

Scott Soames, Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century: Volume 1: The Dawn of Analysis

Princeton University Press, 2003

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Received: ■ / Accepted: 27 March 2006
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The jacket of this first volume of the two volume work tells us that this is a history of analytic philosophy from 1900 to mid-century. Accordingly, we can properly evaluate it under three heads: (1) the care and accuracy of the scholarship; (2) the light it throws on the relationships among the various activities it describes; and (3) the quality of the philosophical argumentation. Evaluated under the third, the book deserves high praise. It provides serious philosophy: arguments are carefully set out and taken to pieces, objections and possible responses are developed in an orderly way. Most readers will learn something of philosophical value, and even on the issues about which they disagree with Soames, they will find him a worthy and helpful opponent. In this respect the text provides a model to which students should aspire. Every page demonstrates one way in which philosophy can be done excellently, as will be no surprise to those familiar with Soames's other work.

Evaluated under the other two heads, however, the book in my judgement falls short. Not only are there historical inaccuracies, the approach to reading, evaluating and interpreting texts is one I find uncongenial; and the attempt to impose some kind of overall developmental themes on the material under discussion strikes me as unsuccessful.

Soames's attitude to the task of interpreting texts is stated on the first page: "the philosophy done in this period is still close enough to speak to us in terms we can understand without a great deal of interpretation" (xi). If time alone obscures, the contemporaries of Aristotle or Kant should have faced negligible interpretative problems. Soames almost never evinces any interpretive doubts¹, nor does he mention that there is a huge body of conflicting interpretive work relating to the

¹ An exception occurs in connection with the *Tractatus* 5.542: "the text is open to interpretation" (242).

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	Journal : PHIL	Dispatch : 2-5-2006	Pages : 7
	Article No. : 0015	☐ LE ☐ CP	☐ TYPESET ☐ DISK

period and its authors. I would wish a student coming to these texts to have a lively sense of the fact that they are hard to understand, and that they have been interpreted in several different ways. At a minimum, the lists of “additional recommended reading” at the end of each section should have pointed to some serious historical commentators. The suggestions are always extremely modest. After 100 pages of discussion of Russell, encompassing the theory of descriptions, logicism, the construction of the material world and logical atomism, the list contains just two items, articles by Nathan Salmon (1987, 1998).²

To provide a story line for the philosophical developments under review, and so locate the various activities described, Soames picks two features. One is that the period reflects the impact of the opinion that our commonsensical or intuitive judgments have to be respected, as constraints on philosophical theorizing; the other is that there was a progressive understanding of the concepts philosophers use as tools: *analytic*, *true by definition*, *apriori*, and so on. Can these threads adequately indicate the overall shape of philosophical development in the period? One alternative would be to see it as in part a struggle between Moorean common sense and Russellian contempt for common sense; the logical positivists and, later, Quine taking up the more radical and Russellian approach and the so-called “Oxford philosophers”, including Ross and Strawson, adopting a more conservative and Moorean one. Soames does not try to provide or discuss such overall pictures. He says (xvi) that the way to give “illuminating overviews of large areas of philosophical investigation [is] by working from the ground up—moving from the trees to the forest, rather than the other way around”. The volume leaves one firmly at the level of the trees, without offering any opinion on whether, as just entertained, conflicting approaches to philosophy helped to generate the character of the subject in the period, or whether we should see it as steady progress within a single (commonsensical?) paradigm, or in some quite other way.

Some of the philosophers in the period certainly gave importance, as part of a self-conscious methodology, to the deliverances of common sense; Moore and Ross are the best examples. Many did not. Consider Russell’s claim that “the point of philosophy is to start with something so simple as not to seem worth stating, and to end with something so paradoxical that no one will believe it” (PLA, 1918–9: 193). Or the view expressed in a semi-popular article (“Mind and matter”):

“...I regret to say that all too many professors of philosophy consider it their duty to be sycophants of common sense, and thus, doubtless unintentionally, to bow down in homage before the savage superstitions of cannibals: (1925: 143).

Although the tone is playful, the attitude is persistent. Late in life he reflected as follows:

I ... am persuaded that common speech is full of vagueness and inaccuracy, and that any attempt to be precise requires modification of common speech both as regards vocabulary and as regards syntax. (Russell, 1959: 387)

² The only book Soames mentions on any of the authors he discusses is Fogelin’s *Wittgenstein*. (1976/1987) Does he think that undergraduates should not know about the many good books on the other authors (for example Peter Hylton on Russell (1990), Thomas Baldwin on Moore (1990), Christopher Hookway on Quine (1988))? Or other histories of the period, like Stroll’s (2000)?

We can infer that common sense, having only the vocabulary and syntax of common speech, cannot contain views that are other than vague and inaccurate, views which are, presumably, unfit for philosophical homage.

Soames comes close to acknowledging that Russell, and even Moore, do not always respect common sense views. He describes two strategies for dealing with the paradox of analysis, where this is taken to be the following dilemma:

“either one’s analysis won’t go beyond what one is analyzing, in which case one’s philosophical worries won’t go away; or one’s analysis will show how one might resolve one’s philosophical worries, but only by *replacing* that which one was analyzing by something new” (163).

One strategy (#2) “is to argue that *strictly speaking* the ordinary person doesn’t, and never did, know” the truth of what was said by the propositions being analyzed (164). Presumably the strategy was worth mentioning only because it had some influence, even if in a confused way. Soames says that “Often, adherents of the Moore-Russell method of analysis were not really clear about which, if either, of these alternatives they wanted to adopt”.³ If they were clear that they respected common sense, we would need an explanation of why they were not clear that they should not accept strategy #2.

Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* is clearly a poor candidate for a work closely informed by commonsensical intuitions, as Soames would be the first to agree, and Quine’s work is firmly in the Russellian tradition. Soames takes himself to be on a better wicket with the logical positivists, suggesting that they gave up putative criteria for empirical significance if these delivered results inconsistent with common sense:

“Even though the positivists had an initially attractive and somewhat plausible theory about what empirical meaning must be, the fact that different formulations of the theory repeatedly conflicted with our most confident pre-theoretic judgments about which sentences are meaningful, and which are not, was, quite correctly, taken to show that the philosophical theory of meaning was wrong” (298).

Yet, as Soames goes on to say, they were “consciously *reformist* in motivation” (299). They would have been delighted if a viable theory of significance delivered the result that some commonsense judgments of meaningfulness were mistaken, for example the judgement that sentences about God are meaningful. Soames does not cite an example of a common sense judgement of meaningfulness which did make, or would have made, a logical positivist rethink the criterion. Rather, the history of the discussion of various positivistic formulations of a criterion is a history of trivialization arguments, and responses to them: arguments designed to show that a criterion which allows any non-observation sentences to count as empirically significant will allow any arbitrary sentence so to count, with the result that the criterion fails in its avowed attempt to make a revisionist distinction between two (non-empty) categories. The criterion was dogged by structural problems, not by specific alleged counterexamples.

Soames’s attitude to history is revealed in a remark which closes the discussion of the criterion of significance:

³ The notion of analysis is largely taken for granted throughout the book, and no specific account is given of a special “Moore-Russell method”. The idea of analysis might have served as a unifying theme, as the title of the work, and of this volume, suggest.

“A few attempts were made to reformulate Ayer’s criterion to save it from objections like the ones just considered. However, none proved successful.” (291)

The student is not told where to look for these few attempts, and the judgement that none proved successful seems unduly dismissive of relatively recent discussions (Lewis, 1988; Wright, 1986, 1989; Yi, 2001; cf. Justus forthcoming). Soames does not say much about what the point of the criterion was, and whether it is still of interest. A naïve reader might reflect that the positivists’ central aim was to demarcate the category of sentences open to empirical confirmation or disconfirmation, and this would appear a legitimate aim, and one which it would be surprising to learn was in principle unattainable, regardless of whether or not the sentences outside the category (or at least the non-analytic outsiders) are labeled meaningless.

As would be expected in a book of this kind, some of Soames’s interpretations of the texts he discusses are disputable. For the most part, these are the sorts of disagreements that are normal and proper: although Soames makes little of it, reasonable interpreters often disagree, even about fairly recent texts. But in the case of one author, Russell, we have something of a different order. Soames quite clearly and indisputably misreports Russell’s views, and must be aware that he is doing so.

1. Russell’s logic is presented as if it were first-order classical logic plus a primitive symbol for membership; the higher-order quantification, which allows him to introduce both “=” and “ ε ” as a defined symbols, is not mentioned. This leads to misleading remarks about logic (for example, it is said on p. 229 that “There is a sound, complete, effective positive test for logical truth in standard Russellian systems”).
2. Russell’s logicism is presented as involving a simple theory of types, despite the fact that Russell explicitly rejected any such theory; no mention is made of the ramified theory of types, or of Russell’s argument that a single hierarchy was needed to deal with both class-theoretic and liar-type paradoxes. Soames does indeed say that he is providing a “simplified sketch” (152) and that we can “ignore most of the complications” (154). We can do this only if we do not mind remaining ignorant of the history of the period, and Soames makes it plain that he does not mind. For example, at one point he says that he wants to address “a composite, hypothetical philosopher—the classical logicist—rather than the views of any one person” (135). Quite so; and quite proper, in a book that does not aspire to tell us the true story, and is happy to ignore the often quirky, inconstant and awkward details of the views real philosophers have held.
3. Russell is said to have aimed to reduce numbers to classes (Soames says, slightly anachronistically, sets); his no-class theory of classes is not mentioned. Soames’s misleading summary is: “The reduction of arithmetic to logic was seen as indicating that one doesn’t need to posit the existence of any platonic, mathematical objects over and above sets” (165).
4. Russell, at approximately the time of *Principia Mathematica*, is said to have believed that conjunctive sentences express propositions with the conjunction relation as a constituent (105). The truth emerges later: according to Russell “‘&’ doesn’t stand for anything in the world” (187).
5. He includes minds among the atomic elements of reality in Russell’s atomism, with no mention of Russell’s many hesitant discussions of neutral monism.



6. He includes counterfactual conditionals among the irreducible facts in Russell's atomism (though with some apologies, as discussed below).
7. He claims that Russell's position in "Our knowledge of the external world" is that "physical objects are logical constructions out of sense data" (168). Russell made no such claim: rather, he said that material objects are logical constructions out of perspectives, and these, unlike sense data, may exist unperceived.

Since Soames must be no less aware than me that he has distorted Russell's views, it is hard to know what to make of these inaccuracies. There is a different book that he could have written, and which I describe in my closing paragraph, to which this lack of concern with historical accuracy would have been entirely appropriate, but it is inappropriate in a book announcing itself as history.

Soames qualifies the penultimate claim on my list, about counterfactual conditionals (6), and offers a brief defense of the last claim (about the supposed reduction to sense data, (7)).

"The other intensional sentences needed in Russell's ideal language are counterfactual conditionals ... I say this despite the fact that he doesn't mention counterfactual sentences or facts in *The Philosophy of Logical Atomism*. ... I have included them ... for the simple reason that I don't see how it would [be] possible for him to maintain his doctrine that physical objects are logical constructions out of sense data without them." (191–2).

Russell does not use or mention counterfactual conditionals as part of the construction he offers in "Our Knowledge of the External World".⁴ He says:

"a 'private world' is a perceived 'perspective' but there may be any number of unperceived perspectives" (1914b: 95).

His language in "The relation of sense-data to physics", where he presents much the same view, is clearer (this article is the preferred text for a discussion of Russell's construction at this period):

"I shall give the name *sensibilia* to those objects which have the same meta-physical and physical status as sense-data without necessarily being data to any mind. Thus the relation of a *sensibile* to a sense-datum is like that of a man to a husband: a man becomes a husband by entering into the relation of marriage, and similarly a *sensibile* becomes a sense-datum by entering into the relation of acquaintance." (1914a: 110)

Soames suggests that the fact that a sensible or perspective could be sensed means that the analysis must use counterfactuals:

"[Russell] speaks of a system of private perspectives, or points of view. Each such perspective consists of a set of appearances, or sense data—essentially the appearances an observer *would* experience if he occupied that perspective. (Note the counterfactual location. [sic]) Material objects are then said to be *logical constructions* out of certain similar, or related, appearances (sense data) given in

⁴ Soames quotes Russell as having used a modal locution on p. 88 of OKEW (1914b), but as this precedes Russell's provision of the logical construction (which begins on p. 94 with the words "We will now make a new start, adopting a different method") the relevance of this is unclear.

different perspectives. For our purposes, the details of this construction are not important.” (171)

A man *would* be a husband if he were to marry (note the counterfactual locution); we should not infer that a theory which quantifies over men, married and unmarried, thereby contains counterfactuals. Russell is explicit that the analogy is supposed to show that a sensible can exist unperceived just as a man can fail to marry, so something modal is at stake; but again, that does not show that the construction itself will contain counterfactuals.

There is a related issue about what resources it is appropriate to allow Russell in explaining his basic notions. He says that a sense-datum “is such a part of the whole [given in sense at one time] as might be singled out by attention” (1914a). While this is consistent with the ontological base of his construction containing none but actual objects (sensed or unsensed), and the basic facts being none but the actual arrangement of these actual objects, it remains that the informal explanation of basic entities contains something modal. Should we worry? The question may involve more attention to “the details of this construction” than Soames regards as important.

The book could fairly easily have been written in a different way, one which would have avoided these criticisms. It might have been entitled *Themes from Twentieth Century Analytic Philosophy*, and would have taken the material thematically, rather than chronologically. Ethical intuitionism, utilitarianism, and the rise of emotivism and expressivism could have formed one theme, bringing together material now found in different parts of the book (34–88, 300–345, perhaps adding Hare, who in the present arrangement has to wait until volume 2); philosophical logic and the theory of descriptions another; logicism a third; logical atomism a fourth, and so on. It would have been appropriate to refer to the various authors, while avoiding the need to make any detailed interpretive claims. The various “reconstructions” could be offered as interesting positions, which indeed they are, without having to pass the test of being precisely what some author in the period asserted. There could have been fuller bibliographic information (and indeed a bibliography). Such a book, driven by Soames’s exemplary skills of dissecting and evaluating argument, would have had an important place in the classroom.

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