-choice* as the *second-order wager* making necessity from contingency (with Agnes), or simply call it *critical philosophy*. Whatever you call it, we can prod again: *if not this, then what else?* These watchwords do not amount to a satisfying answer to the most fundamental of questions, but imagine Dick laughing with the possibility that they might, after all, be

the best we can do.

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