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INTERPRETATIONS OF BOOLE'S ALLEGED PSYCHOLOGISM

*Abstract*

The aim of this paper is to dispute the thesis according to which Boole is a psychologistic philosopher. That thesis has a long tradition and might have some *prima facie* reasons because Boole thinks it is possible (a) to deduce logical laws from the laws of the operations of the human mind and (b) to discover them by means of consciousness. But I claim that (a) and (b) are not good enough reasons to argue for his psychologism. Concerning (a) it is worth noting that (i) he tries to deduce the laws of logic from a consideration only of those mental operations which are implied in the strict use of language as an instrument of correct reasoning; (ii) this derivation is considered methodologically necessary but not sufficient; (iii) in fact Boole asks that the logical laws be derived first of all from the constitution of language, confirmed then by the study of the operations of the human mind, and proved further to be applicable to the analysis of all systems of equations whatever, by which propositions, or combination of them, can be represented. Concerning (b), I claim that (i) Boole never justifies the logical laws by means of introspection or consciousness, even when it could seem “natural”, e.g. in the case (a); (ii) if it is sufficient to appeal to introspection for being psychologist, then a great part of the modern philosophy has to be so; (iii) Boole thinks that consciousness could be a “logical” instrument only because he attributes some psychological reality to the logical laws; (iv) even Frege (the anti-psychologistic and anti-introspectionistic) accepted the psychological reality thesis; (v) accepting that thesis does not imply at all to claim that the logical truths are true because of the ordinary way we think; (vi) if accepting that thesis is a sign of psychologism, then Frege is psychologistic as well as Boole (pace Sober [1978]). But one of the most popular definitions of logical psychologism, originally due, as far as I know, to Carnap [1950] and used among the others by Haack [1978] classifies Boole as psychologistic and Frege as anti-psychologistic. That definition distinguishes between strong (primitive) psychologism, weak (qualified or normative) psychologism and anti-psychologism. Is Boole really psychologistic? Yes, he is just as Frege is. My claim is based on the following considerations: (1) Boole cannot be said to be a primitive or strong psychologistic philosopher because he does not confuse the laws of thought with the laws of ordinary thinking, or the laws of logic with the laws of ordinary reasoning. This is confirmed by the fact (among the others) that he introduces methods in his algebra of logic which have no correspondent in ordinary reasoning; (2) he can be

said to be a qualified or weak psychologistic philosopher because he views logic as normative; (3) if he is so, the same must be claimed of Frege because he also assigns to logic a prescriptive function, *pace* Haack.

Frege never accused Boole of psychologism. Why? Frege had so many problems to show the superiority of his logic in respect to the Boolean one that he would surely have criticized Boole of confusing logic with psychology if he had had any reason to do so. But he had no reasons. In fact, Boole not only separates the laws of thought from the laws of ordinary thinking and views the laws of thought as prescriptive in respect to the laws of ordinary thinking. He also (1) does not rely on genetic explanations regarding the logical concepts; (2) does not identify the logical contents with mental ones; (3) denies that the logical laws are inductive generalizations; (4) asserts that they are necessary, not contingent; (5) offers an objective justification of those laws; (6) thinks we can conceive logical laws which are different from the present ones. Frege could accuse Boole of conventionalism because of (6), but not of psychologism because (1)-(5) show he keeps logic separated from psychology. The absence of a real Fregean reason for viewing Boole as psychologistic is also due to the fact that Boole's interest for the psychological questions is embedded in a philosophy which is cognitively anti-psychologistic entailing the explanatory priority of the logical theory to the psychological theory. A similar awareness for the relationship between logic and psychology is present in Frege (see Cussins [1987] and Moravcsik [1981]). The conclusion which I think is right to draw from the above considerations is that if we like to call Boole psychologistic, we must be prepared to say the same of Frege. Boole cannot be psychologistic, at least according to Frege. He can be called a-psychologistic. This does not mean that he could not be judged psychologistic at all. He could be if (e.g.) Frege was wrong about Boole or if Frege himself was psychologistic.