

Law and Liberty Blog

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Has Philosophy Lost Its Way?

Four years ago, philosophers Robert Frodeman and Adam Briggles published an article with *New York Times*' Opinionator Blog entitled "[When Philosophy Lost its Way](#)." The fundamental argument of the piece is that from the 19th century on, specialization has ruled the discipline: "If philosophy was going to have a secure place in the academy, it needed its own discrete domain, its own arcane language, its own standards of success and its own specialized concerns." Not long after, Scott Soames' [forceful response](#) argued that philosophers are still contributing to the physical, biological, social sciences, ethics, law, and politics as they have been from the time of the pre-Socratics. In his recently published *The World Philosophy Made: From Plato to the Digital Age*, Soames offers a book-length treatment of this theme.

The World Philosophy Made is well-written, offering conversational and thoughtful prose about some very challenging subjects. Readers without a philosophical background will be able to follow most, if not all of his explanations of a myriad of philosophical, mathematical, and scientific concepts in the book. It offers both insight and intellectual challenges appropriate for a wide audience. The argument's central weakness, however, stems from some of his choices about which philosophers, topics, and schools to include, and those whom Soames simply omits.

A History of Western Philosophy

While the stated purpose of the book is to argue that we live in the world that philosophy has made, we see this through the prism of Soames' philosophical canon. Soames starts with the Ancient Greeks, primarily emphasizing how they were the first to move from an oral tradition of myths and poetry to a critically reflective culture. They used the written word to base their beliefs about the natural world, politics, ethics, and mathematics on evidence, argument, and logic. Further, they considered what it meant to live a moral life directed toward the good.

Soames does an excellent job of demonstrating the plurality of ideas of the Medieval period (mid-2nd to the 15th centuries) by contrasting the thought of some very different Christian philosophers. However, this effort is marred by the fact that Soames frames this as a "Truce Between Faith and Reason." He implies that while faith and reason are in an armistice, this will not last because of their intrinsic tensions. Soames claims that modern science and mathematics actually *depend* on this rupture of faith and reason. Before Soames turns to the modern era, he devotes two chapters to the 17th and 18th centuries. In the former, he focuses on the beginnings of modern science, and in the latter, he turns his attention to the development of liberty,

economics, and ethics. Throughout, Soames demonstrates a clear bias against religiously inspired philosophy throughout the book.

At this point of the book, Soames' own philosophical tastes close off certain important parts of philosophy's role in modernity. In the 1800s, Western Philosophy began a process of bifurcating into what in the 20th century became known as analytic philosophy and phenomenology. Analytic philosophy—of which Soames is one of the preeminent living historians—prides itself in objective analysis using the tools of logic, mathematics, and conceptual analysis. By contrast, phenomenology is the philosophical study of experience and consciousness. With the exception of Soames' searing critique of Marx and a few other castaway mentions, the book almost entirely neglects the 19th century. This is an unfortunate sin of omission since there are a number of philosophers that helped make the world in this century as well. For example, he could have mentioned Bernard Bolzano. Bolzano was a mathematician, logician, and philosopher, and thus a forebearer of the type of thinker that Soames holds in such high esteem in the 20th century; further, Bolzano influenced both the analytic and phenomenological traditions.

Thus, Soames leaves us with some questions. Those in the phenomenological tradition (which includes existentialism and post-modernism) are absent: do we conclude that these philosophers did not help make the world? Also, the first four chapters cover the time period from the Ancient Greeks to the 1800s, and the last ten chapters cover 1900 to today: do we infer from this that the last century and a quarter have contributed more than all of the previous centuries by an order of magnitude? Other than a largely fair account of the Medieval Christian philosophers, religion is generally not spoken of: does this represent an inherent bias in Soames thought? While Soames mentions how close we are in time to a disproportionate number of the great philosophers: do we think this because they actually are, or because of chronological snobbery? All of these questions go unanswered.

Logic, Mathematics, Language, & Computers

Gottlob Frege's *Begriffsschrift* (1879) inaugurates the tradition of analytic philosophy. In this and later works, Frege not only introduced autochthonous mathematical notation, he also changed how logic could be interpreted. He changed Aristotle's four classical forms of categorical propositions in, e.g., the following way: from Aristotle's "some knives are weapons" to his "something is a knife and a weapon." This illustrates one of the hallmarks of analytic philosophy, which Frege prophetically stated in the preface of *Begriffsschrift*: logic is a useful instrument for philosophers to break the domination of words over the human mind.

Alas, Frege's own dictum was turned against him when Bertrand Russell discovered a paradox at the heart of his last logical work, *Grundgesetze der Arithmetik*. Russell's Paradox was in reference to an abstract mathematical notation known as *the set of all sets that are not members of themselves*, but his paradox can be explained [intuitively](#). As a result of this paradox, and related ideas in logic, mathematics, and language, thinkers such as Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein expanded on Frege's work and knew now to avoid paradoxes, yet at the same time seeking to have a powerful enough logic to be functional. Gödel proved that not all mathematical theorems could be proved while others demarcated between the syntax of a formal language and its semantics, discovered grammars that generated languages theoretical computers could accept.

In assessing these philosopher-mathematicians together, Soames offers a compelling case that it was this philosophical understanding of the respective scope and limitations of mathematics, logic, and language that gave birth to the digital age.

Freedom, Liberty, Justice, Laws, and the State

In a trio of chapters on political ideas, Soames traces how political and moral philosophers have shaped the government and justice systems of the West, with particular emphasis on the United States. Thomas Hobbes recognized no moral obligation independent of the state, which led to the anti-democratic *Leviathan*. John Locke, who appears earlier in the text with respect to his epistemology, responds that the moral law is not derived from any political institution, but rather moral rights are part of the natural world just as they are laws of physics. Since these laws are independent of the state, the state should be limited in its power; otherwise, it will infringe upon these natural rights. David Hume carries Locke's efforts further by adding social, historical, and biological dimensions to Locke's conception of limited government.

Thus, Soames concludes that unlike Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose abstract conception of the general will gives life to authoritarianism, Hume's empiricism encourages liberty. In presenting the history of political thought this way, Soames offers an implicit endorsement of a kind of moderate secularist skepticism as the best grounding for political life—he raises up a faith in empiricism as the natural basis for liberty. The reality is more complex, and there is something missing in this account. Soames ought to have offered a rich account of what divides those that believe that rights come from the state versus those that rights come nature or God.

This is not to say that Soames needed to become a Thomist in order to offer an adequate account here. What he could have done is turn to Thomas Sowell's elucidation of this point in his peerless *A Conflict of Visions*. The "unconstrained vision" results in Philosopher-Kings that use the power of the state to impose their will on what they-and-only-they understand to be the purported good. The "constrained vision" is self-deprecating, here one understands the limits of human knowledge and trusts in the fallibility of man by limiting the power of the Philosopher-Kings.

Turning to Sowell would have made more sense of where Soames picks up the story of political philosophy in the modern period some chapters later. He opens this account with a discussion of Hayek's *Constitution of Liberty*. While offering some nuanced criticism of Hayek (for example, Hayek is correctly concerned with *absolute poverty*, but not also with *relative poverty* and Hayek's foundational proposition that in a just society income should correspond to the amount of social good for which one is responsible cannot be established), Soames overall view of Hayek's defense of liberty is positive. Soames places Hayek in the tradition of Hume and Adam Smith: Hayek grounds his foundational notation of liberty—the ability to act without coercion—in an empirical way. Hayek certainly appreciates theoretical knowledge, but he also understands the importance of practical knowledge that arises from experience. In this way, Soames offers an endorsement of Hume, Smith, and Hayek based on their shared epistemology: knowledge comes from experience and since that is limited, so is our knowledge. Thus, the legitimate political vision of man is necessarily constrained.

Soames then discusses Robert Nozick's seminal *Anarchy, State, Utopia*. Soames' description of Nozick's work can also be aptly applied to Hayek as well, "There can be no such [distribution of wealth] rule because liberty subverts patterns." Hayek and Nozick both took Wittgenstein's point in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* to heart: there are parts of the world that science cannot speak of, and of that, we must remain silent. Soames concludes his study of near-contemporary political philosophy with a fair critique of Rawls: (a) Rawls never properly defines "fairness" (because it cannot be defined) and (b) fairness is not the only way that humans value one another, (c) fairness is considered to be *a priori*, but it is (in the Humean tradition) *a posteriori*. Thus, he offers a moderate liberal—if not classically liberal—account of the history of political philosophy.

The Limits of General History

The contributions of philosophers to technology and governance, with other contributions detailed in the book such as cognitive science, gives credence to Soames' thesis that philosophy has made our world—and continues to do so. However, Soames' synoptic approach does not always hit the mark.

Among the contributions that philosophy continues to offer policy makers and the military is the [Just War Tradition](#). For example, Barack Obama often [justified his wartime decisions in terms of the tradition](#), and in particular to defend his use of [drone strikes](#) (to include on US citizens) overseas. Donald Trump's decision to assassinate an [Iranian general in Iraq](#) or the [pardon](#) of those convicted of war crimes should be evaluated by the Just War Tradition. The lack of any discussion of this is therefore inexcusable. Instead of addressing moral issues, he merely pointed to the U.S. Constitution as framework for thinking about the *legality* of wars. But morality ought to be prior to legality and certainly prior to judgment. Just War offers a theory that is literally on the front page of the news and speaks to the theme of the book, so it is surprising that it fails to make the cut.

In the penultimate chapter of the book, Soames notes the difficulty of having a nonreligious ethics and offers an empirical ethics based on humans having a "moral sense" in the tradition of the Scottish Enlightenment and its modern interpretation by James Q. Wilson with reference to Charles Darwin and Kant's Categorical Imperative ("Act only according to that maximum whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law"). While his goal of an autonomous objective morality is laudable, he implicitly dismisses the argument that there can only be objective morality if there is God by the mere fact he does not even pose the question to dismiss it. If he were to make that case, Soames' argument for an *a posteriori* objective morality could have been better grounded by a discussion on game theory and nonlinear dynamics—today, philosophers use those mathematical models to explore the nature of cooperation and the evolution of norms. But we might legitimately ask whether even that offers a strong enough moral basis for understanding Western society.

Did Philosophy Make the World?

In short, yes: Soames offers a compelling case for philosophy as a vital craftsman of the modern condition. That being said, philosophy has also been a victim of its own success. Historically, as

each branch of philosophy has become more successful, it has split off into its own discipline (e.g., physics or psychology). Even with that being the case, philosophers are still making striking contributions to the world such that one will only ignore the efforts of philosophers at his own intellectual peril. I too was trained in the analytic tradition of philosophy, and my philosophical education followed this same pattern of neglecting 18th century philosophers, those in the phenomenological tradition, and contemporary Christian philosophers. But the fact they do not rate a presence in the analytic canon is not the same thing as saying they are irrelevant to the history of philosophy—or the broader history of the West. Soames' story remains woefully incomplete.

Despite its blind spots, Soames demonstrates how philosophy shaped our world while at the same time developing a spectacular one-volume history of Western philosophy in the analytic tradition. On those grounds alone, that makes this work a profound achievement.