

Quine Speaks for Himself

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As we meet to celebrate W. V. Quine's contributions to philosophy and logic on the one hundredth anniversary of his birth, it seemed to me appropriate to assemble quotations from Quine's writings to illustrate Professor Goldfarb's points. I hasten to add, for almost all of Quine's contemporaries in philosophy and most of the great figures of Western philosophy, this would be a very bad idea indeed. Quine, however, is not only a great philosopher; he is also a master of English style. Indeed, for this reason, Quine is not always easy to understand—he packs so much into a few words. But he is always an enormous pleasure to read. So, let's let Quine speak for himself.

“I am a physical object sitting in a physical world. Some of the forces of this physical world impinge on my surface. Light rays strike my retinas; molecules bombard my eardrums and fingertips. I strike back, emanating concentric air waves. These waves take the form of a torrent of discourse about tables, people, molecules, light rays, retinas, air waves, prime numbers, infinite classes, joy and sorrow, good and evil. My ability to strike back in this elaborate way consists in my having assimilated a good part of the culture of my community, and perhaps modified and elaborated it a bit on my own account. (p. 228) ... Now how is it that we know that our knowledge must depend thus solely on surface irritation and internal conditions. Only because we know in a general way what the world is like, with its light rays, molecules, men, retinas, and so on. (p. 229) ... Let us therefore accept physical reality, whether in the manner of unspoiled men in the street or with one or another degree of scientific sophistication. ... Then, pursuing in detail our thus accepted theory of physical reality, we draw conclusions concerning, in particular, our own physical selves.... Once we have seen that in our knowledge of the external world we have nothing to go on but surface irritation, [a question obtrudes]: Whence our persistence in representing discourse as somehow *about* a reality, and a reality beyond irritation. (p. 230)” (“Scope and Language of Science,”

in W. V. Quine, *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays*, revised and enlarged edition, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 228-230.)

“Physical things generally, however remote, become known to us only through the effects which they help to induce at our sensory surfaces. Yet our common-sense talk of physical things goes forward without benefit of explanations in more intimately sensory terms. Entification begins at arm’s length; the points of condensation in the primordial conceptual scheme are things glimpsed, not glimpses. In this there is little cause for wonder. Each of us learns his language from other people, through the observable mouthing of words under conspicuously intersubjective circumstances. Linguistically, and hence conceptually, the things in sharpest focus are the things that are public enough to be talked of publicly, common and conspicuous enough to be talked of often, and near enough to sense to be quickly identified and learned by name.” (W. V. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1960), p. 1.)

“To call a posit a posit is not to patronize it. ... Everything to which we concede existence is a posit from the standpoint of a description of the theory-building process, and simultaneously real from the standpoint of the theory that is being built. Nor let us look down on the standpoint of the theory as make-believe. For we can never do better than occupy the standpoint of some theory or other, the best we can muster at the time.” (*Ibid.*, p. 22)

“The uniformity that unites us in communication and belief is a uniformity of resultant patterns overlying a chaotic subjective diversity of connections between words and experience. Uniformity comes where it matters socially.... Different persons growing up in the same language are like different bushes trimmed and trained to take the shape of identical elephants. The anatomical details of twigs and branches will fill the elephantine form differently from bush to bush, but the overall outward results are alike.” (*Ibid.*, p. 8.)

“Uncritical semantics is the myth of a museum in which the exhibits are meanings and the words are labels. To switch languages is to change the labels. Now the naturalist’s primary objection to this view is not an objection to meanings on account of their being mental entities, though that could be objection enough.... Semantics is vitiated by a pernicious mentalism as long as we regard a man’s semantics as somehow determinate in his mind beyond what might be implicit in his dispositions to overt behavior.” (“Ontological Relativity,” in W. V. Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 27.)

“Translation between kindred languages, e.g., Frisian and English, is aided by resemblance of cognate word forms. Translation between unrelated languages, e.g., Hungarian and English, may be aided by traditional equations that have evolved in step with a shared culture. What is relevant rather to our purpose is *radical* translation, i.e., translation of the language of a hitherto untouched people. The task is one that is not in practice undertaken in its extreme form, since a chain of interpreters of a sort can be recruited of marginal persons across the darkest archipelago.... I shall imagine that all help of interpreters is excluded.” (*Word and Object*, *op. cit.*, p. 28.)

“The linguist notes the native’s utterance of ‘Gavagai’ where he, in the native’s position, might have said ‘Rabbit’. So he tries bandying ‘Gavagai’ on occasions that would have prompted ‘Rabbit’, and looks to natives for approval. Encouraged, he tentatively adopts ‘Rabbit’ as translation. (p. 42)...[But] most utterances resist correlation with concurrent stimulations. ... What next?... The linguist ... will project conjectural interpretations of some of [these utterances].... He will accumulate a tentative Jungle vocabulary, with English translations, and a tentative apparatus of grammatical constructions. (p. 45) ... Our radical translator would put his developing manual of translation continually to use, and go on revising it in the light of his successes and failures of communication. (p. 46) ... Considerations of the sort we have been surveying are all that the radical translator

has to go on.... These reflections leave us little reason to expect that two radical translators, working independently on Jungle, would come out with interchangeable manuals. Their manuals might be indistinguishable in terms of any native behavior that they give reason to expect, and yet each manual might prescribe some translation that the other translator would reject. Such is the thesis of indeterminacy of translation. (p. 47f)” (W. V. Quine, *Pursuit of Truth*, revised edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 42-48.)

“Thought, if of any complexity, is inseparable from language.... Science, though it seeks traits of reality independent of language, can neither get on without language nor aspire to linguistic neutrality. To some degree, nevertheless, the scientist can enhance objectivity and diminish the interference of language, by his very choice of language.” (“Scope and Language of Science,” *op. cit.*, p. 235.)

“But the simplification and clarification of logical theory to which a canonical logical notation contributes is ... also conceptual. Each elimination of obscure constructions or notions that we manage to achieve, by paraphrase into more lucid elements, is a clarification of the conceptual scheme of science. The same motives that impel scientists to seek every simpler and clearer theories adequate to the subject matter of their special sciences are motives for simplification and clarification of the broader framework shared by all the sciences. Here the objective is called philosophical because of the breadth of the framework concerned; but the motivation is the same. The quest of a simplest, clearest overall pattern of canonical notation is not to be distinguished from a quest of ultimate categories, a limning of the most general traits of reality.” (*Word and Object*, *op.cit.*, p. 161)

“What distinguishes between the ontological philosopher’s concern and [the rest of science] is only breadth of categories.... Here is the task of making explicit what had been tacit, and precise what had been vague; of exposing and resolving paradoxes, smoothing kinks, lopping off vestigial growths, clearing ontological slums. The philosopher’s task differs from the others’, then, in detail; but in no such drastic way as those suppose who imagine for the philosopher a vantage point outside the conceptual scheme that he takes in charge. There is no such cosmic exile. He cannot study and revise the fundamental conceptual scheme of science and common sense without having some conceptual scheme, whether the same or another no less in need of philosophical scrutiny, in which to work.” (*Ibid.*, p. 275f.)