DISCUSSION

Soames on the metaphysics and epistemology of Moore and Russell

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Abstract   A critical discussion of selected chapters of the first volume of Scott Soames's *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century*. It is argued that this volume falls short of the minimal standards of scholarship appropriate to a work that advertises itself as a history, and, further, that Soames's frequent heuristic simplifications and distortions, since they are only sporadically identified as such, are more likely confuse than to enlighten the student. These points are illustrated by reference to Soames's discussions of Russell's logical system and the place of the theory of descriptions in his ontological development. It is then argued that Soames's interpretation of the point of G.E. Moore's famous "proof" of an external world, while not straightforwardly undermined by the textual evidence, is nonetheless questionable, and plausibly overlooks what is novel in Moore's discussion. This, it is argued, in his attempt to offer a common sense "refutation of idealism", rather than (as is more commonly supposed) an anti-skeptical argument "from differential certainty".

Introduction

Scott Soames's wide-ranging survey of twentieth-century analytic philosophy, *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth–Century* (vol. I)[1] (hereafter "*PATC*") presents the reader with a conundrum. Does Soames mean to be doing history of philosophy, and so to be making claims about what various philosophers actually meant and believed—or even what they actually said—or is he merely using their

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[1] Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2003.

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writings as pedagogically instructive food for thought? Soames is rarely clear about which of these approaches he intends, and often there are problems with making either assumption. Soames's exegesis shows little fidelity to the texts and even less awareness of recent developments in historical scholarship, while his heuristic simplifications, since they are only sporadically identified as such, are often misleading.

To illustrate this last point, consider Soames's discussion of Russell's logic. In the course of laying out what he claims to be ''the system to which Russell reduces [Peano's] system of arithmetic'' (*PATC*, 140). Soames claims (without subsequent retractions) that Russell treats the identity sign and the sign standardly used for the relation of set membership—''∈''—as logical primitives (*PATC*, 138, 140). But *Principia Mathematica* (Russell & Whitehead, 1910–1913) (hereafter ''*Principia*'') treats both as *defined* signs; the former receiving an explicit, the latter an implicit definition (See *Principia* definitions 13.01, 20.02, and 20.081).[2] Terms for classes are themselves eliminated by contextual definitions (see, e.g., *Principia* 20.01, 20.08), so the system of *Principia* is not a *set theory* at all. Soames can hardly be ignorant of these facts. Presumably, he has sound reasons, or what he takes to be sound reasons, of a broadly pedagogical kind for choosing to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of logicism in the context of the non-Russellian theory he expounds. Surely, however, the care he thus shows for students ought to extend to warning them that this system *is* non-Russellian.[3] Without that warning a student who turns from Soames's text to Russell's logical writings will simply be lost.

To illustrate the point about Soames's scholarship, I will focus on a discussion in which Soames is plausibly taken to be engaged in a genuine attempt at historical exegesis. This is his account of Russell's ontological development. I will argue that Soames's interpretation lands far off the mark. I will then turn to a topic about which there is room for genuine debate, namely, Soames's explanation of Moore's purpose in giving his famous ''proof'' of an external world. I will argue that Soames's reading, while not this time straightforwardly undermined by the textual evidence, is nonetheless questionable, and plausibly overlooks what is novel and important in Moore's discussion.

Russell's ontological development

Soames claims that in the *Principles* (composed 1900–1902, published 1903) Russell is committed by an argument from the meaningfulness of negative existentials to an ontology containing such entities as the golden mountain (*PATC*, 97) and the round square (*PATC*, 98).[4] For convenience, and without regard to questions of Meinong

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[2] Nor does the system Soames describes correspond to that of the *Principles of Mathematics* (hereafter ''*Principles*''), for although there set membership is treated as primitive, identity is defined (*Principles* § 24). And while the system Soames lays out contains the axiom of infinity (*PATC*, 141), the system of the *Principles* does not.

[3] Soames does note that the system he describes differs from Russell's in containing a naïve comprehension axiom, but he says nothing to cancel the misleading impression he creates that the system of *Principia* is a set theory.

[4] ''The round square'' doesn't figure on Soames's illustrative list (*PATC*, 97), but it does occur in the passage he quotes from Russell's *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (*PATC*, 98). Soames uncritically assumes that in this passage Russell is directing his criticisms of an ontology containing the round square against his own 1903 view (ibid). In this passage, however, Russell attributes the view that the round square has being only to Meinong.

scholarship, let us call an ontology "weakly Meinongian" just in case it includes some *unreal* entities, such as the golden mountain or the Homeric gods. And let us call an ontology "strongly Meinongian" just in case among the unreal entities it includes are some so-called "contradictory objects," such as the round square. We can then say that Soames's view is, first, that Russell's ontology in the *Principles* is strongly Meinongian, and, second, that the *first* step Russell takes toward paring down this ontology is his discovery of the Theory of Descriptions (*PATC*, 95, 99).

This account paints a misleading picture of Russell's ontological development. In truth, Russell's ontology in the *Principles* was only *weakly* Meinongian. Moreover, the unreal entities to which the *Principles* is committed do not include the golden mountain, but only those having proper names, e.g., (perhaps) Apollo (if we assume that 'Apollo' is a name). It is true that Russell saw the Theory of Descriptions as giving him the means to resist Meinongianism, both weak and strong, but its discovery was by no means the *first* step he took along this path. As we shall see, in the *Principles* he already possessed the theoretical resources to resist strong Meinongianism, and he was shortly afterward—and well before "On Denoting" (Marsh, 1956, 41–56)—to develop the means to resist weak Meinongianism as well. The Theory of Descriptions came into play only upon Russell's abandonment of his earlier ontology-thinning resources.

Soames takes the following passage from the *Principles* to contain Russell's central argument for that work's alleged strong Meinongianism. (I'll call it "The Key Passage"):

> *Being* is that which belongs to every conceivable term, to every possible object of thought—in short to everything that can possibly occur in any proposition, true or false, and to all such propositions themselves. Being belongs to whatever can be counted. If A be any term that can be counted as one, it is plain that A is something, and therefore that A is. "A is not" must always be either false or meaningless. For if A were nothing, it could not be said not to be; "A is not" implies that there is a term A whose being is denied, and hence that A is. Thus unless "A is not" be an empty sound, it must be false—whatever A may be it certainly is. Numbers, the Homeric gods, relations, chimeras and four-dimensional spaces all have being, for if they were not entities of a kind, we could make no propositions about them. (*Principles* § 427).

Soames's reconstruction of this argument is non-standard:

P1. Meaningful negative existentials are ... subject–predicate sentences....
P2. A meaningful subject–predicate sentence is true if and only if there is an object (or there are objects) to which the subject expression refers, and this object (or these objects) has (have) the property expressed by the predicate.
So, C1. [The sentence "Carnivorous cows don't exist"] can be true only if there are objects—carnivorous cows—to which its subject expression, *carnivorous cows*, refers, and these objects have the property of not existing. Ditto for ... all other meaningful negative existentials.
P3. No objects have the property of not existing....[The *reductio* premise]
So, C2. Meaningful negative existentials cannot be true.
C3. So there are no true, meaningful, negative existentials.
C4. In other words, true meaningful negative existentials don't exist.

C4 is both a meaningful negative existential and a consequence of P1–P3. Since these premises entail a general claim which is a counterexample to itself, at least one of them must be false. [And that is P3.]
[So, some objects have the property of not existing. (QED)] (*PATC*, 97)

The reconstruction faces obvious problems of textual fit: First, and most plainly, The Key Passage says nothing about any sentence being a counterexample to itself. Second, strictly speaking, Russell's argument doesn't concern negative *existentials* at all. What "is" expresses in the context "A is not" is Russell's general notion of *being*, rather than his more specific notion of *existence* (temporal being).[5] In consequence, the negation of P3 is not yet the Meinongian conclusion Soames wants. To believe, as Russell himself did in 1903, in entities that lack existence—for example, propositions and concepts—is not yet to believe in unreal entities, such as the golden mountain. Third, Soames's emphasis on complex plural noun-phrases, such as "Carnivorous cows," is inapposite given the impossibility of grammatically substituting such expressions for "A" in the schema "A is not."

By imputing strong Meinongianism to the Russell of the *Principles* and by arguing that the Theory of Descriptions was the means Russell *first* employed to dispense with unreal objects, Soames joins a discredited[6] tradition of interpretation that dates to Quine's 1966 essay "Russell's Ontological Development."[7] The Quinean reading is typically arrived at by an interpretation of The Key Passage that is more faithful to the texts than Soames's. It is worth asking, therefore, whether the attribution of strong Meinongianism to Russell in 1903 can be defended on grounds other than those Soames provides. The answer is still "no."

The Key Passage is more standardly interpreted as containing the following argument: The meaning of a singular term is its referent. Therefore, any sentence of the form "A is not"—or, more perspicuously, "A lacks being"—where "A" is a singular term, is false, if meaningful. It follows that the referent of every meaningful singular term—including "The round square"—has being. So the round square has being.

The main flaw in this interpretation is its uncritical assumption that in this argument Russell would have intended permissible replacements for "A" to include definite descriptions.[8] There is no evidence that Russell held such a view, and some evidence that he did not; for had he done so, he would have been committed to the being of certain entities that he explicitly rejects, for example, the null class.[9] Moreover, it is easy to understand why Russell wouldn't have regarded definite descriptions as permissible replacements for "A" in the argument of The Key Passage. In the *Principles*

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[5] "[The *is* in "A is"] may be regarded ... as really predicating Being of A." (*Principles* § 53).

[6] The errors of Quine's interpretation were exposed by Richard Cartwright nearly two decades ago. See his "On the Origins of Russell's Theory of Descriptions," in his *Philosophical Essays*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1987. Much of what I say about Russell's ontological development is indebted to this article.

[7] *Journal of Philosophy*, 63, 1966, 657–667. Quine seems to imply that Russell's commitment to strong Meinongianism in the *Principles* was perhaps unwittingly incurred.

[8] This error is identified by Gideon Makin in his *The Metaphysicians of Meaning: Russell and Frege on sense and denotation*, London, Routledge, 2000, 61.

[9] Compare: "[W]ith the strictly extensional view of classes propounded above, a class which has no terms fails to be anything at all." and "There is no actual null class." (*Principles* § 73).

he maintains that when a definite description or other "denoting phrase"[10] occurs in a sentence as grammatical subject, the object it denotes—if any—does not occur in the subject position of the proposition thus expressed. Rather, what occurs there is a special kind of entity known as a "denoting concept," which (in a more fundamental sense) "denotes" the entity in question (cf. *Principles* §§ 64–65, 476). Russell says that "a concept may denote although it does not denote anything" (*Principles* § 73). He means that a concept may function as a denoting concept (and thus as the meaning of a denoting phrase) even though it does not succeed in denoting anything. It is therefore consistent with the view of the *Principles* to maintain that "The round square is not" is both meaningful and true. As early as the *Principles*, then, Russell possessed—in the theory of denoting concepts—resources he then counted sufficient[11] to resist the standard argument for strong Meinongianism.[12] A further consequence of this observation is that Soames's attribution of P2 to Russell is incorrect, since, by Russell's own lights, "The null class is not" would constitute a counterexample to (the corrected version of[13]) this premise.[14]

The argument of The Key Passage is intended to have application when—but only when—what replaces "A" is a genuine proper name. Russell says nothing in the *Principles* to suggest that he regards names of mythical or fictional entities as anything but genuine proper names; so he does seem to have been committed to weak Meinongianism in that work. That commitment, however, was short lived. As Richard Cartwright observes, Russell had already arrived at the opinion that "imaginary proper names"—that is, the names of mythical and fictional entities—"are really substitutes for descriptions" in his essay "On the Meaning and Denotation of Phrases," which was written some time before the close of 1903.[15] It follows that some two years before "On Denoting", Russell would have been able to avoid a commitment to, say, Apollo by treating the apparent name "Apollo" as a disguised definite description—as it might be, "The sun god"—and by maintaining that this expression has meaning by expressing a non-denoting denoting concept. So, Russell had the resources to resist an argument even for *weak* Meinongianism from the meaningfulness of "A is not" well before his 1905 adoption of the Theory of Descriptions.

Upon rejecting the theory of denoting concepts in "On Denoting"[16] Russell deprives himself of his usual means for resisting the argument of The Key Passage

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[10] The denoting phrases include, but are not, I believe, exhausted by, the following: "all Fs," "any F," "every F," "some F," "an F" and "the F" (*Principles* § 58).

[11] These resources may not in fact be sufficient. It is part of the denoting concepts theory that a proposition is about the entity or entities denoted, but when "The F" expresses a non-denoting denoting concept there will be nothing for the proposition to be about. However, Russell seems not to have appreciated the full force of this problem until "On Denoting".

[12] As Makin observes, Russell wrote to Meinong in 1904 pointing out that he could use Frege's distinction between sense and reference, which he did not then distinguish from his own distinction between a denoting concept and what it denotes, to avoid commitments to the golden mountain and the round square (Makin, 2000, 60).

[13] As we noted, the argument would have to be revised so that it employs the concept of being rather than existence.

[14] See note 9 above.

[15] Cartwright 1987, 107. See Russell, *Collected Papers*, vol. 4, 285.

[16] I don't have the space to discuss Russell's reasons for rejecting the theory of denoting concepts, but the most important consideration is his notoriously obscure "Gray's Elegy Argument" (Marsh, 1956, 48–51), which purports to expose a deep incoherence in the theory.

for Meinongianism (weak or strong). But the Theory of Descriptions now provides a new means for blocking this argument. This theory allows Russell to maintain that the sentence ''The golden mountain lacks being'' is meaningful and true even though the phrase ''The golden mountain'' does not refer to any entity. The key idea is to deny that definite descriptions express denoting concepts, and to treat them instead as ''incomplete symbols''—that is to say, signs that have no meaning in isolation but are defined in context. In the end, then, it is true to say that the Theory of Descriptions enables Russell to resist an argument for Meinongianism that runs along the lines of the standard interpretation of The Key Passage. And this is how Russell appears to have viewed the matter in retrospect. More than thirty years after ''On Denoting'' he writes:

> [The theory of descriptions] swept away the contention—advanced, for instance by Meinong—that there must, in the realm of Being, be such objects as the golden mountain and the round square.[17]

But it is crucial to realize that this remark summarizes the dialectical situation prevailing immediately *after* Russell's abandonment of the theory of denoting concepts. In late 1903 and 1904, when he still adhered to that theory, Russell would have seen its combination with the description theory of names as sufficient to avoid Meinongianism, both weak and strong.

There are other cases in which Soames's exegesis suffers from obvious flaws, but in order to be constructive I want to turn to a topic on which Soames's interpretation invites a more nuanced—and, I hope, more fruitful—disagreement.

G. E. Moore's ''Proof'' of an External World

In his article 1939 article ''Proof of an External World''[18] (hereafter ''*PEW*'') G. E. Moore famously attempts to prove the existence of things external to our minds. His argument runs as follows:

1. Here is a hand (said holding up the left hand)
2. Here is another (said holding up the right hand)
3. So there are hands
4. *Ipso facto*, there are things external to our minds. (cf. *PEW*, 165–166)

Moore's ''*ipso facto*'' is effectively a further premise—(3a) Hands are things external to our minds.

Moore argues that this argument satisfies all reasonable criteria for being a proof: The conclusion is distinct from the premises; the premises are known; and the conclusion does follow from the premises.

But what is the *point* of Moore's proof? According to Soames, Moore's purpose is ''ironic'': ''it [is] to show that there is no need for such a proof in the first place'' (*PATC*, 23). More fully, Moore wants to get us to see that the true scandal to philosophy is not the one spoken of by Kant—viz., that no proof of the external world had (prior to Kant) been given, but rather that philosophers have uncritically

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[17] Introduction to the 2nd edition of the *Principles*, 1938.

[18] In T. Baldwin (Ed.). (1993)., G. E. Moore selected writings, London: Routledge.

accepted the legitimacy and presuppositions of the skeptic's demands (ibid). In particular, philosophers have accepted certain ''restrictive philosophical theories'' regarding what counts as knowledge (*PATC*, 22), which make knowledge seem harder to come by than it really is. Soames gives as an example the principle: ''in order to know that *p*, one's evidence must logically or conceptually entail that *p*—and so completely rule out the possibility that *p* is not true.'' (ibid).

Moore certainly would have rejected any such ''restrictive theories of knowledge'' and it is at least *arguable*—though, in the end, doubtful—that *part* of the point of his proof is to convey that such theories must be rejected. But the purpose of the proof clearly goes well beyond this, and I am not convinced that the focus of Moore's article is skepticism at all. But before outlining my reservations about Soames's reading, let me delve a little further into its details.

According to Soames, the main business of Moore's article is to defend the status of his argument as a proof, and, in particular, to defend his claim to know its premises. Moore's defense of this claim has two parts. First he just insists that nothing could be more obvious than that we know such things as his premises. Secondly, he compares his proof to the ordinary proofs we routinely give in daily life. No one would deny that I can prove there are three misprints on a certain page by arguing: ''Here is a misprint, there is another, there is a third; so there are at least three misprints on this page.'' But if this argument is a proof, then by Moore's reasonable requirements on proof I must know its premises to be true. Moore then claims that what goes for proofs of printers' errors goes for his proof too, so that he *does* know his premises.

Having presented this train of reasoning, Soames then asks whether it amounts to a genuine *response* to the sceptic or merely a dismissal of him. He answers that Moore does have a real response, even though it is not explicitly given in *PEW*. This is an argument Moore gives briefly in his 1909 article ''Hume's Philosophy,'' and which he develops in his 1910–11 Morely College Lectures (published as *Some Main Problems of Philosophy* (hereafter ''*SMPP*'')). Moore's response, according to Soames, is to observe that any restrictive theory of knowledge must be responsible to the paradigms of knowledge we (ordinarily) recognize—including knowledge of various Moorean truisms (*PATC*, 23). In particular, the proposition that Moore knows he has a hand is one we have more confidence in, or more reason to accept, than the proposition that any restrictive principle about knowledge is true (ibid). Soames supposes that the implicit point of Moore's proof is to make such an ''argument from differential certainty.''[19]

Soames is not alone in thinking he sees an argument of this broad kind in *PEW*,[20] and it is easy to see why one might be tempted by such a reading. We know that the skeptic would deny that Moore's proof qualifies as a proof, on the grounds that Moore *doesn't* in fact know its premises. Moore plainly knows this, and he knows that his audience knows it, etc; so in the very act of taking himself to have proved the

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[19] This phrase is owed to Thomas Baldwin, see his *G. E. Moore*, London and New York: Routledge, 1990, 269.

[20] Essentially the same reading is argued for by William Lycan who sees Moore in *PEW* as ''modestly inviting a plausibility comparison'' between ''the relevant knowledge claims'' and ''the premises of any philosophical argument intended to show they are false,'' with the implication that the former are more plausible (and ''rationally more credible'') than the latter. See ''Moore Against the New Skeptics,'' *Philosophical Studies*, 103, 35–53, 2001, especially 42 and 44. A similar interpretation of *PEW* is suggested more obliquely by John Pollack and Joseph Cruz in their *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*, 2nd edition, Roman and Littlefield, 1999, 6–7.

existence of the external world, Moore conveys to us that he rejects any theory of knowledge that would entail he doesn't know the premises of his purported proof.

But Soames's interpretation faces an obvious difficulty: it is just not clear why Moore should have chosen such an *indirect* method of making this point about differential certainty in *PEW* when he was prepared to make it explicitly and straightforwardly both before *PEW* in *SMPP*[21] and afterwards in his 1959 essay "Four Forms of Skepticism."[22] Unless Soames can explain what the indirect approach achieves that cannot be achieved by making the point about differential certainty directly, and why the indirect approach should have seemed apt only on this one occasion, his interpretation will remain incomplete.

In any case, whether or not Moore's proof contains a nod toward the differential certainty argument, its purpose clearly reaches further in two or more respects. First, in the long preamble to the proof Moore is trying to get us to acquiesce in a distinctively *common sense* conception of what it is for an object to be "external to our minds"—one according to which hands are paradigms of the kind of things that so exist, and after images paradigms of the kind of things that do not. A thoroughgoing idealist would want to resist this way of drawing the distinction from the start, but Moore's deceptively careful discussion creates the impression that it is uncontroversial, and so leads us to acquiesce in premise (3a). Second, Moore is concerned to rebut Kant's claim that there is only *one* possible proof that objects exist external to our minds (*PEW*, 165–166). By Moore's lights, this claim is false because he (Moore) could have just as easily chosen to prove the existence of the external world by proving, say, that he has two ears, or two feet, or whatnot. (It is surprising how often the centrality of this point to Moore's discussion is overlooked, despite the fact that Moore presents his famous "proof" in the very paragraph devoted to making it.)

These are some of the *specific* points Moore wishes to establish in his paper, but what is its overall aim? In my opinion, the broadest description of Moore's aim is that he is seeking to bring out a further commitment of the common sense view of the world presented in his 1925 paper.[16] A "Defense of Common Sense"[25] (hereafter "*DCS*"). Recall that in that article Moore had claimed that common sense holds that each of us knows a great number of Moorean truisms—e.g., that I have a body that was born a certain time in the past, that it has existed since birth on or near the surface of the earth, etc; that I know these truisms are *wholly* true; and that other people know a great many such truisms about themselves (*DCS*, 107–109). In *PEW* Moore makes two further points in the same vein: first, that common sense holds that we give genuine proofs all the time (*PEW*, 106); and, second, that it holds—against the idealist—that hands are the kinds of things that exist outside of our minds (*PEW*, *passim*).

The chief purpose of Moore's exercise of giving the proof of the external world, I would contend, is to bring out that once we get clear about what we mean by such phrases as "the external world" and "things outside of us," *common sense even holds that we can prove the existence of the external world*—indeed, it holds that we can prove this in a variety of ways. The main point of Moore's exercise is, therefore, not

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[21] And also in his 1918–19 essay "Some Judgments of Perception," *Philosophical Studies*, Totowa, NK: Littlefield, Adams and Co, 1965, 220–252; for the relevant passage see 228.

[22] In Moore's *Philosophical Papers*, London G. Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1959, ch. 9.

[25] In T. Baldwin (Ed.). (1993)., 106–133.

to hint obscurely at an anti-skeptical argument from differential certainty, but rather to provide an exemplar of a common sense *refutation of idealism*.[23,24]

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[23] For compelling evidence that Moore did not take himself to have proved in *PEW* that he *knows* that the external world exists see Baldwin (1990, 281–2).

[24] My thanks for comments and/or discussion to Thony Gillies, Peter Sullivan, Jamie Tappenden, Jason Stanley and Matt Pugsley.