

Comments on Scott Soames, *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century*, volume I
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Scott Soames has given us a clear, engaging but ultimately unsatisfying introduction to the history of analytic philosophy. Based on Soames' impressive work in the philosophy of language, when these two volumes appeared I had high hopes that he would be successful. There is certainly a need for an introductory survey of the history of analytic philosophy. Currently, there is no resource for the beginning student or the amateur historian that will summarize our current understanding of the origins and development of analytic philosophy.

In what respects, then, do I find Soames' attempt to fill this gap to be unsuccessful? The fundamental problem is that he has not succeeded in presenting what we now know about analytic philosophy and its history. Instead of drawing on the work of specialists in the field, it seems that he simply read the most famous works of the most famous philosophers and tried to figure out for himself what these philosophers were up to. Readers of Soames' papers and other books will not be surprised to hear that this always ends in a carefully presented argument for a clearly articulated conclusion. Still, at least for the major figures considered in volume one, the interpretations offered fly in face of contemporary scholarship. I will try to justify these charges shortly by considering a few specific cases, but before I get to that, it is worth emphasizing why such an approach to the history of analytic philosophy is flawed, and why it is especially inappropriate in an introductory work.

The overriding lesson of work in the history of analytic philosophy over the last twenty-five years is that history is hard. It is difficult to understand why early figures in analytic philosophy defend the views they do, how their philosophical positions change over time and how they connect with the theories of their contemporaries. Again and again, a firmly established or received interpretation has been found sorely lacking in textual basis or based on a selective reading of an influential paper. So when we consider introducing students to the subject of the history of analytic philosophy, among other things we should caution them about the flaws of such standardly ascribed views and emphasize how easy it is to make such mistakes. Otherwise a student, who has perhaps read “Two Dogmas” but no Carnap, will come to Carnap with faulty assumptions and a bias against whatever philosophical position Carnap is trying to articulate. This is surely a bad thing. One of the main benefits of historical studies is that it exposes us to alternative conceptions of philosophy and forces us to examine our own presuppositions. At the end of the day, of course, we will probably stay with the philosophical positions that we began with, but the range of alternatives that are open to us will be enriched, as will our appreciation for how difficult it is to convince others that our answers are the best.

With these preliminaries in mind, I turn to a summary of Soames’ first volume and some detailed complaints. The aims and presuppositions of the project are clearly stated in an “Introduction to the Two Volumes”. Soames tells us that his goal is to give an overview of the most important figures in analytic philosophy, beginning with Moore’s *Principia Ethica* in 1903 and ending with Kripke’s 1970 *Naming and Necessity* lectures. A basic working assumption is also offered: “Fortunately, 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” (I, xi). Soames does not repeat the error committed even by some experts in the field, notably Dummett, of thinking that there are philosophical theses that are distinctive of analytic philosophy and that must unite the figures discussed. Instead, he offers a narrative of progress and accomplishment:

the two most important achievements that have emerged from the analytic tradition in this period are (i) the recognition that philosophical speculation must be grounded in pre-philosophical thought, and (ii) the success achieved in understanding, and separating one from another, the fundamental methodological notions of logical consequence, logical truth, necessary truth, and apriori truth (I, xi).

These two achievements structure many of Soames’ interpretations of individual figures and clearly influenced his choice to close volume II with four chapters (130 pages) devoted to Kripke. In fact, hardly a chapter goes by without Soames pointing out how an argument under discussion relies on conflating these concepts. Usually Soames faults the philosopher for confusing such clearly different notions, but on at least one occasion he recognizes that we who live in post-Kripke times have it much easier: “Prior to Kripke’s clear articulation and defense of a metaphysical conception of necessity – not tied to or dependent upon linguistic concepts like analyticity – there was no way that philosophers concerned with these issues could have seen them clearly” (II, 354).¹

It is Moore, however, who is credited with the key insight behind (i) and the importance of pre-philosophical commitments. Its significance is signaled by Soames’ choice to begin volume I with a chapter on the 1925 paper “A Defense of Common Sense”, followed by a chapter on the 1939 “Proof of an External World”. Here Moore is praised for recognizing that skepticism itself depends on a philosophical theory of knowledge, and for arguing that this theory is undermined by its skeptical consequences.

¹ He continues, “Once the distinction was made, the clarity and utility of the notion of rigid designation and the intelligibility of essentialist claims became inseparable, almost irresistible.”

Chapters 3 and 4 review Moore's most famous arguments from *Principia Ethica* (1903), where among other faults, Soames alleges that the open question argument depends on a conflation of analyticity and necessity (I, 74).

Four chapters then follow on Russell, beginning with a discussion of 1905's "On Denoting" and the related distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description. Chapter 6 surveys Russell's logicism, while chapter 7 describes Russell's ambitious project of logical constructions. The last Russell chapter outlines the metaphysics of logical atomism as it is enunciated in the 1918 lectures "Philosophy of Logical Atomism". Russell's logical atomism is then used as a jumping off point for a discussion of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Here Soames first discusses the metaphysics of the *Tractatus* and how it is like and unlike Russell's atomism. He then turns to Wittgenstein's theory of representation before offering a concluding discussion of the tensions within the book, and whether Wittgenstein's own doctrines undermine the intelligibility of the *Tractatus* itself.

The four chapters in part four, "Logical Positivism, Emotivism, and Ethics", relate some developments in analytic philosophy in the 1930s. Two chapters on logical positivism, or at least Ayer's version of it, discuss Ayer's linguistic account of a priori knowledge and the difficulties surrounding verificationism and its more liberal descendents. Chapter 14 focuses on the emotivism of some logical positivists about ethics, and notes how emotivism naturally resulted from combining Moore's attack on traditional ethics with the commitments of the logical positivists. In this chapter Soames notes the criticisms of emotivism offered by Ross, and for good measure adds a chapter

discussing Ross' further rejection of consequentialism and his positive theory's distinction between the good and the right.

Volume I concludes with two chapters on the early Quine. The first chapter on Quine summarizes Quine's influential criticism of the analytic/synthetic distinction in "Two Dogmas" and notes the replies offered by Grice and Strawson. Chapter 17, the last chapter of volume I, criticizes Quine's own positive proposals in "Two Dogmas" and sets the stage for Quine's later development in *Word and Object*.

I now want to present three points from volume I for detailed criticism as I think they reflect the more general failings that I have identified above. In each case Soames makes a clear error in interpretation that is based on not discussing relevant writings of the figure or the specialist literature. Case one is the interpretation of Russell, particularly Russell's project of logical construction.² Soames first notes that Russell must invoke both the sense data of others and even sense data that are experienced by no individual ("sensibilia"), in order for his logical constructions of physical objects out of sense data to have a chance. However, "If all bodies are logical constructions out of sense data, then they must be logical constructions out of *someone's* sense data" (I, 178). But Russell cannot assume the existence of other minds as that is something he is trying to prove using his logical construction project (I, 180). So, Russell's entire agenda is undermined and indeed self-defeating.

I claim that Soames has made a crucial interpretative error here, an error which he needs to convict Russell so quickly of incoherence. From his initial rejection of idealism in 1898 onwards, Russell insisted that sense data did not depend on a subject for their existence. His epistemology constantly invokes principles about sense data, and later

² More detailed discussion of the Russell chapters will appear in my review in *Russell*.

percepts, which outstrip the experiences of all conscious agents. How could Soames have missed this central fact about Russell's conception of sense data? I suggest that he did not review Russell's writings where this point is unequivocally made, or engage with the scholarship in which this conception of sense data is conclusively established.

There is a reply that Soames could offer to this charge and it is instructive to see why this reply is misguided. Surely, Soames might say, in so far as Russell is a philosopher, he should argue for his views. And if Russell's arguments are good ones, then their premises should be clearly presented and accessible to the careful and intelligent reader of the papers where Russell presents his conclusions. It is not open to Russell to rely on some bizarre implicit conception of sense data or some approach to epistemology that is foreign to ours. If we, as interpreters, miss these commitments, it is Russell's fault and not ours. There is surely some truth in this charge, and I would be the first to convict Russell of sloppy writing and confusing arguments. But this lack of interest in the philosophical context in which a philosopher is working underestimates how difficult it is to uncover the tacit commitments that guide our work, and just how pernicious the effects of these beliefs can be. Strangely, we have already seen that Soames makes such a tacit commitment the center piece of his entire book, and even recognizes that before Kripke philosophers could not "see clearly" various distinctions which are central to philosophy today. But doesn't this prove that we cannot assume that "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"? Indeed, the more that this assumption leads us to ascribe confusion and obviously incorrect doctrines to intelligent writers, the more we should revise our fundamental preconceptions about how the history of this

period should be written. Soames shows no loss of nerve, however, and repeatedly makes similar mistakes in his interpretations of the positions he discusses.

More briefly, then, I turn to two other such errors. Soames presents the logical positivist view of analyticity and verificationism by discussing Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936, second ed. 1946), noting "this version of positivism, though differing in some respects from other versions, was quite representative of the general tendencies of the movement" (I, 258). This is one of the most stunning things that Soames says, and it ignores the sum total of scholarship on the Vienna Circle since 1980, if not before. This painstaking work has highlighted the plurality of views presented by philosophers like Schlick, Neurath and above all Carnap and how none of them ever agreed with the version of positivism presented by Ayer. This is especially true of Neurath, who defended a sophisticated version of physicalism and fallibilism about scientific knowledge from the beginning. Schlick's evolution is more complicated due to his sympathies with the views of the "middle" Wittgenstein. But Carnap is beyond doubt the most baffling oversight in Soames' discussion. For no matter what decision we come to about Carnap's apparent verificationism in papers like "Overcoming Metaphysics", he articulated a series of different views culminating in his distinction between internal and external questions and the turn to semantics. Soames does not note these disagreements within the Vienna Circle or indicate that Carnap ever broke with his earlier approach.

This is all the more frustrating as it is Carnap's semantic turn which provoked Quine to write "Two Dogmas". Given that Soames does not discuss anything that Carnap wrote, this crucial feature of the context within which Quine's paper was written is obscured. Again, this missing context leads Soames to errors in his interpretation of the

early Quine. When it comes to the holism and pragmatism defended in “Two Dogmas”, Soames can only see a revived verificationism: “Quine endorses the verificationists’ identification of meaning with sensory evidence” (I, 398) when he says “The unit of empirical significance is the whole of science” (quoted at I, 381). This reading of Quine’s holism leads Soames to view Quine as assigning verificationist meanings to entire theories, whereas the verificationist’s mistake was to ascribe them to individual sentences. I find this interpretation of Quine completely mysterious. Why would someone whose entire motivation in writing “Two Dogmas” was to expel meanings from philosophy go to all that trouble only to reintroduce meanings as features of entire theories? More confusingly, why would someone who both before and after “Two Dogmas” expresses deep suspicion about sensory experiences of the sort that Ayer requires use them here to assign meanings to theories? Soames does not tell us, but proceeds to promptly convict Quine of incoherence.

I hope these examples are sufficient to convey the sort of problems that I find with Soames’ book. I will consider one last reply that he may offer in defense. He may claim that it is simply not possible to present a history of analytic philosophy accessible to students that will deal with all of these complexities and finish with Kripke. On this picture, an introduction to the history of philosophy is a bit like an introduction to physics. In a first college physics class, we learn classical physics, i.e. we learn something that every expert in physics knows to be false. There are many good reasons for why scientific education works this way, but I fail to see how any of them apply to philosophy. Above all, while a physics student can be expected to know that classical physics is wrong, nothing alerts Soames’ readers to the limitations of his own proposals.

At the least, if Soames wants to give us simplified versions of historical views which he knows are incorrect, he should repeatedly alert his readers to this and direct them to more accurate interpretations.

In closing I would like to relate these points to Soames' claims about the importance of pre-philosophical knowledge to philosophy, and the more general trend towards specialization that Soames notes in the epilogue to volume II. Soames there recognizes that the history of philosophy is now a specialized discipline (II, 463), but fails to see what implications this has for his own project. For given that there are experts in the topics he is discussing, should he not draw on them? If I were to write an introductory book on the philosophy of language, this is of course what I would have to do. How, then, would a specialist in history, or someone acquainted with their work, do things differently than Soames? I think a specialist would have the knowledge of the details of all the particular figures necessary in order to make a better selection of material to carefully discuss. Such a specialist would have to supplement these discussions with the appropriate background details and motivations behind these writings. This kind of project would have to build on the mountain of books and papers that deal with all the details, and judiciously choose from all the proposed interpretations of these details. Many of the author's arguments for these choices would have to be left out if the book was to remain an introductory one, but surely alternative interpretations could be indicated in footnotes or in references to the writings of others. Above all, I would hope that the reader would finish reading such a book with an appreciation of the difficulties inherent in the study of the history of philosophy, and the genuine philosophical insights that can result from understanding how we got to where we are

today. Even though Soames has not written such a book, he at least *has* written a book. I hope that historians who accept these criticisms of Soames will not only note its shortcomings, but will also get to work writing accessible histories of their own.