

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

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

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

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

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

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

63 I ... am persuaded that common speech is full of vagueness and inaccuracy, and
 64 that any attempt to be precise requires modification of common speech both as
 65 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)?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

107 Soames’s attitude to history is revealed in a remark which closes the discussion of
 108 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.

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

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

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

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



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

161
 162 Since Soames must be no less aware than me that he has distorted Russell's views,
 163 it is hard to know what to make of these inaccuracies. There is a different book that
 164 he could have written, and which I describe in my closing paragraph, to which this
 165 lack of concern with historical accuracy would have been entirely appropriate, but it
 166 is inappropriate in a book announcing itself as history.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

191 "[Russell] speaks of a system of private perspectives, or points of view. Each such
 192 perspective consists of a set of appearances, or sense data—essentially the
 193 appearances an observer *would* experience if he occupied that perspective. (Note
 194 the counterfactual location. [sic]) Material objects are then said to be *logical*
 195 *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.

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

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

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

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

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