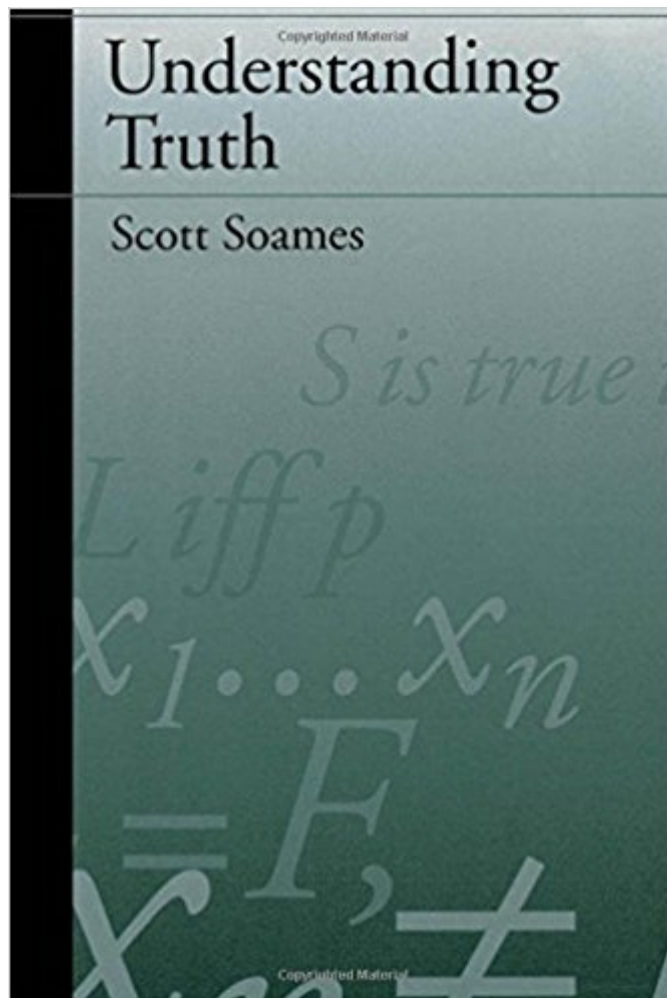


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Understanding Truth



Synopsis

In this book, Scott Soames illuminates the notion of truth and the role it plays in our ordinary thought as well as in our logical, philosophical, and scientific theories. Soames aims to integrate and deepen the most significant insights on truth from a variety of sources. He powerfully brings together the best technical work and the most important philosophical reflection on truth and shows how each can illuminate the other. Investigating such questions as whether we need a truth predicate at all, what theoretical tasks it allows us to accomplish, and how we are to understand the content of any predicate capable of accomplishing these tasks, Soames organizes his discussion into three parts. Part I addresses crucial foundational issues as it identifies the bearers of truth, provides a basis for distinguishing truth from other notions (like certainty, with which it is often confused), and formulates positive responses to well-known forms of truth-skepticism. Part II explicates the formal theories of Alfred Tarski and Saul Kripke and evaluates the philosophical significance of their work. It discusses their treatments of the Liar paradox, the relationship between truth and proof, the notion of a partially defined predicate, the concepts of logical truth and logical consequence, and the connection between truth and meaning. Part III extends important lessons drawn from Tarski and Kripke into new domains: vague predicates, the Sorites paradox, and the development of a larger, deflationary perspective on truth. Throughout the book, Soames examines a wide range of deflationary theories of truth, and attempts to separate what is correct and worth preserving in them from what is not. In doing so, he seeks to clear up many of the most significant philosophical doubts about truth. Written for a general audience while offering engaging material to the specialist, this rich study will be profitably read by both.

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Customer Reviews

One ... feature is the sheer clarity of the writing and the care with which arguments are given and discussed. In this way the book serves as an example of how to write philosophy; and this is no small accomplishment, especially in the face of its frequent absence in contemporary philosophical books. * Australasian Journal of Philosophy, vol.79, no.2 * While there are many introductions to Kripke's theory of truth there are none that rival Soames's presentation ... Soames's presentation of the theory is not only clear, careful, and rigorous, but is likewise, and atypically user-friendly. * Australasian Journal of Philosophy, vol.79, no.2 * Soames's introduction to partially defined predicates is exemplary, one that presupposes virtually no background in logic or maths. ... Soames's interpretation of Kripke's 'truth value gaps' in terms of partially defined predicates ... is arguably the best available interpretation on the market; and Soames's discussion of this interpretation, like his other discussions, is a paradigm of clarity. For these reasons alone the book is well worth reading. * Australasian Journal of Philosophy, vol.79, no.2 *

Scott Soames is Professor of Philosophy at Princeton University.

Soames accomplishes what he sets out to do in the book, which is to provide a clear and coherent introduction to the formal theories of truth developed by Alfred Tarski and Saul Kripke, and to suggest some ways that these theories can be used to illuminate philosophical concerns about what the truth predicate can normally be taken to mean in its regular usage. His coverage of the work of these two logicians is lucid and helpful, but I wish he'd provided a bit more of a summary of Kripke's notoriously obscure theory - his presentation of it is placed within the context of a more general discussion of "partially defined predicates" in a way that makes it less than entirely clear exactly what components of his treatment are ideas that Kripke would himself endorse. Soames inherits from Richard Cartwright the somewhat idiosyncratic (these days) view that the primary bearers of truth are propositions rather than sentences. This is a thesis that is only defended rather glibly in the book's early chapters but it informs most of what he says later. There is a long digression about two-thirds of the way through in which he tries to solve the philosophical problem of vagueness - there is remarkably little evidence of engagement with the literature already out there on this topic, and I'm less than clear why this stuff is even in the book at all. Soames' style is consistently clear but also rather turgid - he insists on taking the reader through every single step of every single

argument that he makes, however basic or obvious some of them might seem, and one can sometimes lose sight of the forest for the trees as a result of this. Still, a little patience with the book is well-rewarded, and by the end I found myself wondering why something like this hadn't in fact been written much earlier by anyone else.

As someone who has majored in philosophy, I'm the first to admit that philosophical jargon has its utility and crucial functions. But Soames could have helped his readers out more by explicating his ideas and the arguments he critiques in plainer, simpler prose. Soames claims he has written the book with the general audience in philosophy in mind, but it's a daunting task to get through. One gets the sense that Soames wants you to wrestle with his words in addition to his ideas. And in all fairness, some of these concepts are very obtuse, even in the realm of philosophy. Style and explication aside, Soames does illuminate the notion of truth and the role it plays in ordinary language and more formalized languages. He has a keen mind and a talent for reconstructing and then demolishing philosophical arguments. I recommend this book for anyone who wants to learn more about what contemporary philosophers think about truth, but you better have more than an elementary background in the philosophy of language (and some symbolic logic wouldn't hurt either) if you want to dive into this book and understand it without hurting your brain.

I have sat in on Soames' classes (he's a philosophy professor at Princeton University) and, because I found him to be an excellent lecturer - concise, clear, expressive and broadly knowledgeable - and able to illuminate a demanding subject. Because I was impressed by him, I read "Understanding Truth." The book duplicates his teaching style -- he's taken difficult subject matter and arranged and explained it in a coherent and interesting manner. The book is probably not for the casual reader, however. Soames demands a relatively intelligent reader with an interest in analytic philosophy. For that individual, this is one of the few books on the subject that is accessible to a non-philosopher.

Stultifyingly written. No one without at least an undergraduate major in philosophy will get much out of it. I recommend that all tempted to read this should first read the Kirkham book "Theories of Truth".

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