

**PHIL 470: Seminar: Metaphysics & Epistemology
Truth and Reality**

Handout (20)

W. V. Quine: Ontological Relativity

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Quine's Main Theses:

- 1. Naturalism in language**
- 2. The indeterminacy of translation**
- 3. The inscrutability of reference**
- 4. Radical translation**
- 5. The ontological relativity → frame of reference; the indispensability of theory**
- 6. Reduction → background theory**

§ Quine's Naturalism

___ Knowledge, mind, and meanings are part of the same world that they have to do with, and that they are to be studied in the same world that they have to do with, and that they are to be studied in the same empirical spirit that animates natural science.

§ Naturalism with Language

___ Meanings are, first and foremost, meanings of language. Language is a social art which we all acquire on the evidence solely of other people's overt behavior under publicly recognizable circumstances. Meanings, therefore, those very models of mental entities, end up as grist for the behaviorist's mill.

___ For naturalism the question whether two expressions are alike or unlike in meaning has no determinate answer, known or unknown, except insofar as the answer is settled in principle by people's speech dispositions, known or unknown.

Dewey:

___ Meaning ... is not a psychic existence; it is primarily a property of behavior.

___ Language is specifically a mode of interaction of at least two beings, a speaker and a hearer; it presupposes an organized group to which these creatures belong, and from whom they have acquired their habits of speech. It is therefore a relationship.

→ There is no private language.

___ Each of us, as he learns his language, is a student of his neighbor's behavior; and conversely, insofar as his tries are approved or corrected, he is a subject of his neighbor's behavioral study.

___ What the naturalist insists on is that, even in the complex and obscure parts of language learning, the learner has no data to work with but the overt behavior of other speakers.

*** In contrast:**

(1) Museum Theory

___ Each word and each sentence has a determinate meaning assigned to it.

(2) Mentalism

___ Mentalism: Meanings are determined by what is in the speaker's mind (the speaker's intention). To know what a person means by her word we must know what is in her mind.

§ The Indeterminacy of Translation

1. One and the same native use of the expression can be given either of the English translations, each being accommodated by compensating adjustments in the translation of other words.
2. Suppose both translations, along with these accommodations in each case, accord equally well with all observable behavior on the part of speakers of the remote language and speakers of English. Suppose they accord perfectly not only with behavior actually observed, but with all dispositions to behavior on the part of all the speakers concerned.
3. On these assumptions **it would be forever impossible to know of one of these translations that it was the right one, and the other wrong.**

*** gavagai**

___ If we are wondering whether to translate a native expression "gavagai" as "rabbit" or as "undetached rabbit part" or as "rabbit stage," we can never settle the matter simply by ostension – that is, simply by repeatedly querying the expression "gavagai" for the native's assent or dissent in the presence of assorted stimulations.

___ Insofar, the native's assent is no objective evidence for translating "gavagai" as "rabbit" rather than "undetached rabbit part" or "rabbit stage."

§ The Inscrutability of Reference

1. Of two predicates which are alike in extension, it has never been clear when to say that they are alike in meaning and when not.
2. The terms "rabbit," "undetached rabbit part," and "rabbit stage" differ not only in meaning; they are true of different things. Reference itself proves behaviorally inscrutable.

*** Japanese classifiers**

*** 'green'**

___ the difference between the concrete general and abstract singular is a difference in the objects referred to.

* The Methods of Ostension

[direct ostension]

___ What characterizes *direct ostension* is that the term which is being ostensively explained is true of something that contains the ostended point (the point where the line of the pointing finger first meets an opaque surface).

[deferred ostension]

___ Other ostension I call *deferred*.

1. Even in cases of direct ostension, there is the inscrutability of reference (e.g. 'gavagai').
2. Moving to deferred ostension and abstract objects, we found a certain dimness of reference pervading the home language.

§ Radical Translation

* [radical translation]:

___ Translation from a remote language on behavioral evidence, unaided by prior dictionaries.

___ On deeper reflection, radical translation begins at home.

1. Must we equate our neighbor's English words with the same strings of phonemes in our own mouth? Certainly not; for sometimes we do not thus equate them. Sometimes we find it to be in the interests of communications to recognize that our neighbor's use of some word, such as "cool" or "square" or "hopefully," differs from ours, and so we translate that word of his into a different string of phonemes in our idiolect.
2. Our usual domestic rule of translation is indeed the homophonic one, which simply carries each string of phonemes into itself; but still we are always prepared to temper homophony with "the principle of charity."
3. **[the principle of charity]:** We will construe a neighbor's word hetero-phonically now and again if thereby we see our way to making his message less absurd.
4. (a) Homophonic translation is implicit in this social method of learning.
 (b) Then there are the relatively rare instances of opposite kind, due to divergence in dialect or confusion in an individual, where homophonic translation incurs negative feedback.
 (c) But what tends to escape notice is that there is also a vast mid-region where the homophonic method is indifferent.

In short, we can reproduce the inscrutability of reference at home.

___ The problem at home differ none from radical translation ordinarily so called except in the willfulness of this suspension of homophonic translation.

§ Ontological Relativity

___ This network of terms and predicates and auxiliary devices is, in relativity jargon, our **frame of reference**, or coordinate system.

___ Relative to *it* we can and do talk meaningfully and distinctively of rabbits and parts, numbers and formulas.

___ Reference *is* nonsense except relative to a **coordinate system**. It is meaningless to ask “Does ‘rabbit’ really refer to rabbits?” absolutely; we can meaningfully ask it only relative to some **background language**.

___ What makes sense is to say not what the objects of a theory are, absolutely speaking, but how one theory of objects is interpretable or reinterpretable in another.

* **existence and theoretical commitment:**

It makes no sense to say what the objects of a theory are, beyond saying how to interpret or reinterpret that theory in another. Suppose we are working within a theory and thus treating of its objects. We do so by using the variables of the theory, whose values those objects are, though there be no ultimate sense in which that universe can have been specified.

* **What makes ontological questions meaningless when taken absolutely is not universality but circularity.**

___ We cannot know what something is without knowing how it is marked off from other things. Identity is thus of a piece with ontology.

JeeLoo’s question:

___ Why don’t we see “commonsense realism” as a form of theory – folk realism, which is not universally acceptable or accepted? If so, then it is *not* the *default* position (contra-Alston).

§ Reduction and Ontology

___ A usual occasion for ontological talk is **reduction**, where it is shown how the universe of some theory can by a reinterpretation be dispensed with in favor of some other universe, perhaps a proper part of the first.

One ontology is *always* reducible to another when we are given a proxy function f that is one-to-one.

Our dependence upon a **background theory** becomes especially evident when we reduce our universe U to another V by appeal to a proxy function. For this is only in a theory with an inclusive universe, embracing U and V , that we can make sense of the proxy function. The function maps U into V and hence needs all the old objects of U as well as their new proxies in V .

Ontology thus is emphatically meaningless for a finite theory of named objects, considered in and of itself.

The question of its ontology makes sense only relative to some translation of the theory into a background theory in which we use referential quantification. The answer depends on both theories and, again, on the chosen way of translating the one into the other.

→ JeeLoo: [Things do not exist in and by themselves; things exist as a theory commits to their existence. A theory has its ontological commitment relative to a background theory.]

*** Conclusion:**

___ **Ontology can be multiply relative, multiply meaningless apart from a background theory.**

___ **We are unable to say in absolute terms just what the objects are.**

___ When we do relativize these matters to a background theory, moreover, the relativization itself has two components: relativity to the choice of background theory and relativity to the choice of how to translate the object theory into the background theory.

Supplementary:

Quine: On What There Is

§ The Ontological Problem

___ **What is there?**

§ Quine's Main Claims:

1. **We can use singular terms significantly in sentences without presupposing that there are the entities which those terms purport to name.**
2. **We can use general terms, for example, predicates, without conceding them to be names of abstract entities.**
3. **We can view utterances as significant, and as synonymous or heteronymous with one another, without countenancing a realm of entities called meanings.**

§ Ontological Commitment

1. The only way we can involve ourselves in ontological commitments: by our use of bound variables [*There is something* (bound variable) which is]
2. Quine's dictum: To be is to be the value of a variable.
3. We remain so committed until we devise some way of *paraphrasing* so as to avoid using bound variables.
4. A theory is committed to those and only those entities to which the bound variables of the theory must be capable of referring in order that the affirmations made in the theory be true.
5. What a given doctrine *says* there is ≠ What *there is*. The former involves language; the latter involves disagreement in conceptual schemes.