

## Studies in English

---

Volume 4

Article 11

---

1963

### The New Philosophy and Its Style

Dwight Van de Vate Jr.  
*University of Mississippi*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://egrove.olemiss.edu/ms\\_studies\\_eng](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/ms_studies_eng)



Part of the [History of Philosophy Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Van de Vate, Dwight Jr. (1963) "The New Philosophy and Its Style," *Studies in English*: Vol. 4 , Article 11.  
Available at: [https://egrove.olemiss.edu/ms\\_studies\\_eng/vol4/iss1/11](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/ms_studies_eng/vol4/iss1/11)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in English* by an authorized editor of eGrove. For more information, please contact [egrove@olemiss.edu](mailto:egrove@olemiss.edu).

## THE NEW PHILOSOPHY AND ITS STYLE

by Dwight Van de Vate, Jr.

The absolute idealist movement in British philosophy began with the publication of Hutchinson Stirling's *The Secret of Hegel* in 1865. Bernard Bosanquet's Gifford Lectures of 1911-1912 were its last major production. By the death of F. H. Bradley in 1924 the effective force of the movement had ended. Bradley was its most profound and original member and his *Appearance and Reality* its most influential book. A sample passage:

And hence, for the present at least, we must believe that reality satisfies our whole being. Our main wants—for truth and life, and for beauty and goodness—must all find satisfaction. And we have seen that this consummation must somehow be experience, and be individual. Every element of the universe, sensation, feeling, thought, and will, must be included within one comprehensive sentience.<sup>1</sup>

The style is grave, heightened, formal, suiting the subject—"the Absolute." It is impossible to think of Bradley telling a joke. He does not preach or edify, he states the truth and the reasons for it. His "we" refers to all who undertake the serious business of reasoning about the ultimate nature of the universe and human life.

After the Great War, the fashion changed. Idealism—in its several senses—died at Ypres and the Somme. The generation that

---

<sup>1</sup>F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality* (2nd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 140.

marched off to the trenches with the unaffected high spirits and copy-book maxims of Lord Baden-Powell's England returned—the few who did return—without illusions. To them the academic grandiosity of absolute idealism was synthetic and dishonest. If indeed “the utility of metaphysics is to be found in the comfort it can give us,”<sup>2</sup> then metaphysics, they thought, must be irrelevant and cheap. It was time for a new philosophical fashion and for a new style of philosophical writing.

The leaders of the new fashion were Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore, and the Austrian, Ludwig Wittgenstein. No one has stated its basic theme better than Russell:

The kernel of the scientific outlook is a thing so simple, so obvious, so seemingly trivial, that the mention of it may almost excite derision. The kernel of the scientific outlook is the refusal to regard our own desires, tastes, and interests as affording a key to the understanding of the world.<sup>3</sup>

The hope of satisfaction to our more human desires—the hope of demonstrating that the world has this or that desirable ethical characteristic—is not one which, so far as I can see, a scientific philosophy can do anything whatever to satisfy.<sup>4</sup>

A technological war had occurred simultaneously with revolutionary advances in physical theory. The new philosophy therefore was founded on the conviction that it is the function of the scientist alone to discover the facts. The philosopher's concern is not for the facts themselves, but for the language in which they are stated. Scientists state the truth, philosophers analyze the meanings of words. Philosophy became “analytic.”

The new analytic philosophy was dominated between the wars by the symbolic logic movement which stemmed from Whitehead

<sup>2</sup>J. E. McTaggart, *Philosophical Studies*, p. 184, quoted in G. J. Warnock, *English Philosophy since 1900* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 5.

<sup>3</sup>Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1953), p. 46. The essay, “The Place of Science in a Liberal Education,” from which this passage is taken was first published in 1913.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 34. The essay “Mysticism and Logic,” from which this passage is taken was first published in 1914.

**Dwight Van de Vate, Jr.****85**

and Russell's *Principia Mathematica* of 1910-1913. This phase is called "Logical Positivism." The logical positivists aimed to eliminate metaphysics by devising symbolic calculi or artificial languages in which only scientifically meaningful propositions could be expressed. Driven from their hiding places in the imprecisions of ordinary language, metaphysical problems would thus be shown to be unreal "pseudo-problems." The program's most influential statement was Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* of 1922.

Early in the 1930's Wittgenstein rejected the logical positivists' attempts (including his own) to impose a single standard of precision on language. He now regarded ordinary languages such as English or German not as pre-scientific approximations to logical calculi, but as instruments of a suppleness and subtlety adequate to the multifarious tasks for which humans use them. One eliminates metaphysics, he now thought, not by escaping from ordinary language, but by using it correctly. The pseudo-problems of the metaphysician result from his misuses of ordinary idiom, from his failure to see the jobs words do. Hence the philosopher's function is therapeutic: he shows those troubled by metaphysical perplexities how their (pseudo-) problems come from using words in illegitimate ways. It is not necessary to invent artificial languages in which metaphysical propositions cannot be expressed. They cannot be expressed grammatically even in ordinary language.

The impact of Wittgenstein's new program of "ordinary language analysis" on the British philosophical public was gradual, but pervasive. He lectured from 1930 to 1947 at Cambridge; while he published almost nothing, his lectures were circulated in manuscript. By the posthumous publication in 1953 of the definitive statement of his later philosophy, the *Philosophical Investigations*, his influence had come to dominate philosophy in Great Britain. There are signs that it may soon dominate philosophy in the United States as well.

The style of the new philosophy has been influenced more by G. E. Moore than by Wittgenstein, who wrote in German. Moore is a curiously "adverbial" figure: what he had to say was of less importance than the painstaking effort at clarity and logical rigor with which he said it. He was concerned to defend "common sense"—the plain man's belief that there is an external world, that

he has a body, that there are other people, etc.—against what he conceived to be the slipshod and precipitate arguments of the absolute idealists. But common sense is where philosophy begins, not where it ends. Moore's position was negative: intentionally, he had nothing new to say. What was new was the ruthless sincerity and indefatigability of his effort to say exactly what he meant.

In this regard, one may single out three features of Moore's style: his addiction to italicization, his fondness for expostulatory phrases, and his use of the first-person-singular form of organization. In the *Principia Ethica* (1903), a book of two hundred and thirty-one pages, there are eighteen pages where no italicized word occurs. This paragraph from the "Refutation of Idealism" illustrates Moore's use of italics:

Now I think I am not mistaken in asserting that the reason why Idealists suppose that everything which *is* must be an inseparable aspect of some experience, is that they suppose some things, at least, to be inseparable aspects of *their* experience. And there is certainly nothing which they are so firmly convinced to be an inseparable aspect of their experience as what they call the *content* of their ideas and sensations. If, therefore, *this* turns out in every case, whether it be also the content or not, to be at least *not* an inseparable aspect of the experience of it, it will be readily admitted that nothing else which *we* experience ever is such an inseparable aspect. But if we never experience anything but what is *not* an inseparable aspect of *that* experience, how can we infer that anything whatever, let alone *everything*, is an inseparable aspect of *any* experience? How utterly unfounded is the assumption that "*esse* is *percipi*" appears in the clearest light.<sup>5</sup>

The italics emphasize like blows of a hammer.

---

<sup>5</sup>C. E. Moore, "The Refutation of Idealism," in W. Barrett and H. D. Aiken, *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 559.

The tone of the paragraph is expostulatory: "there is certainly nothing of which they are so firmly convinced . . .," "nothing else which we experience ever is . . .," "how can we infer that anything whatever, let alone everything . . .," "how utterly unfounded . . . ." In each case, the emphasis is stronger than a simple statement of fact would require. Here are the first and last sentences of the same essay:

Modern Idealism, if it asserts any general conclusion about the universe at all, asserts that it is *spiritual*.<sup>6</sup>

All other suppositions—the Agnostic's, that something, at all events, does exist, as much as the Idealist's, that spirit does—are, if we have no reason for believing in matter, as baseless as the grossest superstitions.<sup>7</sup>

The effect is intense indignation. One imagines Moore shaking his head and striking the air with his forefinger.

The object of this impassioned concern in the "Refutation of Idealism" was, on Moore's own insistence, nothing much:

The subject of this paper is, therefore, quite uninteresting. Even if I prove my point, I shall have proved nothing about the Universe in general. . . . I shall only try to arrive at the truth about a matter, which is in itself quite trivial and insignificant, and from which, so far as I can see and certainly so far as I shall say, no conclusions can be drawn about any of the subjects about which we most want to know . . . . [From my argument] it will indeed follow that all the most striking results of philosophy . . . have, for all that has hitherto been urged in their favour, no more foundation than the supposition that a chimera lives in the moon. It will follow that, unless new reasons never hitherto urged can be found, all the most important philosophic doctrines have as little claim to assent as the most superstitious beliefs of the lowest savages.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 543.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 561.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 545-546.

Here the reaction to Bradley and the Idealists is total. If they rescued the Good, the True, and the Beautiful—the Things that Matter—with a grubby unconcern for their own objectivity, Moore, on the contrary, will practise a pure logical punctiliousness, an impeccable argumentative rigor.

However, the plain man's beliefs are not the conclusion of a constructive argument, but the premiss of a destructive one. One does not arrive at Common Sense, one starts from it. Hence Moore's logical conscientiousness had only a negative function. Common Sense will stolidly persist in the plain man's consciousness whether defended or not. Accordingly—and the conclusion is not meant pejoratively — Moore purchased rigor at the price of relevancy, just as he regarded the Idealists as doing the reverse. The practice of philosophy had an effect on Moore's intellectual conscience, but not on his, or anyone's, substantive beliefs. So a recent and sympathetic commentator can write that "among the immediately operative factors contributing to the decay of Absolute Idealism, special notice should be paid to the *character* of Moore."<sup>9</sup>

It was character—in the intellectual sense—that Moore displayed in his writings. He had not Russell's limpid clarity or hilariously malicious wit. Character is personal. Arguing was an activity Moore personally undertook. His essays do not organize themselves, he organizes them, he "proposes to dispute," he "wishes to show," he will "prove his point." This first-person organization is sometimes belligerent:

I begin, then, with my list of truisms, every one of which (in my own opinion) I *know*, with certainty, to be true.<sup>10</sup>

Nothing dictated Moore's defence of Common Sense but his personal intellectual affront at the Idealists' reasons for rejecting it. Common Sense was placidly indifferent to both. Moore argued on his own initiative. Hence the first-person manner of organization, and hence also the reiterated avowals: "I think," "I mean," "I believe," "in my opinion." Assaulting an orthodoxy in the name of

<sup>9</sup>Warnock, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup>G. E. Moore, "A Defence of Common Sense," in Barrett and Aiken, *op. cit.*, p. 562.

a position it scorned as banal, that he himself thought banal, Moore had constantly to affirm his sincerity. It was his keenest weapon.

Yesterday's iconoclasm becomes today's orthodoxy. This metamorphosis has happened to Wittgenstein and Moore. The British philosophical community is far more intimate and monochromatic than the American: it nourishes one fashion at a time. If the doctrines of the new orthodoxy, ordinary language analysis, are Wittgenstein's, the style descends from Moore—the frequent italicization, the first-person-singular organization. Moore's indignant earnestness, however, has been replaced by a lightness of tone that becomes on occasion even playful:

People used to say this kind of thing prior to Russell, and it had its merits. But it also had its defects, because it led people to ask peculiar questions, like whether Minerva and the class of voters could all get in through the door at the same time.<sup>11</sup>

Having thus put myself way out on a limb, I may expect the objection: "This is sheer sophistry: what the sponsor said is true if every doctor agrees that Stopsneeze helps, otherwise it is false."<sup>12</sup>

Suppose we never break through the "is-ought" barrier, what then? Let us speculate. Then we can never justify ethics and morality. Well, perhaps this would only be true for naturalists . . .<sup>13</sup>

These examples are chosen as extreme. Most philosophical prose, now as in Bradley's day, is formal. Today, however, even the most formal writing is not heightened, but logical, unemotional. Illustrations are chosen from everyday life:

Thus suppose that I am riding across the western plains and notice intermittent clouds of

<sup>11</sup>J. Jarvis, "Notes on Strawson's Logic," *Mind*, LXX, no. 277 (January, 1961), 65.

<sup>12</sup>Z. Vendler, "Each and Every, Any and All," *Mind*, LXXI, no. 282 (April, 1962), 155.

<sup>13</sup>M. Zimmerman, "The 'Is-Ought': An Unnecessary Dualism," *Mind*, LXXI, no. 281 (January, 1962), 53.



smoke rising from a hill to the right. . . . I am frightened of the Indians of whose presence, and interest, the smoke is a sign.<sup>14</sup>

They are phrases like "the time at which the letter was posted," or "the amount of arsenic he put in her tea," which are convertible into indirect questions. . . .<sup>15</sup>

If I buy a red hat, looking at it carefully in daylight, it will be red when I get home.<sup>16</sup>

There are occasional illustrations from physics, and from behavioral psychology, to which a certain affinity is felt. (*Mind*, the leading British journal, encourages it.) The philosophy of mathematics, a legacy of Logical Positivism, is rapidly being abandoned, as the symbolic logicians themselves move into mathematics. The use of illustrations from history or literature is sparing to the point of exclusion. Contemporary political conflicts are ignored, in sharp contrast with Continental philosophy, which is dominated by them. The total absence of appeals, tacit or explicit, to any human interest but the urge for refined logical precision gives to this writing an air of drab severity, lightened here and there by strained whimsy.

Behind the sense of exactness imparted by italicization and similar devices (quotation marks, numbered propositions), behind the resolutely "ordinary" illustrations, stands the unexpressed supposition that the price of precision is disengagement. The world enters into ordinary language analysis only through ordinary language. The philosopher deals with the facts at second remove: with the language of ethics, not ethics, the language of religion, not religion, etc. He is detached, unemotional, save about language itself; there he can be affectionate:

It is crucial to an understanding of morality that

---

<sup>14</sup>J. Gosling, "Mental Causes and Fear," *Mind*, LXXI, no. 283 (July, 1962), 291-292.

<sup>15</sup>D. Gallopp, "On Being Determined," *Mind*, LXXI, no. 282 (April, 1962), 193.

<sup>16</sup>E. H. Wolgast, "Qualities and Illusions," *Mind*, LXXI, no. 284 (October, 1962), 470.

this truth about the uses of our language be understood.<sup>17</sup>

Ordinary language, well used, is extremely flexible and precise; but the difference between its flexibility and precision and that of scientific language comes out in the fact that we never use the word 'nuance' in the latter.<sup>18</sup>

Yet, curiously, his treatment of ordinary language is not scientific; he does not count the frequency of occurrence of words or compare the grammars of different languages, and linguistic scientists have ignored him.

The effect of this abstractness on style is to be seen in the first-person-singular form of organization. Wittgenstein found it fruitful to think of languages as games. This metaphor, with its suggestion of detachment, has become a standard idiom. The philosopher approaches his subject-matter unsolicited. No public necessity of science or politics or religion compels him to philosophize. The commitments of a spokesman would impair his objectivity. His writings are organized as a display not of the intelligibility of his topic, but of his own skill.

The philosophy of an era lives and maintains itself among shifting allegiances and animosities with science, religion, politics, and its own philosophical predecessors. This historical involvement creates doctrine, and doctrine will find a congenial style. The Logical Positivism to which ordinary language analysis is a reaction was itself a reaction to the First World War. It aimed to be scientific: it scorned politics as propaganda, religion as dishonesty, morality as emotion. Now, in the decline of empire, the scientific ideal has been abandoned; philosophy is a twice-attenuated ghost. Style reflects this attenuation. Conceivably, the very gracelessness of today's philosophical writing may accelerate a doctrinal reaction. If accuracy need not be flat and laborious, if eloquence is authentic precision, then the ordinary language analysts may come in time to the recognition that their style implicitly traduces their own professed love, language, and reflects the fact that they have very little to say.

<sup>17</sup>K. Nielsen, "Some Remarks on the Independence of Morality from Religion," *Mind*, LXX, no. 278 (April, 1961), 186.

<sup>18</sup>P. H. Nowell-Smith, *Ethics* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1954), p. 97.