

VOLUME

2

*The Age of Meaning*

PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS  
*in the* TWENTIETH CENTURY

SCOTT SOAMES

**PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS  
IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

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*in the*

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CENTURY

VOLUME 2

THE AGE OF MEANING

*Scott Soames*

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TO MY SON

**BRIAN**

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# INTRODUCTION

## OVERVIEW AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### Overview of the Period

This volume continues the story of the leading developments in twentieth-century analytic philosophy begun in volume 1, which ended with the mid-century views of W. V. Quine. Taking up where that one left off, this volume covers the period starting roughly with Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, published in 1953 but completed several years earlier, and ending about the time of Saul Kripke's *Naming and Necessity*, originally given as three lectures at Princeton University in 1970. Topics covered will include the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein, the ordinary language school of Gilbert Ryle, John L. Austin, Peter Strawson, Richard M. Hare, and Norman Malcolm, the attack on the ordinary language school led by Paul Grice and the recognition of the need to distinguish meaning from use, Quine's naturalism and skepticism about meaning, Donald Davidson's systematic theory of truth and meaning, and Kripke's reconceptualization of fundamental semantic and philosophical categories.

The period studied in these two volumes has the distinction of being old enough to be not quite contemporary, while recent enough not to have achieved the venerable status of history. This makes for an interesting combination. On the one hand, we have achieved enough distance to be able to look back at the work done in the period and begin to form an overall picture of what was achieved and what was missed. On the other hand, since the philosophers studied in these volumes still cast long shadows over current debates, the critical overview we develop should be relevant to contemporary discussions in philosophy. This will, I think, become more apparent as we move through volume 2, and begin to encounter conceptual advances that not only ushered in a new philosophical future, but also transformed our view of our analytic past.

The period discussed in volume 2 begins with the ascendancy of two leading ideas, both growing out of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. The first was that philosophical problems are due solely to the misuse of language. Thus, the job of the philosopher is not to construct elaborate theories to solve philosophical problems, but to expose the linguistic confusions that fooled us into thinking there were genuine

problems to be solved in the first place. The second leading idea was that meaning itself—the key to progress in philosophy—was **not** to be studied from a theoretical or abstract scientific perspective. Rather than constructing general theories of meaning, philosophers were supposed to attend to subtle aspects of language use, and to show how misuse of certain words leads to philosophical perplexity and confusion. So what we have at the outset is a remarkable combination of views: all of philosophy depends on a proper understanding of meaning, but there is no systematic theory of meaning, or method of studying it, other than by informally assembling observations about aspects of the use of particular philosophically significant words in more or less ordinary situations.

As one might have guessed, this combination of views proved to be unstable. There are too many factors in addition to meaning that influence when and how particular words are used in order for us to draw philosophically useful conclusions primarily from piecemeal observations about ordinary use. What is needed is some sort of systematic theory of what meaning is, and how it interacts with these other factors governing the use of language. This insight was something that gradually emerged during the 1950s and early 1960s as ordinary language philosophers wrestled with their dilemma. Two important milestones on the way were the development of the theory of speech acts by John L. Austin, and the work on conversational implicature by Paul Grice, both of which we will say something about in this volume.

The end result was that at a certain point philosophers who were convinced that philosophical problems were simply linguistic problems came to recognize that they needed a systematic theory of meaning. However, it was unclear whether such a theory was possible, or, if it was, what it should look like. At the time, skepticism on the matter was fueled by Quine's highly influential arguments in *Word and Object* and *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, which reject our ordinary notions of meaning and reference as scientifically hopeless, while proposing radically deflated substitutes. Meaning, as Quine conceived of it, was not the center of anything, certainly not philosophy. However, his was not the only voice. In the early 1960s an important development took place. Philosophers working in a different tradition, growing out of the development of formal logic, came up with a philosophical conception of meaning that many found irresistible. The conception was formulated by Donald Davidson, who conceived of a theory of meaning as a systematic theory of the truth conditions of the sentences of a language. To many this seemed like precisely the thing that was needed to fulfill

the conception of philosophy as the analysis of meaning—no matter that the conception of meaning employed was a descendant of one that the later Wittgenstein and the ordinary language philosophers who followed him had earlier rejected as irrelevant.

However, the story was not over. Shortly after the development of Davidson's theory of meaning, Saul Kripke came along to explode the idea that the problems of philosophy were all problems of meaning or linguistic analysis. So we have a historical development with considerable irony. We start with the conviction that all problems of philosophy are really linguistic confusions to be resolved by a clear understanding of meaning. However, it is soon realized that in order to pursue this idea we need some theoretical understanding of meaning. This leads eventually to the widespread acceptance of a certain kind of logically and scientifically inspired theory of meaning, which—despite its many shortcomings—represents a significant advance. Then, at about this time, a powerful and persuasive position is developed that leads to the conclusion that however valuable it is to have an informative theory of meaning, it is a mistake to think that our most basic philosophical problems can be resolved by appealing to it. Such is the story that will be developed in volume 2.

### Historical Background

We begin the story of the period from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* to Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* with a review of the historical background, covered in volume 1, that led up to it. Crucial to the development of the analytic approach was G. E. Moore's conception of the proper starting point in philosophy. According to Moore, there is no defensible starting point in philosophy that is more privileged and beyond reasonable doubt than our most fundamental commonsense convictions—e.g., the conviction that we exist, that we are conscious beings, that we inhabit a world containing other conscious beings as well as material objects of various sorts; the conviction that not only do these things exist now, but many also existed in the past, some at times before we were born; and finally, our conviction that we have some genuine knowledge of the existence and character of many of these things. According to Moore, any attempt to ground these convictions on something more certain than they are is bound to fail; no such grounding is possible. Moreover, any claim that we can't

know these commonsense propositions to be true is something that presupposes a philosophical conception of knowledge that stands more in need of justification than the commonsense propositions themselves. This point of view, forcefully expressed by Moore, recurs again and again in the analytic tradition throughout the twentieth century. Not all analytic philosophers have accepted every aspect of it. But it has remained a powerful and influential force.

Although Moore thought that philosophy couldn't contest our most basic commonsense convictions, he did believe that philosophy might be able to provide an analysis of their content—an analysis that would make clear how commonsense truths can genuinely be known. But how should such analysis proceed? Since Moore himself wasn't sure, it was left to Bertrand Russell to provide what became the most widely accepted answer to this question. According to Russell, the task of philosophical analysis was primarily that of uncovering the hidden **logical forms** of sentences, which he took to be the forms of the thoughts that the sentences were used to express. Failure to identify the logical forms of sentences, and to distinguish them from the sentences' grammatical forms, was, he believed, the source of many of the most serious errors in philosophy.

Russell illustrated his point with the problem of negative existentials. A negative existential is a sentence that says that a certain thing, or a certain kind of thing, doesn't exist—e.g., *Carnivorous cows don't exist*, or *The creature from the black lagoon doesn't exist*. Such sentences are grammatically of subject-predicate form. Standardly, we think that a sentence of this form is true if and only if the subject refers to something that has the property expressed by the predicate. For example, the sentence *Pedro Martinez is a baseball player* is true iff the referent of the subject expression—the man Pedro Martinez—has the property of being a baseball player. But if we say the same thing in the case of negative existentials, we get a paradox. Suppose some negative existential is true—e.g., the one about carnivorous cows. Then, it would seem that the subject expression—the phrase *carnivorous cows*—must refer to some things (carnivorous cows), and the predicate *don't exist* must express a property (nonexistence) which those things have. But that, Russell thought, is impossible; if carnivorous cows are there to be referred to at all, then they must exist. Thus, it would seem that the sentence cannot be true; and, more generally, no negative existential can be true. But surely, that can't be right.

According to Russell, the solution to this problem lies in the fact that the grammatical form of negative existentials obscures their true logical

form. Roughly put, his view was that the logical form of the grammatically subject-predicate sentence *Carnivorous cows don't exist* is given by the logical formula, *For all  $x$  either  $x$  isn't carnivorous or  $x$  isn't a cow*. The important point to notice is that this logical form does not contain a subject expression the job of which is to refer to something that is then said not to exist. Rather, Russell saw the logical form as making a claim about the property—expressed by *either  $x$  is not carnivorous or  $x$  is not a cow*—of not being carnivorous or not being a cow. The claim it makes is that this property is possessed by every object. The analysis of the negative existential *The creature from the black lagoon doesn't exist* is similar. Roughly put, Russell takes this sentence to say that the property of being identical with an object  $o$  if and only if  $o$  is a creature from the black lagoon is a property that has no instances. He then generalizes this analysis by arguing that whenever a sentence contains a definite description—an expression of the form *the so and so*—its logical form will be of this complicated sort, and will not contain any single logical constituent corresponding to the grammatical unit *the so and so*. The end result is a conception of abstract logical form that is rather distant from surface grammatical form, and that has to be reached by a process of logical analysis. This theory of Russell's—his theory of descriptions—became for many analytic philosophers in the first half of the century the paradigm of philosophical analysis.

Russell extended the paradigm into the philosophy of mathematics, where he defended the view that all of mathematics could ultimately be reduced to pure logic. The motivation for this view was, in part, his desire to explain the certainty of mathematics and our knowledge of it. He initially thought that if mathematics could all be reduced to logic, then it would have the highest degree of certainty anything can have. The reduction was thought of as coming in two parts. First, higher mathematics was reduced to arithmetic, something that was taken to have been accomplished prior to Russell. Next, arithmetic was to be reduced to logic; this was the project to which Russell contributed. To accomplish the reduction, he formulated a set of what purported to be logical axioms, and he proposed a set of definitions of the central concepts of arithmetic—natural number, zero, and successor—in terms of what he took to be purely logical concepts. He then showed how, using his definitions, the axioms of arithmetic could be derived from his set of logical axioms. In effect, this involved viewing simple arithmetical sentences as being abbreviations of very complex logical formulas. Although this might at first seem counterintuitive, the philosophical advantages of the analysis were thought to overshadow any computational

complications. In the end, it is doubtful that anything did more to lay the foundations of the view that philosophy is logical and linguistic analyses than Russell's theory of descriptions, and his reduction of formal theories of arithmetic to his system of logic.

After Russell came Wittgenstein, who had briefly been a student of Russell's. He took Russell's conception of analysis, and his distinction between logical and grammatical form, and made them the foundations of an integrated philosophical system, which he presented in his early work, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. In the *Tractatus*, he presents an aprioristic theory of meaning, intelligibility, and the limits of philosophy. According to the theory, all intelligible thoughts have contents and structures that are revealed by sentences in an ideal logical language, which constitutes the hidden core of our ordinary language. The theory classifies the sentences in this ideal language as falling into one or the other of two classes. The sentences in one class are contingent and capable of being known to be true, or to be false, only by doing observations and gathering evidence about the world. The sentences in the other class are either necessarily true or necessarily false. According to the theory, whenever a sentence of the ideal language is necessarily true (or necessarily false), it is capable of being shown to be such by logic alone.

On this view, there can be no special philosophical sentences that give information about the world. If a sentence gives information about the world, then it is empirical and not decidable by philosophical reasoning. If a sentence is a necessary truth, then it is a tautology, and requires only rigorous logical proof. Hence, there are no meaningful philosophical sentences, no philosophical thoughts, and there is no subject matter for philosophy. According to the *Tractatus*, philosophical problems arise solely from the misuse and misunderstanding of language. Confronted with a philosophical problem, the proper response is to make clear precisely what the misuse or misunderstanding is. Ideally, this should be done by giving the proper philosophical analysis of the problematic sentences, preferably by showing how to express them in an ideal logical language. So says the *Tractatus*. Later, after Wittgenstein had rejected the *Tractatus*, he retained this linguistic conception of philosophy, while giving up the picture of analysis as revealing hidden logical structure.

According to the *Tractatus*, the foundation of the hidden logical language consists of elementary or atomic sentences (propositions), which, if true, mirror the structure of the world. On this picture, the

basis of all meaning is naming. The simplest linguistic expression is a name, the meaning of which is the object named. The simplest type of sentence, an atomic sentence, is a structured collection of names. The way the names are arranged in a sentence represents the way their bearers are portrayed as combining in the world—for example, the fact that the name *a* immediately precedes the symbol *R*, which in turn immediately precedes the symbol *b*, in the sentence *a R b*, may represent the referent of *a* as being located to the right of the referent of *b*. Atomic sentences are said to represent logically possible ways in which objects can be combined. Such combinations are called *logically possible facts*. A sentence (proposition) that stands for a logically possible fact is said to be true if and only if the fact really obtains, and so is actual rather than merely possible. According to the *Tractatus*, the truth values of all other sentences (propositions) are completely determined by the truth values of all the atomic sentences (propositions). In fact, all nonatomic sentences are claimed to be constructable from the atomic sentences by repeated applications of a simple operation that gathers together previously constructed sentences into a set, and jointly denies them. This is the picture of meaning that Wittgenstein constructs in the *Tractatus*, and that he later sets out to refute and replace in the *Philosophical Investigations*.

Another position that preceded the *Investigations* was logical positivism. Although the positivists accepted the *Tractatus* conception of philosophy as linguistic analysis, they didn't accept the *Tractatus* conception of meaning. In its place, they offered a replacement that linked meaning with verification. Again, sentences were separated into two classes—contingent and empirical vs. analytically true or analytically false, where an analytically true sentence was said to be true solely in virtue of meaning, independent of any possible state of the world (and similarly for analytically false sentences). An attempt was then made to provide a precise criterion for determining which non-analytic, empirical sentences were meaningful. These attempts fell into two categories. First, the positivists tried to define empirical meaningfulness in terms of strong verifiability or strong falsifiability. A sentence was said to be strongly verifiable if and only if it was logically entailed by some finite consistent set of observation statements; it was said to be strongly falsifiable if and only if its negation was logically entailed by some finite consistent set of observation statements. In effect, strongly verifiable sentences were supposed to be those the truth of which could, in principle, be completely established on the basis of sensory observations alone;