PRECIS

Précis of *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century, Volume 1, The Dawn of Analysis*

Scott Soames

This, first of two, volumes covers major figures starting with Moore, Russell, and Wittgenstein, continuing through selected logical positivists, emotivists, and the anti-emotivist David Ross, and concluding with pre-*Word-and-Object* works of Quine. The volumes are outgrowths of upper-division undergraduate courses at Princeton University that were often attended by first and second-year graduate students as well. The intended audience consists of comparable students at universities in the English-speaking world, autodidacts, and professional philosophers, who may use the volumes to fill gaps in their knowledge, and to interact with the larger evaluative and interpretative perspectives on offer. Although the volumes were intended as an intensive introduction, they were also written with a more ambitious agenda. The aim was to identify the main lines of progress in the analytic tradition—which involved selecting the most important works, explaining their most significant successes, and drawing lessons from their most disappointing failures.

The result is a philosophically and pedagogically motivated history the aim of which is to separate the essential from the inessential by focusing intensively on the achievements that every member of the tradition should understand. Minor figures and minor works of major figures are, for the most part, omitted. The emphasis throughout is on explaining what was philosophically important and why, as opposed to tracing lines of historical influence, or chronicling changes in individual philosophers' thoughts over time. The major achievements themselves are subjected to intense critical scrutiny. The aim, in each case, is to express the essential insights in the clearest, most powerful way—even if this means dispensing with inessential complexities and minor infelicities in the author's own presentation. The model here is the history of logic. Just as we standardly introduce students to the theorems of great logicians like Gödel, Tarski, and Church by giving streamlined proofs of strengthened versions of the material in their original papers, so we do the same for philosophers like Russell, Wittgenstein, and Quine. Of course, philosophy is not

S. Soames (✉)
USC School of Philosophy, Mudd Hall of Philosophy, University of Southern California,
3709 Trousdale Parkway, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0451, USA
e-mail: soames@email.usc.edu

logic, and progress in the former, though genuine, is often less clear and more likely to be entangled with the questionable, or downright incorrect, than it is in the latter. For this reason, the interpretive task is more delicate in philosophy, and the susceptibility to criticism of even the important milestones of the subject is something from which there is much to learn.

Volume 1 begins with the common-sense epistemology of Moore, and his characteristic philosophical method of using pre-philosophical certainties to test general philosophical principles—illustrated by statements of the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge—rather than going the other way around. Although this methodology was an important advance, the hopes Moore placed on analysis to explain our pre-philosophic knowledge were not born out in his own work. No analysis of the contents of statements of perception that he contemplated ever succeeded in throwing much light on how, precisely, perception certifies their truth. Something similar can be said about his use of philosophical analysis in ethics, where his influential view that *good* is unanalyzable falls prey to a crippling dilemma. On any understanding of analyzability on which the unanalyzability of *good* would justify his claim that conclusions about it are not derivable from premises that don't contain it, his ''open question'' argument does not show that *good* is unanalyzable; whereas on any understanding of analyzability on which his argument does establish that *good* is unanalyzable, this result does not justify the claim that conclusions about what is good can't be derived from premises that don't contain *good*. In this sense, his most famous ethical analysis failed—for reasons connected with his official view of analysis, which, far from a source of strength, was, arguably, his Achilles heel. By contrast, the decidedly more modest conception of analysis that emerged from his exemplary practice of unrelenting, conceptual clarification undeniably advanced the subject, and served as a model for generations of philosophers to come.

The four chapters on Moore are followed by four on Russell, who, more than anyone else, defined the paradigms of philosophical analysis in the period covered by Volume 1, and set the stage for identifying philosophy with the analysis of language. Chapter 5 explains his Theory of Descriptions, his distinction between logical and grammatical form, his logical language, the interaction between the Theory of Descriptions and his epistemology, and the use of Russellian techniques to dispel metaphysical confusion. Chapter 6 presents the leading ideas behind the reduction of arithmetic to logic, Russell's Paradox, and its resolution—separating technical achievements from critical questions about the reduction's philosophical motivations. Chapter 7 takes up Russell's historically influential, but philosophically problematic, attempt to apply his logical techniques to the problem of explaining our knowledge of material objects and other minds, while Chapter 8 sketches his version of the first comprehensive philosophical system in the analytic tradition—logical atomism.

Wittgenstein's version of atomism—one of the most fascinating, intricate, and self-contained philosophical systems ever devised—is the subject of the next three chapters, on the *Tractatus*. There, he presents his conception of a logically perfect language, underlying all ordinary language and thought. Particularly influential was his conception of necessity, apriority, and logical truth. According to the *Tractatus*, all necessity is linguistic necessity, in the sense of resulting from our system of representing the world, rather than the world itself. Moreover, all linguistic necessity

is logical necessity, and all and only logical truths are knowable apriori. These truths make no claims about the world. Those that do are contingent, constitute the domain of science, and are knowable only by empirical investigation. There are no other meaningful sentences—save for the logically or contingently false. Since virtually all traditional statements of ethics, philosophy, and religion seem to fall outside these categories, Wittgenstein concluded that they are nonsense—which meant that there are no meaningful philosophical questions to answer. On this conception, the job of philosophy is to eliminate the linguistic confusion that caused us to seek answers to non-existent questions in the first place. Like Russell, Wittgenstein believed that everyday language disguises thought by concealing true logical form. The proper aim of philosophy was to strip away the disguise, and illuminate the form, thereby dissolving, rather than solving, philosophical problems.

Among the defects of the *Tractatus*—aside from being self-refuting—was an obscure and elaborate conception of reality, the structure of which was designed to parallel the structure of Wittgenstein's logically perfect language. This was jettisoned by the logical positivists, who sought to marry Wittgenstein's idea of a philosophical test of intelligibility to Russell's empiricism and logical techniques. The centerpiece of positivism was the empiricist criterion of meaning, which stated, roughly, that a non-analytic, non-contradictory sentence S is meaningful if and only if S is verifiable or falsifiable. Although the idea initially seemed simple, the devil proved to be in the details. Chapter 13 is devoted to failed attempts to make verificationism workable and precise, leading to the conclusion, drawn in a discussion of Hempel and Carnap, that *if* meaning is to be analyzed in terms of verification, then both must be thought of more holistically—as applying to something larger than individual sentences. Chapter 12, is devoted to the positivists' linguistic conception of the apriori, and Quine's long under-appreciated, but powerful critique of it. Chapter 14 explains and criticizes emotivism, while Chapter 15 examines the leading anti-emotivist, and anti-consequentialist, moral philosopher of the period, Sir David Ross.

The final two chapters address Quine's rejection of the analytic–synthetic distinction and embrace of holistic verificationism. His circle argument shows that—as analyticity was understood by positivists and others—it cannot be defined without presupposing the very notions of necessity and apriority it was supposed to explain. The proper conclusion to be drawn is that either (i) analyticity, necessity, and apriority are *not* related in the way imagined, or (ii) they are all subject to the same doubts. Since Quine shared his opponents presuppositions about the relationship between the three notions, he embraced (ii) and rejected them all. In Chapter 16, I suggest that (i) would have been the better choice. Chapter 17 explains his holistic verificationism and its role in rejecting the conception of philosophy as the analysis of language. For Quine, philosophy is continuous with science. It has no special subject matter of its own, and it is not concerned with the meanings of words in any special sense. Philosophical problems are simply problems of a more abstract and foundational sort than those of everyday science. Chapter 17 ends with a critique of holistic verificationism.

Viewed as a whole, this part of the tradition gives lie to the idea that analytic philosophy is a cohesive school with a unified set of doctrines or a single methodology. Instead, it is a trail of influence involving philosophers with overlapping concerns, a commitment to clarity and rigor in argumentation, and the conviction

that philosophy can progress, not by exalting it above, or separating it from, common sense, the sciences, and other disciplines, but by grounding it in their most secure elements. Although different analytic philosophers have had very different ideas about how to do this, it is hard to deny that—like the best of their pre-analytic predecessors—they are on to something, and have achieved considerable success.