

Précis of philosophical analysis in the twentieth century, volume 2, the age of meaning

Scott Soames

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This volume picks up the development of analytic philosophy at mid-century, where Volume 1 left off. In the years immediately following World War II, logical positivism was drawing its last breaths, and new approaches to philosophy were gathering steam. In America, Quine was attempting to strip positivism of two of its cherished doctrines—the analytic/synthetic distinction, and the verificationist analysis of individual sentences—while rehabilitating its commitments to the centrality of science in philosophy, and the need for a properly empirical conception of meaning. In Britain, the ordinary language school took a different tack—retaining the linguistic conception of philosophy, while eschewing both formal methods and wholly representationalist models of language. Having covered the early Quine in Volume 1, I begin Volume 2 by discussing Wittgenstein, Ryle, Austin, Strawson, Hare, Malcolm, and Grice.

For the later Wittgenstein, language differs from formal calculi, formal derivability plays no special role in explaining conceptual connections, and meaning is not based on naming. Instead, it arises from socially conditioned agreement about the use of words to serve social ends. To understand a word *w* is not to know what *w* names, or how to define *w*, but to know how to use *w* in concert with others. Such understanding is not a psychological state, but a disposition to apply *w* in the correct way; where by *the correct way* we do not mean the way determined by an internalized rule, or indeed by anything else purely internal to the speaker. Rather, Wittgenstein suggests, for one to use *w* correctly is for one to apply *w* in conformity with the way it is applied by others. The problem of giving a precise explanation of this meaning-constituting conformity is one, I argue, that Wittgenstein failed to solve. Nevertheless, his social conception of meaning was central to his philosophy—providing the basis for both his deflationary metaphilosophy, and his private language argument, according to which words are associated with public criteria for assessing correct use, and psychological terms do not make essential reference to internal states.

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

Despite protestations to the contrary, Wittgenstein's philosophical psychology is, I argue, highly revisionary of our ordinary way of thinking about the mental—a result that conflicts with his deflationary view of philosophy as devoid of theoretical discoveries, and limited to reminding us of what we already know, by clearing up verbal confusions. A similar conflict is found in Ryle, who takes the aim of philosophy to be the resolution of dilemmas in which platitudes that are unobjectionable in their own domains appear incompatible when brought together. Typically, he thinks, this apparent incompatibility can be dispelled by a type of analysis that proceeds, not by defining key concepts or uncovering hidden logical forms, but by illuminating the intricate connections that relate all members of the relevant family of concepts. His most important application of this method is to psychological concepts. Rejecting the Cartesian “Myth of the Ghost in the Machine,” he argues that talk of the mental is really just talk about how an agent's actions are coordinated. On this view, to attribute beliefs and desires is not to describe the internal causes of an agent's action, but simply to describe the agent as being disposed to act in certain ways. It is here that we find the conflict. On one hand, Ryle's ordinary-language ideology forswears philosophical theory in favor of the resolution of linguistic confusion, with the aim of leaving us with a clearer, less muddled, version of what we pretheoretically think. On the other, his philosophical arguments seek to undermine a widely held view of the mind, and to substitute for it what is, arguably, a sweeping revision of our ordinary conception of the mental.

In addition, I argue that two generic errors run through Ryle's discussions. One is over-reliance on his holistic method of conceptual analysis, with the result that sometimes (as in his discussion of fatalism) illuminating logical analyses are missed, and sometimes (as in his dispositional analysis of mental terms) gaps in his project are obscured by the lack of precisely specified conditions for the application of crucial concepts. The other error is his conflation of modal, epistemic and linguistic modalities, with the result that genuine alternatives to his account of perception and the mind are not considered.

Equally serious errors plagued Strawson's and Hare's attempt to use Austin's notion of a performative utterance to analyze truth and goodness. The errors were (i) adopting analyses that overlooked the systematicity of meaning by focusing on uses of simple sentences (to call something true, or good), while ignoring their contributions to complex, nonperformative sentences, (ii) failing to identify factors (like conversational implicature) distinct from meaning that significantly affect use, and (iii) exaggerating the difference between performative sentences and others by wrongly suggesting that the former do not express propositions with truth conditions.

I next turn to Austin's *Sense and Sensibilia*, an exemplar of the ordinary language approach to knowledge and skepticism. Though suffering from methodological problems common to the approach, its largely successful critique of the sense-data theory, its insightful discussion of perceptual language, and its fascinating, but flawed, attempt to convict the skeptic of semantic incoherence hold valuable lessons. The latter is especially useful in extending the moral of related attempts by Ryle and Malcolm to disarm skepticism by linguistic means. It is one thing to show that, judged by our best nonskeptical account of meaning, the skeptic violates presuppositions that give his words meaning; it is another to produce an antiskeptical argument even the skeptic must accept. Whereas the latter is, essentially, hopeless, the former may sometimes be possible.

The ordinary language approach, already suffering from increasingly evident methodological shortcomings, was, in my view, brought to an end, in part by Grice's theory of conversational implicature—which made it clear that use was the result of more than meaning—and in part by Davidson's theoretical proposal for how meaning might be systematically studied. However, before taking up Davidson, I turn to Quine's influential views of meaning and reference.

Beginning with the routes to, and content of, his doctrine of the indeterminacy of translation, I show that his most powerful argument for the doctrine equivocates on what it is for one set of truths to determine another. When the equivocation is resolved, his conclusion can't be established. This, of course, doesn't refute the doctrine. To do that we must follow Quine in extending indeterminacy to reference, and related notions. In the end, I maintain, he should be understood as arguing for eliminativism about the ordinary notions of meaning, reference, and truth, and proposing to replace them with the scientifically respectable notions of stimulus meaning, disquotational Tarski-reference, and Tarski-truth. Once this is understood, it is not hard to see that his argument is self-defeating—since without the notions he proposes to eliminate, one can't state the crucial theses on which the indeterminacy doctrine depends. Needless to say, neither Quine nor his contemporaries realized this.

A similar confusion about the fundamental notions required by the Davidsonian program marred its first decade in existence. During that period, Davidson repeatedly portrayed his theories of meaning and interpretation as employing Tarski-truth, which is insufficient to ground meaning, plus a nonrealist notion of reference, the content of which is exhausted by its role in stating systematic connections between the truth conditions of different sentences. Because of this, it was all too easy to view him as deriving a workable notion of meaning—beyond stimulus meaning—from a modest, and essentially Quinean, basis. Fortunately an interesting theory remains even after this illusion is dispelled, and more robust notions of truth and reference are embraced. It is this theory that is the main topic of my discussion. One question central to its assessment concerns the fact that statements specifying truth conditions are less informative than those specifying meaning—as is illustrated by the fact that it is possible for one to know all the truth conditions given by a correct Davidsonian theory of truth for a language, while systematically misunderstanding its sentences. How, in light of this, can Davidsonian theories qualify as theories of meaning? After showing that Davidson's two main attempts to answer this question fail, I briefly assess the prospects for better answers. In the end, it seems clear that although some of the steps he took represented progress in the study of meaning, more needs to be done.

The final philosopher studied is Saul Kripke. Among the doctrines discussed are (i) his distinction between rigid and nonrigid designators, (ii) his arguments against descriptive theories of the meaning and reference of names and natural kind terms, (iii) his positive account of how the reference of these expressions is fixed, (iv) his rehabilitation of essentialism, and rebuttal of Quine's objection to it, (v) his distinction between epistemic and metaphysical possibility, (vi) his conception of possible worlds and his understanding of how we are able to talk about them, (vii) his demonstration of the existence of necessary *a posteriori* truths, and (viii) his argument for the contingent *a priori*. Although I endorse and seek to illuminate his central insights in each of these areas, I argue (a) that his theory of descriptive reference-fixing for certain names and natural kind terms is flawed and requires

modification, (b) that his attempt to construct instances of the contingent apriori involving such descriptive reference-fixing cannot succeed, and the existence of this category of truths must be established in another way, (c) that although one of his two routes to the necessary aposteriori—via essential properties of objects that they can be known, only empirically, to have—is both correct and revolutionary, his other argumentative route to such truths fails, and (d) that his conception of metaphysically possible world-states must be supplemented with an account of metaphysically impossible, but epistemically possible, world-states.

The volume ends with an epilog assessing analytic philosophy at the end of the century, with special attention to the degree of specialization that characterized its final three decades. Trends in philosophical logic and the philosophy of language are used to illustrate general conclusions about the state of the discipline.