

REVIEW

SCOTT SOAMES

Understanding Truth

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Graham Priest

Department of Philosophy

University of Melbourne

Philosophical problems don't come much bigger or deeper than the nature of truth, and that issue, as its title indicates, is what Soames' book takes on. The material is based on seminars that Soames has given over a period of years at Princeton and elsewhere.

The book comprises three parts. The first, 'Foundational Issues', contains a discussion of the nature of truth bearers—coming down firmly on the side of propositions—and a rejection of various forms of 'skepticism' about truth: that it is indefinable, unknowable, metaphysical, redundant, and incoherent. The second, and main, part is called 'Two Theories of 'Truth'', the two theories being Tarski's and Kripke's. Both theories are explained and discussed. There are interesting critiques of Tarski's theory, and of various consequences that it is often taken to have. In particular, the views of Davidson on meaning, Field on physicalism, and Etchemendy on validity, are taken on and rejected. The discussion of Kripke's theory is sensitive and, I thought, handled well the elusive distinction between lacking a truth value and having a third truth value. As one might expect, the adequacies of each of the two theories to address the Liar paradox come in for extended discussion. The final part, 'Extensions', contains two chapters, the first on vagueness, the second on deflationary accounts of truth. I will return to the treatment of some of these issues in a moment.

Generally, I found two things about the book striking. The first is the thorough and professional nature of its discussion. Though one might not always agree with Soames' conclusions, one cannot but admire the care and thought that has gone into the writing. I found a number of the discussions (often those contained in long footnotes) illuminating. The second is the somewhat narrow perspective of the book. Despite the fact that, Soames tells us (p. 4), 'the main aim of the book is to integrate and extend the most important insights on truth from a variety of sources', it is written from the

standpoint of a North American logician. There is no mention of Peirce, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, or Rorty. Soames may well think that there are no important insights in these people. That, of course, is his prerogative. Perhaps more notable is that there is no mention of people working squarely within Soames' tradition. There is no mention of Gupta's 'revision' theory of truth; of Barwise and Etchemendy on the Liar; of dialethic accounts of truth and the Liar; no mention of Williamson on vagueness. (Some other contemporary writers on vagueness are taken on as something of an afterthought in a final footnote in that chapter.) Of course, you can't discuss everything, but I did find some of these silences rather surprising. Perhaps the most surprising is McGee's book *Truth and Vagueness* (Hackett Publishing Co., 1990). Both Soames and McGee want to treat the truth predicate and vague predicates in the same way; both take off from Kripke's account of truth. But McGee finds this account inadequate (Ch. 3) and goes beyond it; Soames does not. None of this is mentioned.

In the rest of this review, I will comment on Soames' position on some of the issues he raises. Let us start with vagueness. Soames espouses, essentially, a truth value gap approach. A vague predicate, *F*, has a determinate extension (containing those things of which *F* is determinately true), a determinate anti-extension (containing those things of which *F* is determinately false), and a residue (containing those things of which it is determinately neither). Soames also argues, cogently, that the actual extension and anti-extension of a vague predicate may vary, given contextual circumstances, to fill in some of the residue (though not necessarily to eliminate it entirely), allowing more things to count truly or falsely as *F*. So much is fairly standard. But Soames adds to this the claim that the determinate extension and anti-extension of a predicate may themselves depend on contextual features. Something is in the determinate extension of a predicate, *F* (in a context, *C*) just if (p. 221):

the linguistic conventions that govern *F* (together with special facts about the use of *F* in *C*, and the relevant non-linguistic facts) determine that *F* applies (in *C*) to [it].

If this is right, then it is no longer clear (at least to me) how one distinguishes between extension and determinate extension: both vary according to context and rules locally in force. Indeed, it is no longer clear why one should want to make this distinction. (One promising line for drawing the distinction, in terms of modifiers like 'definitely', is closed off by Soames. These, he claims, function quite differently (p. 221).)

One relevant difference between extension and determinate extension, Soames suggests, is that, at least in a number of cases, the boundary between the extension and the residue is vague, whereas the boundary between the

determinate extension and the residue is crisp. But if this is the case, the problem of vagueness looms with respect to the latter distinction. Even once the context is fixed, the division between what is determinately true and what is not seems just as problematic as the division between what is true and what is false for someone of bivalent persuasion. Soames' solution (pp. 216f.), as far as I understand it, is to bite the bullet, and accept the existence of such a cut-off point, even though we may not be able to say where it is. One wonders what, if anything, is to be gained, in the present approach, over the epistemic account of vagueness of Williamson and Sorensen.

I turn now to Soames' account of the Liar paradox. Soames considers a Tarskian account of the paradox, and rejects it, for reasons that are fairly standard. He takes it—as he must, as we shall see—that the objectives do not 'refute the hierarchical approach' (p. 156). Instead, he develops a Kripkean account of the paradoxes. In the end, though, this has to be rejected for again familiar reasons. Given the machinery of the purported solution, extended paradoxes can be formulated. This machinery has then to be relegated to a metalanguage, and so we are off up a Tarskian hierarchy.

But why do the standard objections not refute a Tarskian approach? Soames explains (p. 158):

The extremely puzzling character of the Liar paradox and the ease with which intuitively obvious assumptions about truth can be shown to lead to contradiction make it plausible to suppose that any effective treatment of the paradox may lead us to revise some of our intuitive judgments about truth. Thus it is not out of the question that one might argue that the difficulties we have found with the hierarchy are based on erroneous intuitions that need to be revised.

What intuitions? Soames explains well that if the hierarchy is correct, then many of the things that we (think we) say cannot, in fact, be said. We cannot even explain the hierarchy itself! So we can deny the intuitions that we really are saying them. But if this is right, what on earth is Soames doing in his book when he explains all these things? This is an exercise in kicking away the ladder of Tractarian proportion. The whole picture here is a familiar one (told in detail in my *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 1995)).

New perspectives on the matter might have opened up had Soames pursued some of his ideas further. To motivate the idea of truth value gaps, he has a nice example of introducing a predicate 'smidget' into the language (pp. 164f.) There are two groups of people, *A* and *B*, such that every member of *A* is shorter than every member of *B*. If someone is shorter than some member of *A*, then they are a smidget. If they are taller than some member of *B* then they are not a smidget. There may be people who are neither, and for whom, therefore, the applicability of the predicate is not defined.

But now suppose that the members of *A* and *B* overlap very slightly in the middle range (perhaps unbeknown to us). Exactly the same considerations apply, except that this time we end up with truth value gluts, not truth value gaps. And if we do this, we have a paraconsistent logic, which brooks inconsistencies, and so finesses the consistency constraint that drives the unhappy consequences of all standard accounts of the Liar paradox. Soames might insist that such inconsistency is incoherent. (In fact, lie uses ‘inconsistent’ and ‘incoherent pretty’ much interchangeably throughout the book.) But this cannot be right: if ‘incoherent’ means ‘making everything true’, then the semantics implicit in the tweaked form of his proposal show this to be false; and if ‘incoherent’ means ‘unusable’, one need only quote Soames’ own words about ‘*smidget*’—I interpolate one phrase (p. 164):

the point of introducing the term may be to set up a gross categorization of the two groups easily distinguishable from each other by observation. Because of this there may be no need to define a sharp and finely discriminated boundary [...] to distinguish the smidgets from the *nonsmidgets*. The price we pay for this convenience is, of course, our inability to use the instructions introducing the predicate to characterize certain individuals as smidgets or [exclusive disjunction] nonsmidgets. However, if adults whose heights are in the intermediate range [...] are rare and not often encountered, this may be a price that we are willing to pay. Surely there is no *a priori* reason why the advantages of introducing a predicate by stipulations of the sort just illustrated must always be outweighed by the potential disadvantages. Language is an institution designed to meet various practical contingencies. As such, it is not required that linguistic conventions be framed in terms of all imaginable circumstances.

Let us turn, finally, to Soames’ own position on the nature of truth. He characterizes deflationism, roughly, as the view that (p. 231):

claims of the sort It is true that *S* and The proposition that *S* is true are trivially equivalent to *S* and that this equivalence is in some sense definitional of the notion of truth.

He also says (without much argument) that ‘deflationism is obvious, uncontentious, and [...] without substantial philosophical consequences’. (The fact that some of these ‘trivial, *a priori* and necessary’ truths are paradox-generating is conveniently set aside at this point (p. 244, esp. fn. 24).) This does not mean that deflationism is an easy view to articulate satisfactorily, though. Soames criticizes the versions of Ramsey, Strawson, Tarski and Kripke (to the extent that they are deflationists), and Horwich; but does not, in the end, offer a version of his own. The criticisms of the views in question are excellent; but I somehow doubt that deflationism is obvious

and uncontentious. Too many have thought, and still think, that correspondence is, in some sense, definitional of truth for this to be the case.

I have chosen to dwell here on some of the issues over which I disagree with Soames. It should go without saying that this does not mean that I think the book to be bad. On the contrary: if there were nothing in a philosophy book with which one disagreed, it would probably contain nothing but platitudes. This may not be a book that will be noted for its new ideas and positions; but those who read it to find careful and thoughtful scrutiny of some currently standard views on truth and related issues will be well rewarded.