

## Preface and Acknowledgments

What makes a philosopher important? How can we know whether a philosopher will have a reputation that places him firmly within the lineage of figures who occupy a certain and inextinguishable place in the history of ideas? It is a sad but commonplace observation among jurists that by definition one does not become a recognized authority in legal theory until one has “gone the way of all flesh.” For it is up to the historians of a discipline ultimately to determine which of its practitioners has cemented his or her place as one of the beacons who light the way for those to come. One thing of which we can be sure, however, is that there are at present names on the lips of every philosopher that one day will rarely be spoken, and yet others less often mentioned that will echo down the generations.

Without prejudging the estimation of future historians, Fred Sommers is one philosopher who has a strong claim to falling into the second category. His work, so far spanning some fifty years, ranges primarily over logic, philosophy of language and metaphysics, reaching even into philosophy of mind and scientific methodology. From papers on category theory, through logic, truth theory, realism, and related subjects, Sommers has built up an impressive body of thought notable for its originality, rigor and cohesiveness. Is originality what a philosopher should be striving for? In the common acceptance of the term, certainly not. It is not the job of the philosopher to dream up utterly new ideas and theories or to spin shiny new systems out of virgin cloth. The best philosophy, of course, is always marked by creativity and new thinking—it cannot and should not be a sterile repetition of the past. Yet that new thinking must, if it is to have any claim on our rational allegiance, build upon the wisdom and tradition of the ages, on the finest fruit of mankind’s collective mental effort in

penetrating the deepest and most difficult problems of meaning and existence. The kind of originality that respects the best of the past is the originality which itself deserves the respect of present and future thinkers.

Fred Sommers is among a handful of the senior philosophers of the last half-century to understand the intellectual, even moral, imperative of building on the past rather than forsaking it for new fashions and radical dead-ends. And it is in his virtually single-handed revival of the traditional Aristotelian or syllogistic logic that this sensitivity to philosophical tradition is most manifest. The logic of Aristotle, despite revisions, corrections, and additions, remained largely intact as *the* logical system taught and researched by philosophers for more than two thousand years. Its overthrow and replacement by the logic of Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell is the closest philosophy has ever come to a Copernican-style revolution (*pace* Kant). One cannot underestimate the sharpness of the break with the past that the development of Fregean (or “modern predicate”) logic represented. If it is taught at all, Aristotelian syllogistic appears as no more than a curious footnote, perhaps a short chapter, in contemporary logic textbooks.

The opinion of most philosophers is that Aristotelian logic was good but is now as good as dead. Most of them, one suspects, would sooner see a revival of geocentrism than of syllogistic logic. Hence the vastness of the task of rehabilitating it, let alone renewing and refashioning it into a system with at least the elegance as well as the expressive and deductive power of modern predicate logic. This Sommers has done, but he could not have done it without building explicitly on the ideas not only of The Philosopher himself but of the medieval scholastic logicians, Leibniz (who himself worked hard and with ingenuity on refining and improving syllogistic logic) and the nineteenth-century algebraic logicians such as George Boole and Augustus De Morgan. His 1982 magnum opus *The Logic of Natural Language* sets out in detail the system TFL, which stands alternately (and happily) for both *term functor logic* and *traditional formal logic*. It is a dense and difficult work, and might seem quite baffling to readers not familiar with Sommers’s previous writings or appreciative of the nature of the task he set himself. And yet, like all great works, with careful and patient study it yields up its secrets and rewards constant rereading. If Sommers had not written anything else, his reputation would have been assured in the eyes of all but those with an unchallengeable hostility to

the very idea of his task. Will traditional formal logic as conceived by Sommers and developed by his followers, or syllogistic logic in general, ever break out of its current position as an enclave within contemporary logic and regain some of the ground lost in the previous century? Or is it doomed to remain an intellectual curiosity defended by a small number of largely traditionally minded thinkers? Again, this is for history to reflect upon, not for the current generation to predict. That Sommers has done the work of several philosophers in giving syllogistic logic its best chance of recovery since the end of the nineteenth century is beyond doubt. One cannot ask any more.

The present collection is a witness not only to the esteem in which the work of Fred Sommers—in all the areas in which he has written—is held by those who know it, but also to the influence of that work on the thinking of others. It is striking, however, in reflecting the extent of that influence on disciplines outside philosophy. For *The Old New Logic* brings together not just philosophers and logicians, but linguists, psychologists, and computer scientists who have each in their own way felt the force of Sommers's ideas. It is my profound hope that this fascinatingly diverse range of essays does its small part in bringing to the wider philosophical and intellectual community the work of the man to whom it is, in admiration, respectfully dedicated.

I would like to thank the graduate students to whom I have taught Sommers's logic in recent years, whose motivation and enthusiasm have in turn aided my own attempts better to understand his work. I am grateful also to George Englebretsen, whose unstinting support for this project has helped make it possible. He has, more than anyone, assisted myself and others in seeing the depth and importance of Fred Sommers's thought; may he continue to do so. I would like to record special thanks to everyone at the Social Philosophy and Policy Center, Bowling Green State University, Ohio, where I was a Visiting Scholar during the summer of 2003, for providing the immensely congenial conditions in which much of the editorial work was undertaken. I would also like to thank Bill Purdy for his generous technical help with last-minute preparation of the manuscript, and Judy Feldmann of The MIT Press for her expert copyediting. Finally, my gratitude goes to Tom Stone of The MIT Press for taking on this book and for his advice and encouragement.