

## Doing Philosophy With Words

Scott Soames has written two wonderfully useful books that will be valuable introductions to twentieth century philosophy. The books arose out of his well-received classes on the history of twentieth century history at Princeton, and will be valuable to anyone teaching similar courses. I shall be relying on them as I teach such a course at Cornell.

The books consist of detailed case studies of important twentieth-century works. They are best read alongside those original texts. Anyone who works through the canon in this way will have an excellent introduction to what twentieth century philosophers were trying to do. The selections are judicious, and while some are obvious classics some are rather clever choices of papers that are representative of the type of work being done at the time. And Soames doesn't just point to the most important works to study, but the most important sections of those works.

Soames's discussion of these pieces is always built around an analysis of their strengths and weaknesses. He praises the praiseworthy, but the focus, at least in the sections I'm discussing (ordinary language philosophy from Wittgenstein to Grice), is on where these philosophers go wrong. This is particularly so when the mistakes are representative of a theme. There are three main mistakes Soames finds in philosophers of this period. First, they rely logical positivism long after it had been shown to be unviable. Second, they disregard the principle that semantics should be systematic. Third, they ignore the distinction between necessity and a priority. All three constitute major themes of Soames's book, and indeed of twentieth century philosophy as Soames sees it.

These books concentrate, almost to a fault, on discussion of philosophers' published works, as opposed to the context in which they are written. Apart from occasionally noting that some books were released posthumously, we aren't told whether the philosophers who wrote them are alive, and only in one case are we told when a philosopher was born. This kind of external information does not seem important to Soames. He is the kind of historian who would prefer a fourth reading of Austin's published works to a first reading of his wartime diaries. And he'd prefer to spend the evening working on refutations, or charitable reformulations, of Austin's arguments to either. I'm mostly sympathetic to this approach; this is history of *philosophy* after all. We can leave discussions of the sociology of 1950s Oxford to those better qualified. But this choice about what to write about has consequences.

Most of Soames's chapters focus almost exclusively on a particular book or paper. The exceptions are like the chapter on *Sense and Sensibilia*, where Soames contrasts Austin's discussion with Ayer's response. We learn a lot about the most important works that way, but less

about their intellectual environment. So the book doesn't have much by way of broad discussion about overall trends or movements. There's very little, for example, about who were the influencers and who the influenced. There's nothing about how anyone not called 'Wittgenstein' changed their positions in response to criticism. One assumes from the chronology that Ryle's influence on Austin was greater than Austin's influence on Ryle, for example, but Soames is silent on whether this is true.

Soames says at one point that, "[Ryle] was, along with Wittgenstein, J. L. Austin, and Paul Grice, one of the prime movers in postwar philosophy in England." (68). But we aren't really told why this is so, apart from the discussion of some prominent works of these four philosophers. (Perhaps Soames has taken the maxim *Show it, don't say it* rather completely to heart.) Nor are we told why the list includes those four, and not, say, Strawson or Geach or Anscombe. Actually Anscombe's absence reminds us that there is almost no discussion of women in philosophy in the book. That's not Soames' fault, it's a reflection of a long-running systematic problem in philosophy that the discipline has a hard time recruiting and retaining women. Could some of that be traced back to what was going on in the ordinary language period? That kind of questions *can't* be addressed by the kind of history book that Soames has written, where the focus is on the best philosophical writing, and not on the broader philosophical community.

One of the other consequences of the format is that, by necessity, many important figures are left out, on pain of writing a fifteen-volume book. In the period under discussion here there was historically important work by (among many others) Nelson Goodman, Wilfrid Sellars and Roderick Chisholm, some of which connects up closely to the themes and interests of the ordinary language philosophers, but none of which is as much as mentioned. (Goodman is mentioned in the epilogue as someone Soames regrets not covering.)

Now these points can't be complaints about the book Soames has written, because it would have been impossible to cover any more figures than he did in the style and depth that he did. And it would have been impossible to tell in detail the story of how Ryle's impact on the philosophical world differed from Austin's, or of the painfully slow integration of women into the top echelons of philosophy, without making the book be even more monumental than it is. All we're left with is a half-hearted expression of regret that he didn't write a different *kind* of book, one that told us more about the forest, even as we value what he says about the tallest of the trees.

### *1. Grice and The End of Ordinary Language*

There is one place where Soames stops to survey the field, namely his discussion of the impact of Grice's work on the ordinary language tradition. Soames argues that with Grice's William James

lectures, the idea of ordinary language philosophy had “run their course”. The position seems to be that in these lectures Grice overthrew a paradigm that had been vibrant for two decades, but was running out of steam by the time of Grice’s James lectures. How plausible is this?

The first step is to work out just what it was that Grice refuted. When summarising the ordinary language paradigm that he takes Grice to have overthrown, Soames is uncharacteristically harsh. In Soames’s summary one of the characteristic activities of an ordinary language philosopher is “opportunistically assembling reminders about how philosophically significant words are used in ordinary settings” (216). That *may* be a fair enough description of *some* mid-century work, but it isn’t a fair summary of the best of the work that Soames has spent the previous two hundred odd pages discussing. It all suggests that Grice didn’t so much overthrow ordinary language philosophy as much as badly done ordinary language philosophy, and this category might not include Strawson, Ryle, Austin and so on.

More importantly, it isn’t entirely clear just what it was Grice did that caused this paradigm shift. In Soames’s telling it seems the development of the speaker meaning/semantic meaning distinction was crucial, but Austin at least already recognised this distinction, indeed appealed to it twice in *Sense and Sensibilia*. Soames mentions one of these: the discussion on pages 89 to 91 of *Sense and Sensibilia* of phrases like “I see two pieces of paper”. There is also the intriguing discussion on pages 128-9 of the relation between *accurate* and *true* where Austin goes close to stating Grice’s submaxim of concision.

The other suggestion is that Grice restored the legitimacy and centrality of systematic semantic theorising. It’s true Grice did that, but this doesn’t show we have to give up ordinary language philosophy unless it was impossible to be an ordinary language philosopher and a systematic semanticist. And it isn’t clear that this really is impossible. It hardly seems *inconsistent* with the kind of philosophy Austin did (especially in his theory of perception) that one endorse a systematic semantic theory. (Though Austin *himself* rarely put forward systematic analyses.) Notably, there are plenty of very systematic formal semanticists who take Strawson’s work on descriptions seriously, and try and integrate it into formal models. So we might wonder why Grice’s work shouldn’t have led to a kind of ordinary language philosophy where we paid more careful attention to system-building.

More broadly, we might wonder whether the ordinary language period really did end. The analysis of knowledge industry (strangely undiscussed in a work on *analysis* in the twentieth century) seemed to putter along much the same before and after the official demise of ordinary language philosophy. And there are affinities between the ordinary language philosophers and important contemporary research programs, e.g. the ‘Canberra Plan’ as described by Frank

Jackson (1998). So perhaps before we asked who killed ordinary language philosophy (It was Professor Grice! In Emerson Hall!! With the semantics/pragmatics distinction!!!) we should have made sure there was a corpse.

## 2. *A Whig History?*

One of the major themes of Soames's discussion is that there are some systematic problems in twentieth century philosophy that are righted by the heroes at the end of the story. I already mentioned the heroic role assigned to Grice. But the real star of the show is Kripke, who comes in as a *deus ex machina* at the end showing how different necessity and a priority are, and thereby righting all manner of grievous wrongs. That Kripke is an important figure in twentieth century philosophy is hardly a matter of dispute, but Soames does stretch a little to find errors for our hero to correct.

Some of the complaints about philosophers collapsing the necessary/a priori distinction do hit the target, but don't leave deep wounds in their victims. For instance, Soames quotes Ryle arguing (in *Dilemmas*) that perception cannot be a physiological process because if it were we couldn't *know* whether we saw a tree until we found out the result of complicated brain scans. Soames points out, perfectly correctly, that the seeing might be necessarily identical to the brain process even if we don't know, and even can't know without complicated measurements, whether they are identical. Soames is right that Ryle has made an epistemological argument here when a metaphysical argument was needed. But rewriting Ryle so he makes that metaphysical argument isn't hard. If my seeing the tree is necessarily identical to the brain process, and the brain process is (as Ryle and Soames seem to agree it is) individuated by the brain components that implement it, then I couldn't have seen the tree had one of the salient neurons in my brain been silently replaced with a functionally equivalent silicon chip. Since it *is* possible that I could have seen a tree even if a salient neuron was replaced with a functionally equivalent silicon chip, the seeing and the brain process are not necessarily identical. So while Ryle might have slipped here and presented an unsound argument, and Kripke's work does help us detect and correct that slip, the consequences of this are basically verbal. Kripke doesn't show us that Ryle's reasoning is useless. Indeed, with a minor modification the argument can be made to work.

A more important charge of ignoring the necessary/a priori distinction comes in Soames's discussion of Wittgenstein's deflationism about philosophy. Here is the salient passage.

His deflationary conception of philosophy is also consistent with, and even derivative from, his new ideas about meaning plus a set of unquestioned

philosophical presuppositions he brings to the enterprise. The philosophical presuppositions include the then current and widespread assumptions that (i) that philosophical theses are not empirical, and hence must be necessary and a priori, and (ii) that the necessary, the a priori and the analytic are one and the same. Because he takes these assumptions for granted, he takes it for granted that if there are any philosophical truths, they must be analytic (29).

This seems to me to be mistaken twice over.

First, it isn't clear to me that there is *any* appeal to concepts of necessity in the passages in Wittgenstein Soames is summarising here, and metaphysical necessity simply doesn't seem to have been a major interest of Wittgenstein's. Wittgenstein does appear to reason that if a proposition is not empirical it is a priori, but that inference doesn't go via claims about necessity, and isn't shown to be fallacious by any of Kripke's examples.

Second, it simply isn't true that philosophers in Wittgenstein's time took for granted that the analytic and the a priori were one and the same, as Soames says. (Soames describes this identity as an 'unquestioned philosophical presupposition' (29) that Wittgenstein 'takes to be obvious' (30).) To be sure, many philosophers in the early twentieth century (including many argue the younger Wittgenstein) argued against Kant's claim that they are distinct, but this isn't quite the same as taking for granted they are identical. And there are a few places where Wittgenstein appears to accept that some propositions are synthetic a priori. For example in *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* he says it is synthetic a priori that there is no reddish green, (Part III, para 39) and goes on to say this about primes.

The distribution of primes would be an ideal example of what could be called synthetic a priori, for one can say that it is at any rate not discoverable by an analysis of the concept of a prime number. (Wittgenstein 1956, Part III, para 42)

Now it is far from obvious what the connection is between remarks such as these and the remarks about the impossibility of philosophical theses in the *Investigations*. Indeed it is not obvious whether Wittgenstein really believed in the synthetic a priori at any stage of his career. But given his lack of interest in metaphysical necessity, and openness to the possibility of synthetic a priori

claims, it seems unlikely that he was, tacitly or otherwise, using the argument Soames gives him to get the deflationary conclusions.<sup>1</sup>

### 3. *Getting the Question Right*

As I mentioned above, Soames's is the kind of history that focuses on the works of prominent philosophers, rather than their historical context. There's much to be gained from this approach, in particular about what the greats can tell us about pressing philosophical questions. But one of the costs is that in focussing on what they say about *our* questions, we might overlook *their* questions. In most cases this is a trap Soames avoids, but in the cases of Austin and Ryle the trap may have been sprung.

Soames sees Austin in *Sense and Sensibilia* as trying to offer us a new argument against radical scepticism.

Austin's ultimate goal is to undermine the coherence of skepticism. His aim is not just to show that skepticism is unjustified, or implausible, or that it is a position no one has reason to accept. Rather, his goal is to prevent skepticism from getting off the ground by denying skeptics their starting point. (173-4)

But we don't get much of an interpretative argument that this is really Austin's goal. Indeed, Soames concedes that Austin "doesn't always approach these questions directly" (172). I'd say he does very little to approach them at all. To be sure, many contemporary defenders of direct realism are interested in its anti-sceptical powers, but there's little to show *Austin* was so moved. Scepticism is not a topic that even arises in *Sense and Sensibilia* until the chapter on Warnock, after Austin has finished with the criticism of Ayer that takes up a large part of the book. And Soames doesn't address the question of how to square the somewhat dismissive tone Austin takes towards scepticism in "Other Minds" with the view here propounded that Austin put forward a fairly radical theory of perception as a way of providing a new answer to the sceptic.

If Austin wasn't trying to refute the sceptic, what was he trying to do? The simplest explanation is that he thought direct realism was true, sense-data theories were false, and that "there is nothing so plain boring as the constant repetition of assertions that are not true, and sometimes no even faintly sensible; if we can reduce this a bit, it will all be to the good." (Austin

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<sup>1</sup> I'm grateful to many correspondants for discussions about Wittgenstein. They convinced me, inter alia, that it would be foolish of me to commit to strong views of any kind about the role of the synthetic a priori in Wittgenstein's later thought, and that the evidence is particularly messy because Wittgenstein wasn't as centrally concerned with these concepts as we are.

1961: 5) I'm inclined to think that in this case the simplest explanation is the best, that Austin wrote a series of lectures on perception because he was interested in the philosophy of perception. Warnock says that "Austin was genuinely shocked by what appeared to his eye to be recklessness, hurry, unrealism, and inadequate attention to truth" (Warnock 1989: 154) in the work of Ayer and others, and suggests this explained not only why Austin wrote the lectures but their harsh edge.

There is one larger point one might have wanted to make out of a discussion of direct realism, or that one might have learned from a discussion of direct realism, that seems relevant to what comes later in Soames's book. If we really see objects, not sense-data, then objects are constituents of intentional states. That suggests that public objects might be constituents of other states, such as beliefs, and hence constituents of assertions. Soames doesn't give us a discussion of these possible historical links between direct realism and direct reference, and that's too bad because there could be some fertile ground to work over here. (I'm no expert on the history of the 1960s, so I'm simply guessing as to whether there is a historical link between direct realism and direct reference to go along with the strong philosophical link between the two. But it would be nice if Soames has provided an indication as to whether those guesses were likely to be productive or futile.)

Soames gives us no inkling of where theories of direct reference came from, save from the brilliant mind of Kripke. Apart from the absence of discussion of any connection between direct realism and direct reference, there's no discussion of the possible connections between Wittgenstein's later theories and direct reference, as Howard Wettstein (2004) has claimed exist. And there's no discussion of the (possibly related) fact that Kripke was developing the work that went into *Naming and Necessity* at the same time as he was lecturing and writing on Wittgenstein, producing the material that eventually became *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*. Kripke is presented here as the first of the moderns<sup>2</sup>, and in many ways he is, but the ways in which he is the last (or the latest) of the ordinary language philosophers could be a very valuable part of a history of philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

Matters are somewhat more difficult when it comes to Ryle's *The Concept of Mind*. Ryle predicted that he would "be stigmatised as 'behaviourist'" (Ryle 1949: 327) and Soames obliges, and calls him a verificationist to boot.

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<sup>2</sup> The first of what David Armstrong (2000) has aptly called "The Age of Conferences".

<sup>3</sup> Just in case this gets misinterpreted, what I'm suggesting here is that Kripke (and his audiences) might have been influenced in interesting ways by philosophy of the 1950s and 1960s, *not* that Kripke took his ideas from those philosophers. The latter claim has been occasionally made, but on that 'debate' (see Soames 1998a, 1998b) I'm 100% on Soames's side.

The idea behind [Ryle's argument] seems to be some form of verificationism. If beliefs and desires were private mental states [says Ryle], then we could never observe the beliefs and desires of others. But if we couldn't observe them, then we couldn't know that they exist, [which we can.] ... This argument is no stronger than verificationism in general, which by 1949 when *The Concept of Mind* was published, had been abandoned by its main proponents, the logical positivists, for the simple reason that every precise formulation of it had been decisively refuted (97-8).

But Ryle's position here isn't verificationism at all, it's abductophobia, or fear of inference to underlying causes. Ryle doesn't think the claim of ghosts in the machine is *meaningless*, he thinks it is false. The kind of inference to underlying causes he disparages here is *exactly* the kind of inference to unobservables that paradigm verificationists, especially Ayer, go out of their way to *allow*, and in doing so buy all end of trouble.<sup>4</sup> And abductophobia is prevalent among many contemporary *anti*-verificationists, particularly direct realists such as McDowell (1996), Brewer (1999) and Smith (2003) who think that if we don't directly observe beer mugs we can never be sure that beer mugs exist. I agree with Soames that Ryle's argument here (and the same style of argument recurs repeatedly in *The Concept of Mind*) is weak, but it's wrong to call it verificationist.

The issue of behaviourism is trickier. At one level Ryle surely is a behaviourist, because whatever *behaviourism* means in philosophy, it includes what Ryle says in *The Concept of Mind*. Ryle is the reference-fixer for at least one disambiguation of *behaviourist*. However we label Ryle's views though, it's hard to square what he says his aims are with the aims Soames attributes to him. In particular, consider Soames's criticism of Ryle's attempt to show that we don't need to posit a ghost in the machine to account for talk of intelligence. (Soames is discussing a long quote from page 47 of *The Concept of Mind*.)

The description Ryle gives here is judicious, and more or less accurate. But it is filled with words and phrases that seem to refer to causally efficacious internal

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<sup>4</sup> It would be particularly poor form of me to use a paradigm case argument without discussing Soames's very good dissection of Malcolm's paradigm case argument in chapter 7 of his book. So let me note my gratitude as a Cornelian for all the interesting lines of inquiry Soames finds suggested in Malcolm's paper – his is a paradigm of charitable interpretation, a masterful discovery of wheat where I'd only ever seen chaff.

mental states—*inferring, thinking, interpreting, responding to objections, being on the lookout for this, making sure not to rely on that*, and so on. Unless all of these can be shown to be nothing more than behavioral dispositions, Ryle will not have succeeded in establishing that to argue intelligently is simply to manifest a variety of purely behavioral dispositions. (106)

And Soames immediately asks

So what are the prospects of reducing all this talk simply to talk about what behavior would take place in various conditions? (106)

The answer, unsurprisingly, is that the prospects aren't good. But why this should bother *Ryle* is never made clear. For Ryle only says that when we talk of mental properties we talk about people's dispositions, not that we talk about their *purely behavioural* dispositions. The latter is Soames's addition. It is rejected more or less explicitly by Ryle in his discussion of knowing how. "Knowing *how*, then, is a disposition, but not a single-track disposition like a reflex or a habit ... its exercises can be overt or covert, deeds performed or deeds imagined, words spoken aloud or words heard in one's head, pictures painted on canvas or pictures in the mind's eye." (1949: 46-7). Nor should Ryle feel compelled to say that these dispositions are behavioural, given his other theoretical commitments.

Ryle is opposed in general to talk of 'reduction' as the discussion of mechanism on pages 76ff shows. To be sure there he is talking about reduction of laws, but he repeatedly makes clear that he regards laws and dispositions as tightly connected (1949: 43, 123ff) and suggests that we use mental concepts to signal that psychological rather than physical laws are applicable to the scenario we're discussing (167). Moreover, he repeatedly talks about mental events for which it is unclear there is any kind of correlated *behavioural* disposition, e.g. the discussion of Johnson's stream of consciousness on page 58 and the extended discussion of imagination in chapter 8. Ryle's claim that "Silent soliloquy is a form of pregnant non-sayings" (269) hardly looks like the claim of someone who wanted to reduce all mental talk to behavioural dispositions, unless one leans rather hard on 'pregnant'. But we aren't told whether Soames leans hard on this word, for he never quite tells us why he thinks all the dispositions that Ryle considers must be behavioural dispositions, rather than (for example) dispositions to produce other dispositions.

To be sure, from a modern perspective it is hard to see where the space is that Ryle aims to occupy. He wants to eliminate the ghosts, so what is left for mind to be but physical stuff, and

what does physical stuff do but behave? He's not an eliminativist, so he's ontologically committed to minds, and he hasn't left anything for them to be but behavioural dispositions. So we might see it (not unfairly) but that's not how Ryle sees it.<sup>5</sup> Soames sees Ryle as an ancestor of a reductive materialist like David Lewis, and a not very successful one at that. But the Ryle of *The Concept of Mind* has as much in common with non-reductive materialists, especially when he says that "not all questions are physical questions" (1949: 77), insists that "men are not machines, not even ghost-ridden machines" (1949: 81) and describes Cartesians rather than mechanists as "the better soldiers" (1949: 330) in the war against ignorance. Perhaps a modern anti-dualist should aim for a reduction of the mental to the physical, but Ryle thought no such reduction was needed to give up the ghost, and the historian should record this.

#### 4. Conclusion

As I said at the top, Soames has written two really valuable books. For anyone who wants to really understand the most important philosophical work written between 1900 and 1970, reading through the classics while constantly referring back to Soames's books to have the complexities of the philosophy explained will be immensely rewarding. Those who do that might feel that the people who skip reading the classics and just read Soames's books get an unreasonably large percentage of the benefits they've accrued. As noted once or twice above I have some quibbles with some points in Soames's story, but that shouldn't let us ignore what a wonderful service Soames has provided by providing these surveys of great philosophical work.\*

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<sup>5</sup> Of course he *couldn't* have seen it that way since in 1949 he wouldn't have had the concept of ontological commitment.

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