HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

Christopher Pincock
Philosophy / Purdue U.
West Lafayette, in 47907, usa
pincock@purdue.edu

Scott Soames. *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century*, Vol. 1: *The Dawn of Analysis*; Vol. 2: *The Age of Meaning*. Princeton: Princeton U. P., 2003. Pp. xix, 411; xxii, 479. us$50.00 (hb), us$24.95 (pb) for each volume.

The last twenty years have seen an explosion in books and papers on Russell's philosophy and its contemporary significance. There is good reason to think that this will continue as the contents of the *Collected Papers* are digested by Russell scholars and as more specialists contribute to the history of analytic philosophy more generally. Given all this good news, it is disconcerting to find a 100-page discussion of Russell, in a well-reviewed book by a first-rate philosopher, repeating many of the errors and misconceptions about Russell that scholars have worked so hard against. Soames' discussion of Russell in the volumes under review is in fact so distressing that it alone compromises the book as a suitable introduction to the history of analytic philosophy. After briefly reviewing the outline of the two volumes, I discuss the errors concerning Russell, and conclude by drawing some lessons for Russell scholarship.

Soames' focus is on what he takes to be the most important and influential work of analytic philosophers, beginning with Moore's *Principia Ethica* and ending in 1970 with Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* lectures. Kripke, in fact, marks the culmination of one of the two great achievements of analytic philos-

ophy that Soames sees in this period:

> … 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)

Moore is credited with the methodological innovation required by (i), as once we accept that what we think we know prior to philosophical reflection is a constraint on our epistemology, Moore's response to scepticism, which Soames endorses, inevitably follows. But even Moore, and nearly every other figure that Soames discusses, is guilty of confusing necessity, analyticity and apriority. Soames endorses Kripke's basic point that necessity is a metaphysical concept that can come apart from the epistemic notion of apriority and the semantic category of analytic propositions.

Volume I repeats this charge several times, using it to undermine Moore's views on ethics in Part One, Russell's conception of analysis in Part Two, and logical positivism in Part Three. It is noteworthy that Soames takes Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* as representative of logical positivism, ignoring contemporary scholarship on the Vienna Circle just as much as he ignores Russell scholarship. Part Four reconstructs Wittgenstein's views in the *Tractatus* and Volume I ends with a discussion of Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiricism".

The second volume begins with a part on Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. This paves the way for Soames' discussion of ordinary language philosophy in Parts Two and Three, which Soames sees as closely tied to the later Wittgenstein. Ryle's *Concept of Mind*, Strawson's early views on truth, Hare's theory of goodness as well as Malcolm's paradigm-case argument and Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia* are investigated in these chapters. Part Four presents Grice's theory of conversational implicature as the final nail in the coffin of ordinary language philosophy. In Part Five, Soames returns to Quine, this time discussing the ambitious arguments of *Word and Object* and the more general project of naturalized epistemology. Part Six articulates Davidson's program for constructing a theory of meaning for natural languages along the lines of a Tarski-style theory of truth, and Volume II ends with an extended discussion of the promise and limitations of Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*.

The material on Russell is entirely confined to four chapters in Volume I: Chapter 5: "Logical Form, Grammatical Form, and the Theory of Descriptions", Chapter 6: "Logic and Mathematics: The Logicist Reduction", Chapter 7: "Logical Constructions and the External World" and Chapter 8: "Russell's Logical Atomism". I will discuss five significant errors which Soames commits in these chapters, but more no doubt could be found. Each error is something

that I believe all Russell scholars will agree is an error, even if we cannot agree on what correct interpretation should be put in its place.

First, Soames claims that the theory of descriptions

> … was central to his rejection of the view that every object of thought must have being, and hence that there must be such things as Pegasus, Santa Claus, and the present king of France. The key argument in favor of that doctrine was based on statements called negative existentials. The argument was given in Russell's early book *The Principles of Mathematics*. (1: 95)

This completely ignores Russell's theory of denoting concepts, which solves the problem of negative existentials without positing Pegasus or the present king of France. In fact, we know now that the puzzles Russell used to motivate his theory of descriptions in "On Denoting" were not the reason why he adopted it. Instead, it was the tensions in the theory of denoting concepts itself and the associated need to give a viable account of classes which caused Russell's change in approach.

A second error concerns Soames' presentation of Russellian propositions. Soames claims that Russell thought that "propositions constitute the information encoded by sentences … [and of] the information encoded by a sentence (in a logically perfect language) as a complex entity the structure of which mirrors the structure of sentences" (1: 104–5). This seems to me to be extremely misleading. In 1905 Russell was a realist of a particularly aggressive kind about propositions. He thought that propositions are just complex things. So, for example, Desdemona loving Cassio is a complex thing whose parts are Desdemona, Cassio and the loving relation, and the proposition is just Desdemona standing in the loving relation to Cassio. Such propositions are not "information" or set-theoretic constructions or any kind of entity more likely to be encountered in contemporary philosophy of language.

The challenges that Soames faces in providing an accessible treatment of Russell's logicism are easier to appreciate, but even here I think Soames falls short of what should be done when introducing students to this complex array of issues. His strategy is to present Russell's original system of logic as a first-order version of set theory with naïve comprehension. In a brief discussion of what Soames calls the theory of types, naïve comprehension is replaced by a version restricted to types, and the axiom of infinity is then introduced to allow the derivation of arithmetic to go through. This, of course, fits poorly with what Whitehead and Russell actually did in *Principia Mathematica*, and as usual Soames never alerts the reader to this mismatch. A student of Soames would be surprised to hear, for example, that Russell did not believe in sets, preferring to replace talk of sets with sentences involving propositional functions. More explicit qualifications about the formal theory that Soames presents could have

avoided these misimpressions.

At least one remark by Soames suggests, however, that he may not be aware of the substantial differences between his presentation and the logic of *Principia Mathematica*. For he offers the objection that "since Gödel's result implies that no set of axioms can suffice to derive all and only the arithmetical truths, it shows, a fortiori, that no set of logical axioms, whether pure or not, can do so" (1: 157). Soames notes the qualification that the theorem applies only to "any consistent first-order theory of arithmetic" in the same paragraph, but he does not appear to realize that *Principia Mathematica* does not present a first-order theory. Given this, it is certainly possible that the axioms would logically imply all the theorems of arithmetic, although only given a relation of logical consequence that goes beyond first-order logical consequence.[1]

The presentation of Russell's approach to logical constructions is also problematic. Soames ascribes some form of latent verificationism to Russell in *Our Knowledge of the External World*: "the truths we assert that seem to be about material objects are in reality nothing more than truths about sense data" (1: 168) because "Verification always consists in the occurrence of sense data" (1: 172) and statements about the physical world are regularly verified. What this ignores is Russell's repeated invocation of relations between sense-data, and the role of non-empirical principles concerning these relations in the justification of scientific knowledge. And in fact Russell argues for this in an earlier lecture: "… if there is any knowledge of general truths at all, there must be *some* knowledge of general truths which is independent of empirical evidence, i.e. does not depend on the data of sense."[2] So, sense-data are part of the story of our justification of scientific knowledge, but the relations connected with the sense-data and the associated logical principles about relations do an important share of the work.

Another issue is the nature of the sense-data and their dependence or independence from minds. Soames recognizes 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" (1: 178). But Russell cannot assume the existence of other minds as that is something he is trying to prove using his logical construction project (1: 180).

[1] Gödel's result, more exactly stated, is that any consistent, axiomatizable extension of *Q* is incomplete, where *Q* is a set of axioms for a weak theory of arithmetic. See George S. Boolos, John P. Burgess and Richard C. Jeffrey, *Computability and* Logic, 4th ed. (Cambridge U. P., 2002), Chap. 17. Chap. 22 of this book discusses a second-order theory of arithmetic.

[2] *OKEW*, p. 56; *OKEW*$_2$, pp. 65–6.

So, Russell's entire agenda is undermined and indeed self-defeating.

Just as with Russellian propositions, Soames has confused a more common contemporary conception of sense-data with Russell's own conception. 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 percepts, which outstrip the experiences of all conscious agents. This is what makes it an option for Russell to eventually give a logical construction of the self out of sense-data (or sensations).

Finally, in his discussion of Russell's metaphysics in "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism", Soames' main goal is to prepare the reader for the metaphysics of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. This makes good pedagogical sense. However, Soames errs in his claim that "Russell himself never took this vision much further" (1: 193). The reader is given no hint of the interesting and complex transitions in Russell's thought in the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s which do refine the "vision" of the 1918 lectures. While these may not be Russell's most important writings, they were enormously influential in shaping the self-conception of analytic philosophy. Again, it is understandable why Soames does not discuss them. But, in his aims to provide a history of analytic philosophy free of significant "gaps" (2: 463), he downgrades the importance of the material that he does not discuss.

In these five broad areas of the theory of descriptions, propositions, logicism, logical constructions and logical atomism, Soames perpetuates claims that have been clearly challenged and refuted by Russell scholars. It is hard not to take this badly, and this feature of Soames' book helps to explain the wide divergence of critical reactions it has received since its publication. Historians of analytic philosophy generally see clearly how Soames feels about their work by the fact that he shows no interest in it. Non-historians are more positively disposed to the book as it at least presents clear philosophical positions and presents a comforting narrative of progress of philosophy over time.

For those of us who work on Russell, and the history of analytic philosophy more generally, two lessons should be drawn. First, of course, we should communicate to our non-historian colleagues exactly where Soames has gone wrong. Otherwise his errors will become even more entrenched than they are. Still, this sort of partisanship is not enough. The second, more important lesson that we should learn is that we must do a better job of teaching the history of analytic philosophy and communicating the discoveries that we have made to non-specialists. As our accumulated specialized studies become increasingly hard for the non-specialist to review, more effort is needed in relating these discoveries to contemporary debates. Until we do this, non-historians will doubt the philosophical significance of our historical work and the details will continue to be ignored, even by those who write introductory histories of analytic philosophy.