

QUINE'S INSCRUTABILITY OF REFERENCE

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Reference is judged inscrutable by Quine[1] because in spite of the restrictions he imposes on his terminology, he finds he is unable to bridge the gap between his language and experience. This however may be merely due to his behaviorist interpretation of knowledge. Quine's ontology may be considered naive insofar as he ignores or forgets the act that makes experience cohere. He is committed to characterize all knowledge as knowledge of objects, and claims we can eliminate names in favor of variables and predicates and thus reduce all ontological questions to questions about quantification. The problem is whether by doing so he is not changing the subject. We cannot specify reference except in the context of background knowledge. Mohanty however is quite right in pointing out that this thesis would equally apply to the child's or the foreign adult's utterance of «red» in the presence of red as much as to the native speaker's faultlessly using the referential apparatus of existential quantification and identity. Thus, Quine has not satisfactorily shown why the child's or the foreign adult's reference of «red» does not refer at all[2]. What Mohanty does is to question the behaviorist assumptions on which Quine's theory of reference is based. Objective reference will be considered inscrutable only as long as we insist on a behaviorist interpretation of reference, and such opaqueness disappears the moment we accept a terminology that takes account of the structure of the domain as adopted for example by Brentano, Meinong or Husserl. Quine himself talks sometimes about «positing objects»[3], and his use of reference is, on his own admission, somewhat remote from ordinary usage.

Thus, according to Quine, both science and philosophy (which is continuous with science) construct rather than describe the framework of ordinary language. Part of such reconstruction is the regimentation of science and philosophy, and it is of this reference that Quine gives a psychogenesis[4]. What the child learns at first is to refer in a sense of referring that is not Quinean, a sense that is

embedded in perception and ordinary language. It is with individuation that the process of objectification begins and Quine's criteria for individuation are derived from the theory of sets. But long before he knows how to count the child learns to individuate objects by mastering the plural form, and such forms as «that apple,» «an apple,» «same apple,» and the «is» of identity. At this level, learning the word «dog» is already no longer discovering merely a presence; it is to learn what is to count as a dog. Each dog becomes a *Gestalt*, a «such that» construction, and this is how bodies become charter members of Quine's ontology[5]. But even though bodies are objects par excellence for Quine, he does use idealist language when he speaks of *positing* objects. Strictly speaking, his bodies exist only in a restricted, quasi-mathematical terminology in which it is possible to posit one kind of object rather than another, to choose «rabbit» as the referent of *gavagai* rather than rabbithood or rabbit-parts. This, Quine admits, amounts to no more than to impose our own particular provincial pattern, but then it is difficult to see how such restrictions can serve as the general basis for objectivity. Only what makes a behavioral difference will be admitted as a fact by Quine, but all such facts are never independent of the way they are described in language. What will be considered reinforcement will likewise depend on how we individuate in the terminology we adopt.

It is therefore meaningless to ask absolutely what a word refers to. One can ask this only relatively to a background language to which Quine's behaviorist interpretation cannot apply because it is itself expressed in that language. This holds even in the case of « $(\exists x)(x \text{ is red})$,» for inscrutability of reference and indeterminacy of translation vitiate as much the apparatus of quantification as they do the distinction between, say, singular and general, and if both are parochial, so is objective reference. Quine seems to assume that a transparent sense of reference cannot be fully attained unless the entity referred to is not merely presupposed or implied but explicitly shown in the very form of referential expression. While talk of «positing objects» remains indefinite and obscure, «there is an x , such that...» does precisely that. This then becomes the standard of transparent reference, but it is a standard which Quine's behaviorist conception of reference is incapable of satisfying. Such referential or objectual quantification requires nameless objects, or at least that the

name and the named be separable. The use of the variable renders this explicit: if the reference is not to a rabbit but to an *x* such that it is a rabbit, it thereby becomes evident that many alternative descriptions may be true of that *x*. On the other hand, of this *x* itself we can say very little, hence its «inscrutability.» It appears to be a late version of Kant's *Ding-an-sich* except that it permits *different* true predications. In view of all this, Quine's ontology may be considered naive insofar as he ignores or forgets the act that makes the domain of objects possible.

II

Gottlieb accepts the Quinean position that merely to refer to a thing is (or presupposes) that we have (or can get) knowledge about it. Singular terms presuppose the possession of a predicate satisfied by the object referred to, which predicate gives the object's identity criterion[6]. While in this respect predicates and quantifiers are on a par, predicates are taken as the starting point because they are learned first and because they have a simpler linguistic basis. Gottlieb insists however that an expression is a genuine predicate only if it possesses an associated criterion of identity. Predicates require identity conditions because they are the medium of expression for theories that give us objective knowledge. Propositions are identical if and only if the sentences expressing them are synonymous – yet we have no strict behavioral criteria for synonymy. Quine can of course always ask whether different uses of «N» name the same object, but the appropriateness of the question does not provide him with an answer – and thus he takes refuge in the inscrutability of reference. His task is to link identity to predication, or in his own phrase, «divided reference.» As long as the child merely «announces» the arrival of objects in his vicinity his behavior is regarded by Quine as wholly nonlinguistic; he is merely responding selectively to various stimuli. Only when the apparatus of identity enters his linguistic repertoire does he learn to master predication and thus reference. Quine holds that «the dividing of reference consists in setting conditions of identity.»[7] But as a behaviorist Quine thinks of reference as a particular complex of behavior on a par with chess where forging a link between reference

and identity becomes highly problematical. One must learn to use expressions of identity the way knowledgeable competent language users do, and Gottlieb admits that such an explanation is empty[8]. Since we have all mastered the use of «same proposition» and «same person»— in spite of all the vagueness and ambiguity that these expressions engender – we always qualify as being capable of referring to propositions and persons. On the other hand, because of the inevitable indeterminacy of translation such propositions or persons will fail to meet Quine's scientific criteria for objectivity. It does not therefore follow that where a full mastery of identity is missing, there will be no reference at all. What we fail to satisfy are merely Quine's refined standards, while in ordinary discourse we get along quite well with the vaguer and more ambiguous degrees of identity. Different forms of identity are appropriate to different kinds of theory and systematic knowledge that wishes to combine such diverse kinds of identity often does so by ignoring essential differences. Since we appeal to different degrees of consistency, we often use such concepts without having settled the precise nature of their identity.

Core sentences are therefore never strictly isolated from the sentences of the rest of our language. Rather, they are capable of being believed to count as knowledge even when lacking precise identity. The core usually contains some observation sentences formulated in an appropriate terminology and logic, but even in the core some epistemic relations will not be settled because of the undecidability of first order logic. This is due not to the inadequacy of our perception but to the nature of the subject matter: the fuzziness may be said to be ontological rather than merely epistemic. Some of our logical problems over quantum mechanics reflect an inherent vagueness (or «complexity») in the postulated object. Thus Gottlieb's demand that in order to have knowledge of a particular object we must have a way of referring uniquely to that object[9], is not always met. That objects must have precise and clear cut borderlines may be no more than a Euclidean prejudice. What should be considered genuine knowledge of an object will depend on the kind of object we are dealing with; it will involve more than just one way of referring. Each type of object is associated with certain characteristic modes of epistemic access which correspond to its particular form of identity. This is reflected both in the terms and in the logical connectives which

we use in expressing knowledge of objects of that particular kind. The theories that are instruments with which we acquire knowledge relate to their respective objects not just in one uniform manner.

Quine is committed to characterize all knowledge as knowledge of objects but what may be an object in ordinary discourse will not necessarily be one in scientific terminology and vice versa. All knowledge requires some possibility of access to their respective objects from a variety of points of view and at different times, but this by itself will by no means ensure any precise form of identity. It is for example not at all evident that a contemporary physicist (or even Rutherford) refers to the same object «atom» as did Democritus. How we answer that question will depend on the purpose of the investigation which will always limit the range of perspectives from which an object can be approached, and such implied or imposed limitations will determine the ontological status of the particular object. The knowledge yielded will likewise not be the selfsame thing in each case. When we want to coordinate such partly conflicting conceptions, some core meanings will emerge, but their epistemic identity is by no means as precise or as determinate as Gottlieb seems to assume [10]. Since we cannot say what the essential epistemological commitments of referential semantics are which we consider to be necessary for knowledge per se, Quine cannot even establish that all knowledge must be of objects.

III

Facts about ontological reducibility loom large in the argument for the inscrutability of reference. The general idea is that when we are given an interpretation of the language it serves no useful purpose to have a model with indistinguishable objects. We cannot make sense of speakers of a language talking about objects which are not specifiable in that language. Quine accordingly demands that we impose conditions on what the ontological commitments of that language should be. A model will not be an acceptable assessment of someone's ontological commitments if that model contains objects which could be deleted without any change of truth values of the sentences of the language [11]. Quine claims that we can eliminate names in favor of variables and predicates, and thus reduce all ontological questions to

questions about quantification[12]. The problem is whether by doing so he is not changing the subject. The ontological commitments of the two different theories consist in different objects introduced by his metalinguistic theory which result in different truth conditions for the language in question. Even in a scientifically restricted language we lack a list of all atomic sentences determining effectively the truth or falsity of any quantified statement. If a theory postulates three rabbits, we can eliminate the reference to rabbits in defining truth for the theory only after we know enough about rabbits to know which decision procedure is the appropriate one[13]. In disciplines like arithmetic, atomic truth conditions can be given without appealing to denotation, but in the general case where there is no decision procedure for the truth of atomic sentences, the appeal will always be to not fully explicit background knowledge.

Quine's doctrine of ontological commitment involves two different points of view: in some papers such as «On What There Is», he discusses what objects must be included in the domain of quantifiers in order for some sentences to come out true given a fixed interpretation of the predicates. In other papers, such as «Ontological Reduction and the World of Numbers,»[14] he is considering the possibilities of varying both the domain and interpretation of predicates. According to this theory, what counts in a model is its structure; the model is not made up of items at random but of elements related to each other in a definite manner. Choosing a model invokes not merely fixing its objects; it requires defining its range of suitability. A theory depends on its domain no less than on what the objects are taken to be. The trouble is that Quine sometimes seems to talk as if ontology were independent of application. He ignores the fact that in characterizing the restricted model of scientific terminology he has made essential reference to ordinary discourse. Thus his fundamental notion of what it is to understand a language is that of assenting to or holding true a sentence even though he is unable to behaviorally justify this principle.

Of course, his thesis that there are no meanings did not intend to deny that the synonymy class of a word could exist. Rather, the point seems always to have been to repudiate what Quine later called the «myth of the museum» – the idea that we can understand a predicate by in any sense grasping, or by being acquainted with, or perceiving, a

property or a concept. The perception of a property cannot be all there is to understanding a predicate, for perception alone will not set up the network of conditional assent to sentences. On the other hand, although one cannot characterize my understanding of the word «red» without taking into account that my eyes are sensitive to red light, one can describe that part of the network which constitutes my understanding of the word «number» without postulating anything like Russell's acquaintance with the concept «number». Quine denies that we understand the meaning of predicates by any sort of inner perception of a property: «electron» is understood by coming to assent not to one definition but to a cluster of statements involving the word «electron.» These statements are only contingently coextensive, and no statement in the cluster occupies a privileged position. Quine's central objection to properties is that their property conditions are obscure. Contrary to Gottlieb, it does not always seem appropriate to ask for a clear cut criterion for identity: we have such a criterion for sets but not always for physical objects.

Quine therefore believes that epistemology is best studied as a branch of empirical psychology. To «naturalize our epistemology» means that we rephrase the question about what we can know so that it turns into the question whether a certain relation holds between physical objects of our knowledge. Quine's naturalized epistemology however does not tell us what counts as being the true theory in the first place[15]. He denies that truth and knowledge can ever be absolute and insists that they are always relative to theory. But once he gives up the requirement that there be a one-to-one correspondence between atomic facts and atomic sentences, there is no longer any reason to suppose that any single theory will be the correct one. Quine admits that «immediate experience» will not of itself cohere as an autonomous domain, but what makes it cohere in a restricted language is not spelled out either. Postulation of theoretical entities of one form or another is the only way by which our total experience of the world can be explained, and for Quine the best of these theories is the physical one. But Cresswell is quite right in pointing out[16]that Quine's naturalized epistemology is dependent, and not a substitute for metaphysical justification.

Since Quine holds that individual sentences cannot be determinately paired with confirming experiences, sets of sentences meet

experience as corporate entities, and no single sentence is immune from revision. Scientific investigation could lead to the rejection of even purported definitional truth[17]. He has not hesitated from applying his holism to logic which he considers to be in principle no less open to revision than quantum mechanics or the theory of relativity[18]. On the other hand, he does not really expect logic to go the way of geocentrism, for it is only because the laws of logic are «obvious» that deviant translations are always unacceptable. Thus, a scientist's apparent denial of « $p \vee \neg p$ » merely means that we have mistranslated him. The completeness of classical logic ensures that unfixing the usual relations of the connectives will also change the semantics and thus the interpretation of the assigned truth values. Genuine dissent is impossible, for denial of logic amounts to changing the subject. While Quine denies necessity, he does consider logic to be undeniable. It is possible however to interpret quantum mechanics as refuting classical logic, and this is all that is needed to defeat the thesis that logic is obvious. Even if one cannot be illogical, Quine's translation argument demonstrates that one can be alogical. Nothing can refute the classical laws of logic, but the evidence could move us to shift to a system of concepts which have no match in our present system. One may thus refrain from affirming p without denying it, if the elements out of which p is constructed are not in one's lexicon. The law of kinetic energy, for example, could be interpreted in a sense that attributes its denial to mistranslation. But this would be compatible with the existence of conceptual schemes in which nothing at all quite corresponds to «kinetic energy.» [19] The logics of two cultures will be incommensurable at worst but never in conflict, since conflict would simply discredit our translation[20]. Reference is judged inscrutable by Quine because in spite of the restrictions he imposes on his terminology, he finds he is unable to bridge the gap between his language and experience. This however may be merely due to his behaviorist interpretation of knowledge.

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