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On the origins of the contemporary notion of propositional content: anti-psychologism in nineteenth-century psychology and G.E. Moore's early theory of judgment

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ABSTRACT

I argue that the familiar picture of the rise of analytic philosophy through the early work of G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell is incomplete and to some degree erroneous. Archival evidence suggests that a considerable influence on Moore, especially evident in his 1899 paper 'The nature of judgment,' comes from the literature in nineteenth-century empirical psychology rather than nineteenth-century neo-Hegelianism, as is widely believed. I argue that the conceptual influences of Moore's paper (conventionally thought to have introduced what is now known as analytic philosophy) are more likely to have had their source in the work of two of Moore's teachers, G. F. Stout and James Ward. What may be called an anti-psychologism about psychology characterizes the work of these and other psychologists of the period. I argue that the anti-psychologism that is the main aim of Moore's early theory of judgment is an adaptation of this notion, which is significantly dissimilar from the notion defended by Bradley, traditionally thought to have been a key influence on Moore.

1. Introduction

The story of the rise of analytic philosophy in the early writings of Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) and G. E. Moore (1873–1958) has long emphasized the dominance of neo-Hegelian metaphysics in late nineteenth-century philosophy at Cambridge and Oxford.[1] The conventional account of the shift in philosophical perspective and practice in the late 1890s often takes the form of Russell's own early description of a 'rebellion',[2] initiated by Moore and eagerly embraced by Russell himself. Both are held to have rejected the Idealist metaphysics they had absorbed from their teachers at Cambridge, and introduced concerns and methods that generally characterize analytic philosophy to this day.[3] Later reconstructions of this period in philosophy have, in their turn, included detailed discussion of the considerable influence of Frege's work in mathematical and philosophical logic.

In this paper, I will defend the position that the traditional picture of the rise of analytic philosophy is incomplete and, to some degree, erroneous. While Russell's idealist apprenticeship has been thoroughly and definitively examined by Griffin, and by Hylton,[4] there is no similarly detailed analysis of the development of G. E. Moore's views between 1894–1904.[5] A careful look at both published and unpublished material will show, I believe, that it is more

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[1] Key figures include F. H. Bradley (1846–1924), Bernard Bosanquet (1848–1923), and F. C. S. Schiller (1864–1937) at Oxford, and J. M. E. McTaggart (1866–1925) and Edward Caird (1835–1908) at Cambridge.

[2] See Russell (1938), p. viii; (1944), p. 12; (1959), pp. 11–12; (1975), p. 61.

[3] For example, Ayer (1971), p. 141.

[4] See Griffin (1991) and Hylton (1990).

[5] Moore's papers are preserved in Cambridge University Library; his 1897 and 1898 dissertation drafts (with examiner's comments and archival notes) are preserved in Trinity College Library. Material in the Cambridge University Library is cited as 'Add. 8330' or 'Add. 8875,' following library classmark convention. I am grateful to Jonathan Smith, senior archivist at Trinity College Library, for permission to consult Moore's dissertations (on permanent loan to Trinity College), and to the Syndics of the University Library at the University of Cambridge for permission to consult the Moore papers held there.

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likely that a significant influence on Moore's early writings, specifically his 1899 paper *The nature of judgment* ('NJ'),[6] comes from the literature in empirical psychology, and is less likely to have been derived from the idealist metaphysics of F. H. Bradley (1846–1924), as is widely believed.[7]

An exhaustive reconstruction of this period in Moore's philosophical evolution and its consequences for the history of philosophy goes beyond the scope of this paper, but a sketch of the broader picture will help to focus my discussion here. A complete analysis would require at least: (1) a critical analysis of Moore's unpublished manuscripts, letters and notebooks, of which the most important are the 1897 and 1898 versions of his dissertation, titled 'The metaphysical basis of ethics;' (2) a comparative account of the early work produced by both Russell and Moore, including unpublished student essays, notebooks, and papers read at meetings of the Apostles Society, the Sunday Essay Society, and the Moral Sciences Club, as well as published material; (3) a defense of the claim that Moore's early writings develop views that emerge more fully formed in his 1903 *Principia ethica*; and (4) an examination of the evidence, published and unpublished, for the intellectual influences on Moore during the period 1894–1904.

The discussion in this paper falls under (4). We know that Russell was a significant influence on Moore practically from Moore's arrival at Trinity but my focus here will be to reconstruct influences that have received scant attention. I will specifically center on the debate in the growing literature in late nineteenth century empirical psychology on the nature of judgment and the content of thought, discussed, in particular, by G. F. Stout (1860–1944) and James Ward (1843–1925), both of whom were Moore's teachers and with whom he worked closely. Stout and Ward were thoroughly familiar with the work of, among others, the psychologists Hermann Lotze (1817–1881), Franz Brentano (1838–1917), and Brentano's student Kasimierz Twardowski (1866–1938).[8] I believe that the evidence strongly suggests that a central thesis that characterizes the work of these figures—what we will call an anti-psychologism about the new science of psychology—is (1) among the key influences on Moore, (2) provides the context for his early work, and (3) helps to explain why its consequences for twentieth-century philosophy were so acute.[9]

The role of NJ in the history of philosophy at this period cannot be underestimated. By 1903 Russell had credited Moore with having put an end to the fortunes of Absolute Idealism with its appearance, and subsequent historical accounts of this period do not hesitate to describe the publication of NJ as a watershed moment.[10] But the archival evidence, in my view, provides evidence that a more nuanced understanding is needed, not only of the main line of argument in NJ but also of its impact on subsequent developments in philosophy. I have indicated above what I believe are the historical influences of the views Moore develops there. But I will also argue that the origin of the contemporary notion of propositional content is to be found in the distinction that Moore draws in NJ between the act of thought and the objects of thought and, in particular, the terms in which he draws it. The publication of NJ is indeed a genuinely significant moment in the history of analytic philosophy, I will show, in that it represents the definitive break between nineteenth-century metaphysics and mental science, and twentieth-century philosophy of mind.

2. Reconstructing the composition of 'The nature of judgment'

I will begin with Moore's published autobiography, which contains a clue to the influences that shaped his early views. Moore was elected to a six year Fellowship at Trinity in 1898 that came to an end in 1904. From 1904–1911 Moore did not have a permanent university position, but in 1911 he was offered a university lectureship in moral sciences at Cambridge. Moore explains that this lectureship was meant to provide lectures for the students who were preparing for the Part I moral sciences Tripos exams, and that he would be expected to lecture on either logic or psychology. Moore opted for psychology:

> The chief books that were recommended for the subject–such books as Ward's article in the *Encylopedia Britannica*, Stout's *Manual* and *Analytic Psychology*, and James' *Principles of Psychology*—seemed to me largely to consist of what was strictly philosophy; I had read all these books with a good deal of attention, and a good many of the subjects discussed in them were subjects on which I had thought a great deal and thought as hard as I could. It seemed to me, therefore, that I was already fairly competent to deal with a good part of the subject I should reasonably expect to cover ... (Schilpp, 1942, pp. 27–32)

Not one of Moore's published writings from the period 1904–1911[11] deal directly with the works of Ward, Stout, and James that he describes above (published, respectively, in 1886, 1899 and 1896, and 1890). Yet he tells us that he was familiar with this material, and had devoted hard and protracted thought to the issues raised there. I will make the case below that there is direct evidence that the line of argument in these works (even Stout, 1899) will have featured as an influence on Moore during 1897 and 1898 as he was writing his Fellowship dissertation, although it might possibly have been an element of his preparation for the Part II moral sciences Tripos throughout 1894–1896.

However there is indirect but suggestive evidence for this dating as well. Moore was given to making copiously detailed lists; and indeed ten such lists in Moore's hand survive, noting, for instance, 'People I See' (Add. 83301/1/2) and 'Play, exercise, and health' (Add. 83301/1/5).[12] There are, in addition, lists entitled 'Books and music' (Add. 8330 1/1/3) and 'Work' (Add. 8330 1/1/4) which date from 1901 and cover the period 1901–1902. The most comprehensive of these, however, is a 'Chronological table of my life,' which describes events from November 1873 to July 1901 (Add. 8330/1/1/1).

Two small notebooks detailing 'work' also survive. Each one contains lists, starting from both ends, titled in Moore's hand,

[6] Originally read at a meeting of the Aristotelian Society and subsequently published in *Mind*, 1899.

[7] Bell (1999) confirms my general view here concerning the role of nineteenth-century empirical psychology on the development of early analytic philosophy, but is unconvincing on the specifics of the influences on Moore's early views. Bell cites no evidence in support of his attribution of a wholesale unreconstructed Brentanianism to Moore, and does not appear to have consulted the archival material. Bell also appears to overlook other crucial evidence of the influences on Moore at this period.

[8] See Brentano (1995) and Twardowski (1997).

[9] A corollary effect of my argument, moreover, is that it puts pressure on part of Dummett's account of the origins of analytic philosophy. Contrary to his assertion (1993), p. 1, Russell and Moore did not spring from an entirely different philosophical milieu from the German and Austrian thinkers Dummett credits with originating analytic philosophy—and, in fact, were directly influenced by those very thinkers, as the evidence will show.

[10] See, for instance, Ryle (1970), who describes NJ as 'the *De Interpretatione* of early twentieth-century Cambridge logic' (Ambrose & Lazerowitz, 1970, p. 90). But it must be said that in the main, there has been little reconstructive explanation as to exactly how or why. This is likely due in part to the fact that Moore refused to reprint his early papers and dismissed them as the regrettable products of a philosophically unsophisticated mind. Moore's early papers did not appear in a collection until 1986, nearly thirty years after Moore's death. In his autobiography, however, though Moore brushes 'Freedom' (1898) aside as 'absolutely worthless', and does not even mention 'In what sense, if any, do past and future time exist?' (1897), he is far more forgiving about NJ (Schilpp, 1942, p. 21).

[11] Published volumes of work produced by Moore at this period are Moore (1922, 1953, 1986, 1993).

[12] The existing lists seem to have been complied from memory at about 1901–1902, continuing for several years.