

Pro-Attitude: Historical Background

David Conan Wolfsoord

Introduction

"Pro-attitude" is a recent term of philosophical art.¹ It first occurs among British philosophers of the 1930s and 40s, specifically in the context of semantic interpretation "good," then more broadly with respect to other normative and evaluative terms and correlative metaphysical kinds. With Donald Davidson's 1963 "Actions, Reasons, and Causes," "pro-attitude" entered the nascent analytic literature in the philosophy of action. From the later 1960s, "pro-attitude" appears in other areas of philosophical psychology such as the interpretation of pleasure.²

My aim here is to explain how the term "pro-attitude" entered philosophical discourse and to assess its legitimacy. The discussion divides into two parts. Part 1: Historical Background begins by introducing the context in which "pro-attitude" was originally employed. I then remark on the meanings of "attitude" and "pro." Finally, I discuss the motivations for the introduction of the term "pro-attitude." This part of the discussion concludes by showing that these motivations were misguided.

With the original grounds for introducing the term "pro-attitude" undermined, the task of Part 2: Critical Reconstruction remains to consider whether there is nonetheless a genuine psychological kind pro-attitude. This discussion begins with a sample of views – drawn from the original users of the term as well as select subsequent users – of both the nature of the kind pro-attitude and the various sub-kinds that have been subsumed within it. The aim here is to motivate and frame the ensuing critical reconstruction.

The critical reconstruction proper then begins with methodological remarks on the nature of psychological kinds. Indebted to ideas from F. C. Keil, Richard Boyd, and Paul Griffiths, I distinguish natural from merely nominal psychological kinds. Nominal psychological kinds are denoted by unambiguous (in contrast to polysemous or even homonymous), common (as opposed to proper or singular), logically consistent psychological terms.³ But, analogously to

¹ Some authors use the unhyphenated form "pro attitude," which I use when quoting from them. Otherwise, I use the hyphenated form.

² E.g. cp. David L. Perry, *The Concept of Pleasure*, Mouton & Co., 1967, 204-14. Most notably, according to Fitting Attitude theories of value, something has value insofar as it is fitting to have a certain pro-attitude toward it E.g. cp. Francesco Orsi, *Value Theory*, Bloomsbury, 2015; R. Rowland, *The Normative and the Evaluative: The Buck-Passing Account of Value*, Oxford University Press, 2019. [You can and should be more careful here, since you have the data from JStor! 1935-1940 (?); 1941-50 (12 distinct works: NB: this is not the same as 12 instances); 1951-60 (38??), 1961-70 (44??), 1971-80 (61??)]

³ E.g., arguably Lewis's "besire" is a logically inconsistent psychological term.

"superlunary body," a nominal psychological kind term may denote no natural kind at all, or, analogously to "jade," its extension may comprise two or more distinct natural kinds. According to Boyd's view, a natural kind is defined by a homeostatic property cluster. ...

I suggest that in fact "pro-attitude" does not even denote a nominal kind. This is because "pro-attitude" is ambiguous. Precisely, there are two senses in which attitudes are pro. Each of these two senses denotes a distinct nominal psychological kind, which I call a "conative" and an "evaluative" state, respectively. I consider wanting as a paradigm of the former, and liking a paradigm of the latter. The remainder of the discussion considers several salient additional examples of conative and evaluative states and their relations, as well as several psychological kinds, such as hope, that have been considered pro-attitudes, but which cannot be subsumed under either conative or evaluative kinds.