

Discussion—Soames on empiricism

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Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century by Scott Soames reminds me of nothing so much as *Lectures on Literature* by Vladimir Nabokov. Both are works that arose immediately out of the needs of undergraduate teaching, yet each manages to say much of significance to knowledgeable professionals. Each indirectly provides an outline of the history of its field, through a presentation of selected major works, taken in chronological order and including items that are generally recognized as marking decisive turning points. Yet neither Soames's work nor Nabokov's is a history in any conventional sense, both being immediately disqualified from that category by the general absence of coverage of minor and middling works and writers. The emphasis is pedagogical rather than historiographical: the emphasis is on introducing the student to the field through very close examination of the limited number of key texts selected for inclusion.

The author's distinctive personality is also apparent in both works. Each writer has a favorite theme he repeatedly sounds: for Soames, the danger of conflating the analytic, the a priori, and the necessary; for Nabokov, the philistinism of expecting an uplifting "message" from works of literary art. Each also includes some quirky, individual selections: *The Right and the Good*, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Few others would have taken R.L. Stevenson to be up there with Dickens, Flaubert, and Proust, or W.D. Ross with Russell, Wittgenstein, and Quine. Each also sets aside for separate treatment elsewhere a major body of work one might have expected to be covered. Nabokov reserves Russian literature for a companion volume, while Soames gives only slight coverage to what he describes as "work in logic, the foundations of logic, and the application of logical techniques to the study of language"—a category that in practice turns out to include the bulk of the relevant material (by such writers as Frege, Carnap, and Tarski) that was published originally in German without simultaneous English translation.

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Scope of the work

The effects of this exclusion are more important in volume 1, *The Dawn of Analysis*, than in volume 2, *The Age of Meaning*, and they are perhaps most important for the chapters of volume 1 that devoted to empiricism: the two (12 and 13) on logical positivism and the two (16 and 17) on early Quine. The most obvious effect is certainly that the story of empiricism in the last century begins in Soames's account not with Mach, and not with the Vienna Circle of the 1920s, but with the introduction of logical positivism to the English-speaking philosophical world in Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936). What we are given is not so much an account of logical positivism as of its reception among Anglo-American philosophers.

Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) appears as the main representative of verificationism; Hempel's "Problems and Changes in the Empiricist Criterion of Meaning" (1950) and Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (1951) appear as the major representatives of the thought that it is only a theory as a whole, and not its individual assertions one-by-one, that can be tested against experience. Doubts that observation reports can be formulated in terms of sense data rather than ordinary objects, or that observation and theory can be cleanly separated, are given some discussion as secondary objections to positivism, but larger "scientific realist" doubts about the empiricist claim that "all we are really interested in" are what is reported by observation reports are not mentioned, presumably because they were not prominent in Anglo-American philosophy in the first half of the last century.

Historically, by contrast, holism was prefigured already in Poincaré's doctrine of the conventionality of geometry and Duhem's views on "crucial experiments." For the philosophically well-read mathematical physicist Hermann Weyl, writing in 1927, it was already an old and familiar point:

But Hilbert furthermore pointed with emphasis to the related science of *theoretical physics*. Its individual assumptions and laws have no meaning that can immediately be realized in intuition; in principle, it is not the propositions of physics taken in isolation, but only the theoretical system as a whole, that can be confronted with experience.

And in the continuation of the passage Weyl already anticipates scientific realist objections to empiricism:

It has been said that physics is concerned only with establishing pointer coincidences. ... **But, if we are honest, we must admit that our theoretical interest does not attach exclusively or even primarily to ... the report that this pointer coincides with that part of the scale;** it attaches, rather, to the ideal assumptions that *according to the theory* disclose themselves in such coincidences, but of which no perception gives the full meaning—as, for example, the assumption of the electron as a universal elementary quantum of electricity. [Weyl (1927/1967, p.484) Boldface mine.]

From an historian's point of view, perhaps the most interesting issue here is why, after such a sophisticated position had been reached, there was a relapse in crude verificationism. But that is not the sort of issue that Soames addresses.

Omissions of historical anticipations are, of course, inevitable given that Soames is writing in the first instance for American undergraduates. For a work addressed to that audience, the reading list of works addressed already quite ambitious, and it

would be unrealistic to expect students to be able to grapple even with just those works, were it not for Soames's patient and painstaking analyses of the key arguments.

Moreover, if the only effect of the gap in coverage were the one I have just been mentioning (the effect of conveying a somewhat misleading idea of the date of first appearance of this or that idea) it could not be claimed to be of overwhelming importance, especially when one calls to mind the wise words of Peter Freyd:

People who comb or concoct obscure sources in order to support usually lame or self-serving priority claims concerning well-known discoveries, theorems, “theses” or conjectures have their priorities reversed. It's not the first person who discovers something that counts; it's the last person—the person who discovers it so that it never needs rediscovery. [Attributed by John Corcoran in private correspondence]

So far as I can see, the effect I have been mentioning *is* in fact the only major consequence of the gap in coverage *for chapters 12 and 13*. And so, given the primary audience for the work, it may not be terribly important that, for instance, while Quine's description of his proposal as “issuing essentially from Carnap's doctrine of the physical world in the *Aufbau*” is quoted, the *Logische Aufbau der Welt* itself is not discussed. But Soames's avoidance of Carnap (apart from brief mentions here and there) has I think a more substantial effect *on chapters 15 and 16*. That we get only one side of the on-going dialogue between Carnap and Quine is regrettable.

I especially lament the omission of my own favorite work of pre-Kripkean 20th-century analytic philosophy, Carnap's “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology,” which appeared on the pages immediately preceding Hempel's “Problems and Changes” in the same volume of the same journal. According to Soames, by the time we get to that paper of Hempel's (a kind of obituary notice for long-ailing and recently deceased positivism) all that is left is the claim (so much weaker than Ayer's original, crude verificationism) that “a non-analytic, non-contradictory sentence is meaningful when it plays a functional role in some system which makes observational predictions.” The reader might well wonder how such a weakened principle could still be expected to do any philosophical work, and Carnap's “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology” illustrates perhaps better than any other work what kind of philosophical punch even that weakened principle still has.

Moreover, Quine's reply, “Carnap's Views on Ontology,” which appeared the same year as “Two Dogmas,” illustrates as least as well as any other work what kind of philosophical punch the rejection of the analytic/synthetic was supposed to have according to Quine. So I think it would have been a very good thing if this pair of papers had been included—though I don't want to say what I would have cut to make room for them. I especially regret their omission because I really would like to see them analyzed in the admirably clear and thorough way in which Soames analyzes “Problems and Changes” and “Two Dogmas.”

The meaning of “meaning”

Having just expressed my admiration for Soames's style of analysis, I will now qualify that expression in one regard: though he is very appreciative of Quine at some points (and in particular is one of the few to appreciate fully the value of

Quine's "Truth by Convention"), I find him at other points just a trifle too unsympathetic and lacking in charity in his reading of Quine.

One such point is the long footnote 8 on pages 364–365, and the passage in the body of Soames's text to which it attaches. Here Soames cites passages from Quine's writings where Quine introduces certain terms as abbreviations—"cordate" and "renate" as short for "organism having a heart" and "organism having a kidney"—and passages where Quine seems to concede that in introducing new terms in this way one is creating clear, transparent examples of synonymy, and thereby clear examples of analyticity. Soames concludes that Quine has amusingly contradicted himself.

In fact, Quine's position on these issues is that the kind of synonymy exhibited in such cases is *transitory*, and a notion of analyticity derived from it cannot do any of the philosophical work the notion of the analytic was traditionally supposed to do. The matter is dealt with in "Carnap and Logical Truth" (1954) and again in "Necessary Truth" (1963). The entry "Definition, as episodic" in the index to *The Ways of Paradox* will direct one to three relevant passages, one giving the well-known momentum example. While there is no need for Soames to go into Quine's defense at length, given that he does devote three whole paragraphs (two of them, to be sure, in a footnote) to this particular criticism of Quine, he might at least have included references to the works just cited for Quine's side of the story.

Soames also attaches great weight to what he calls "Criticism 2" from the well-known Grice-Strawson "Defense of a Dogma" (1956). Carnap's "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology" was in part a reply to philosophers who object to "meanings" on the grounds that they are abstract entities, and that abstract entities, be they meanings or classes, do not exist. Quine, having long given up nominalism and objections to classes, allowed that "meanings" can be admitted if "synonymy" can: meanings could simply be taken to be equivalence classes synonymous expressions. But since "synonymy" (setting aside the "episodic") is unacceptable to Quine, so are "meanings." Grice, Strawson, and Soames all think that there is a short route from the fact that Quine rejects "meanings" to the conclusion that Quine is committed to the claim that everything he himself says is meaningless. But it all depends on what one means by "rejects."

In Quine's defense, let me quote some of what he says in his "Responding to Richard Schuldenfrei," reprinted among the "Responses" in *Theories and Things*:

My position is that the notions of thought and belief are very worthy objects of philosophical and scientific clarification and analysis, and that they are in equal measure very ill suited for use as instruments of philosophical and scientific clarification and analysis. If someone accepts these notions outright for such use, I am at a loss to imagine what he can have deemed more in need of clarification and analysis than the things he has thus accepted. ... Meaning, like thought and belief, is a worthy object of philosophical and scientific clarification and analysis, and like them it is ill-suited for use as an instrument of philosophical and scientific clarification and analysis. [Quine (1981, pp. 184–185).]

This kind of "rejection" of meanings or meaning clearly does not bring with it a commitment to the claim that everything one says is meaningless. I freely admit that there are other passages where Quine's "rejection" appears to be of a different and more extreme character, and that there are yet other passages where there is doubt whether Quine's "rejection" should be taken in a less or in a more extreme sense. In

interpreting Quine, “sympathy” largely consists, I believe, in giving the less extreme reading the benefit of the doubt. It is this kind of sympathy that Soames doesn’t always exhibit.

Turning back from Quine to earlier, positivist writers, it seems to me quite clear that in denying that, say, *Sein und Zeit* has “cognitive meaning,” they never meant to claim that there is nothing to get right or wrong in producing an English translation. Carnap, who made fun of the line “Das Nichts nichtet,” would surely have allowed that this must go over into English as something like “Nothingness noths” and not “Twas brillig and the slithy toves...” or “Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.”

The qualifying adjective “cognitive” in “cognitive meaning” is not empty: however obscure the notion of *cognitive* meaning may be, it is clearly not to be identified with *linguistic* meaning, that which translators try to preserve. Quine, Soames warns us at the end of his volume 1, did go on to reject the notion of translation as well. But in the sense in which he “rejects” it, he rejects it not only in application to the works of Heidegger, but equally in application to those of Frege. So this denial has little to do complaints about the “[cognitive] meaninglessness” of certain kinds of philosophy.

Soames does not always seem to put much weight on the presence of a qualifying adjective “cognitive,” and I have a suspicion why this is. The special sciences have mainly emerged from philosophy, and through much of the modern era philosophers have been especially active in whatever area of philosophy seemed at the time ready to give birth to a new science, or at the border with what was at that time a recently born science. At the present time, this would mean activity in or interaction with “semantics,” which I suppose some would consider still a science-in-embryo and others a new-born science. Soames has been one of the leading figures in this area of activity and interaction, and I wonder whether this fact doesn’t perhaps partly color his reading of earlier philosophers.

Some things the positivists or Quine said seem just silly if one takes them to be talking about linguistic semantics. To me, however, it seems clear that in saying many of these things they simply were *not* talking about linguistic meaning of the kind that interests Soames. I am almost inclined to say that after Russell on descriptions, analytic philosophers were not seriously engaged with natural language until the rise of the ordinary language school, and not *successfully* engaged with natural language until the time of Grice’s lectures on conversational implicature, and the downfall of the ordinary language school (a topic well covered in Soames’s volume 2, by the way).

A charitable reading of Quine’s dictum that “meaning” is a appropriate *object* but not an appropriate *instrument* of analysis would have him distinguishing between the kind of philosophy of language that is interested in language for its own sake and the kind of linguistic philosophy that investigates language with ulterior philosophical motives—and favoring the former over the latter. Since Soames seems to me a paradigm of a philosopher of language of the first kind, as Dummett would be of the second, I am surprised that he is not more sympathetic to Quine’s point of view.

I am also a bit surprised about this for another reason. I personally have often had the experience of reading papers on some dispute in my own specialty, beginning to suspect that it the issue may be merely terminological, and then as I think further on the matter finding myself unable to decide whether this is so or not, and ultimately losing my grip on the distinction between merely terminological and other disputes, which is to say, ultimately doubting that there is a well-determined analytic/synthetic

distinction to be applied in this area. Can Soames say he has never had this kind of experience? Well, maybe he can; so let me pass on to a further topic that, at least to me, seems a paradigm of a situation where it sometimes really is unclear whether different philosophers mean the same thing by a certain term and disagree over the facts about whatever it is that the term denotes, or whether they mean different things by the term.

The meaning of “necessity”

Though he does not make an appearance until well into volume 2, Saul Kripke is clearly the hero of *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century*. For Soames the crucial contribution of “Naming and Necessity” lies in Kripke’s distinguishing the analytic, the a priori, and the “necessary” in the sense in which Kripke uses that term. For Soames, failure to keep these three notions properly distinguished from each other vitiates many, many arguments of analytic philosophers in general. (Just as for Grice failure to distinguish use from meaning, or pragmatics from semantics, vitiates many, many arguments of the ordinary language school in particular.)

Now it is agreed on all sides that the analytic is both a priori and “necessary” in Kripke’s sense.¹ Kripke insists that there are a posteriori necessities (in his sense) and suggests that there may be a priori contingencies (in his sense). I see, however, an important difference, reflected already in my choice of verbs in the preceding sentence: as will emerge in Soames’s treatment of “Naming and Necessity” in volume 2, Kripke has much less to say about the contingent a priori than about the necessary a posteriori; what he does say is more tentative or guarded; and if I am not mistaken, it has been less widely and enthusiastically accepted. More importantly, I see a significant difference between roles, in pre-Kripkean analytic philosophy, of the identification of the a priori with the analytic, and of the conflation of Kripkean necessity with analyticity.

The notion of the synthetic a priori was absolutely central to the philosophy of Kant. During the 19th century his most plausible examples, provided by geometry and arithmetic, were called into question. From the time of Gauss the view that geometry is a posteriori gained ground, as did the view that arithmetic is analytic from the time of Frege. Yet there were still many neo-Kantians around. The positivists, in maintaining that the analytic coincides with the a priori, were quite self-consciously taking a contentious position on a famous philosophical issue.

The situation with “necessity” is rather different. To begin with, there are at least three *prima facie* distinct notions to be considered. First there is *gnecessity*, the property connoted by “necessarily” as used in general usage or popular speech or ordinary language, whatever that property may turn out to be. Second there is *pnecessity*, the property connoted by “necessarily” as used by philosophers and modal logicians down through Carnap’s *Meaning and Necessity* and beyond, namely, analyticity. (In Quine, “Necessarily _____” is an *operator* equivalent to the *predicate* “‘_____’ is analytic;” whereas the modal logicians were sloppier about operator *vs* predicate, and use *vs* mention.) Third, there is *knecessity*, or “necessity” in the sense in which I was using the term in the preceding paragraphs, namely, the property

¹ This is not to say that the analytic is simply the intersection of the a priori with the “necessary” in Kripke’s sense: if there are a posteriori Kripkean necessities and a priori Kripkean contingencies, a disjunction of one of each will be both a priori and “necessary” in Kripke’s sense, but synthetic.

connoted by “necessarily” as used by Kripke, and following him many or most subsequent philosophers. In this usage, the “necessary” is that which “could not have been otherwise” or “is and still would have been no matter what”.²

Analytic philosophers down to Quine, so far as I know, showed little interest in determining what gnesssity amounts to. Quine’s “Necessary Truth” addresses the question and finds roughly this, that in general usage “necessarily” signals that what comes next is a matter of inference rather than direct knowledge. Obviously, this view makes gnesssity very different from pnesssity or analyticity, and not really a property at all. Kripke does not discuss this view of Quine’s in “Naming and Necessity,” nor does he explicitly reject it in favor of the identification of gnesssity with knecessity, though he tends to write as if he thought there was no serious divergence that needed to be pointed out and explained between usage of the “necess-” words in his philosophical writings and the usage of the same words in popular speech. (But certainly the identification of gnesssity with knecessity is not obvious, since there is something to be said for Quine’s account in “Necessary Truth” as at least part of the story.) As for pnesssity, its identification with analyticity ought to be no more controversial than (to adapt an example of Soames) the identification of red balls with balls that are red. Certainly no one supposed this identification to be what I called above “a contentious position.”

Now there are *some* places, especially in the literature of philosophical logic, where pnesssity and knecessity do seem to be confused. For instance, some modal logicians, after first officially committing themselves to understanding “necessity” as logico-linguistic truth or analyticity, then go on to argue that since nothing *could have been* distinct from itself, therefore $\forall x \Box (x = x)$ should be a law of modal logic, thus implicitly reading formulas with boxes and diamonds in terms of ordinary-language subjunctive and conditional moods. Nonetheless, in many philosophical contexts, especially in Quine’s writings, where analyticity is being identified with “necessity,” it is only being correctly and harmlessly identified with pnesssity. Whether some sort of fallacy of ambiguity or equivocation is being committed in a given argument about “necessity” is something that really has to be considered case by case.

Or so it seems to me. But be all that as it may, it surely was the case before Kripke that little explicit note of the concept of knecessity was taken, and if that concept did not seldom get confused with pnesssity or analyticity, those who confused the two concepts do not seem to have been self-consciously taking up a contentious position, as were an anti-Kantians who identified apriority with analyticity.

In sum, then, the cases of the identification of the a priori with the analytic and of its identification with the “necessary” are not quite as tidily parallel as Soames’s discussion in his volume 1 (and the part of volume 2 before he actually gets into the details of Kripke) may make them appear to be. Even from our post-Kripkean perspective not every case where “analytic” and “necessary” are being used interchangeably is a case where a gross fallacy is being committed. In some cases there may only be a difference between pre- and post-Kripkean usages of “necessary.” And as I hinted at the end of the last section, it is sometimes not especially easy to determine whether there is a difference of opinion or only a difference in usage.

² The initial consonants in the various “necessities” are pronounced as in *gnostic*, *pneumonia*, and *knight*.

Nor, in truth, is it entirely clear to me how far my own differences with Soames, as expressed above, are differences of principle or only differences of emphasis. (We probably are not quite on the same page, but I think we are at least in the same chapter.) One thing that is clear is that Soames's interpretations—even if they need to be probed at many points and revised at some—provide a background and starting point from which discussions of meaning, necessity, and other central philosophical topics can take off in a variety of interesting directions. What more could one ask of a text whose primary aim is to draw students into the study and practice of philosophical analysis?

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