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Review of “Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century, Vols. 1 & 2”

Peter Murphy
University of Indianapolis

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Book Review

Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century, Vols. 1 & 2, by Scott Soames. Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 2003. 411 + xix pages. ISBN: 069112244-X; 479 + xix pages. ISBN: 069112312-8.

Across these two impressive volumes, Scott Soames extracts and evaluates key arguments from roughly thirty-five important episodes in twentieth century analytic philosophy. Soames is a master at exposing flaws in arguments. Some of these flaws are well-known, but many are not. What emerges is an interesting vindication of the analytic tradition. Time and again, a novel position on a topic is developed and supporting lines of argument are marshaled; but, the supporting arguments are found to be seriously flawed and so the position is wisely abandoned. The lessons then are mainly negative, a list of positions and methodologies that philosophers should avoid; this does not, however, diminish their value.

Volume 1 divides into five parts that cover Moore on ethics, epistemology, and analysis; Russell on logic and philosophy of language; Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*; Logical Positivism, Emotivism, and Ross's ethics; and Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiricism." Volume 2 has seven parts that cover Wittgenstein's *Investigations*; key works in ordinary language philosophy by Ryle, Strawson and Hare; Malcolm's and Austin's ordinary language responses to skepticism; Grice's "Logic and Conversation"; Quine's *Word and Object* and *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*; Davidson's work on truth and meaning; and Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*.

These books are already causing controversy. Many of the criticisms that have appeared so involve familiar disputes about methodology, including some rather prickly exchanges about respectable ways of doing the history of philosophy. Nonetheless, I recommend these exchanges. In particular, I recommend volume 129 of *Philosophical Studies* (2006) and volume 135 of *Philosophical Studies* (2007). Soames's side of these exchanges can be found on his website, which also includes a useful set of responses to critics of Volume 1, taken from a recent American Philosophical Association symposium.

Any review of these volumes has to be highly selective. This is due not only to the span of the volumes, as well as the fact that Soames does not go in much for big themes that are played out across the tradition. The leading big theme comes in Soames's identification of two (yes, just two) principal positive contributions of the analytic tradition. One is the clear demarcation of the notions of logical consequence, logical truth, necessary truth, and a priori truth. Soames painstakingly shows that this contribution was hard-won; many giants of the tradition failed to understand and distinguish these notions, causing them deep philosophical mistakes. For philosophers raised since

Kripke, the differences among these notions are vivid. In fact, the notions are now taken to belong to entirely different families: logical consequence and logical truth are to be understood in terms of other logical notions, necessary truth is to be understood in terms of other metaphysical notions, and a priority is to be understood in terms of other epistemological notions. Soames is a great guide to these notions, and does a masterful job of showing just how conceptually distinct these notions are from one another.

Readers may be less satisfied with the discussions of the other principal contribution that Soames identifies. It consists in Moore's directive that we abandon philosophical principles that clash with the beliefs of common sense or the beliefs of science. Why are beliefs in philosophical principles epistemically inferior? Here is one of Soames's key discussions of Moore:

As Moore saw it, conflicts between speculative philosophical principles and the most basic convictions of common sense confront one with a choice. In any such case, one must give up either one's commonsense convictions, or the speculative philosophical principle. Of course, one ought to give up whichever one has the least confidence in. But how, Moore wondered, could anyone have more confidence in the truth of a general philosophical principle than one has in the truth of one's most fundamental commonsense convictions – convictions such as one's belief that there are many different objects, and many different people, that exist independently of oneself? In the end, Moore came to think that one's confidence in a general principle of philosophy never could outweigh one's confidence in convictions such as these. In other words, Moore came to think that philosophers have no special knowledge that is prior to, and more secure than, the strongest examples of what we all pre-theoretically take to be instances of ordinary knowledge. As a result philosophers have nothing that could be used to undermine the most central and fundamental parts of what we take ourselves to know. The effect of Moore's position was to turn the kind of philosophy done by some of his teachers on its head. According to him, the job of philosophy is not to prove or to refute the most basic propositions that we all commonly take ourselves to know. We have no choice but to accept that we know these propositions. (Volume 1, pp. 8-9)

This passage contains several different rationales for Moore's dictum. At the outset, the emphasis is on confidence: if one belief is held with more confidence than another, then the second should go. However this is only as satisfying as the claim that degrees of confidence correlate with degrees of justification, something that is surely false. Some beliefs are held quite confidently and are not justified at all; and other beliefs that are held quite tentatively are, in fact, highly justified. Isn't it the less justified belief that should go, not the one held with less confidence?

At the end of the passage, Soames invokes doxastic involuntarism, claiming that "We have no choice but to accept that we know these propositions." But if we take Plato, Plotinus, Leibniz, Spinoza, Berkeley, Hegel, McTaggart, Bradley, and many others at their word, they did *not* accept many of the propositions of common sense. Soames perhaps is not speaking for them. But as long as they were able to avoid accepting some of these propositions, why can't we do the same? Surely it is possible that some day you will be convinced (whether you should be convinced or not) of one of these philosopher's arguments for rejecting a proposition of common sense.

In the middle of the passage, Soames attributes this claim to Moore:

philosophers have no special knowledge that is prior to, and more secure than, the strongest examples of what we all pre-theoretically take to be instances of ordinary knowledge.

If warranted assertion requires knowing what one is asserting, then Moore was warranted in asserting this only if he knew that philosophers have no such special knowledge. But the claim that philosophers have no such special knowledge seems to be itself a philosophical claim; it doesn't seem to be part of common sense or science. This might not be a problem, as long as the quoted claim does not clash with any claims of common sense or science. For if there is no such clash, then Moore could still know this philosophical claim. But, notice, the claim does not require that there be an *actual* such clash for beliefs in philosophical principles to be epistemically inferior. The claim is that beliefs in philosophical principles are epistemically inferior to the beliefs of common sense and science *regardless* of whether they clash with any of those beliefs. But consider a belief in a philosophical principle, where that principle does an excellent job at explaining and systematizing our common sense and scientific beliefs. Even that belief fails to make the higher grade. This reader, at least, was left wondering why.

These are fantastic books. They are engaging on many central philosophical issues in philosophy of language, metaphysics, and epistemology. And they provide plausible interpretations of many of the key works of the analytic tradition. If you have any interest in the analytic tradition, read these books.

Peter Murphy
University of Indianapolis