

Quine at 100

June 25, 2008 marked the 100th anniversary of the birth of Willard van Orman Quine. Between June 17 to June 25, five universities hosted conferences to commemorate the event; the University of Oslo, the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos, Princeton University, Stanford University, and Oberlin College (where Quine was an undergraduate). In October, Harvard University will hold their own event in honor of perhaps the greatest philosopher ever to teach there. But most humanists have no clear sense of Quine's enormous contributions to the course of philosophy in our century. Those who have heard his name encountered it most likely from two sources. First, Quine is treated with reverence in the work of Richard Rorty. Secondly, many older academics remember that Quine added a prominent philosophical voice in support of the skepticism about the existence of determinate facts about linguistic meaning that was a core principle of the post-modern moment.

One can gain a dim understanding of a few of Quine's views from these sources. Rorty is faithful to Quine's sweeping pragmatist rhetoric. And it is certainly true that skepticism about linguistic meaning is central to Quine's philosophy. But if all Quine's work amounted to was grandiose anti-metaphysical posturing about truth and skepticism about the existence of linguistic meanings, he would certainly not be one of the greatest figures of Twentieth Century philosophy. His greatness is rather due to other facts. Quine ended logical positivism. Ironically, he did so by exposing the weakness of its metaphysical presuppositions. In so doing, he made way for a distinctive brand of scientific naturalism that permeates much of philosophy today. With his view that there are no clear distinctions between traditional questions of ontology and the hypotheses of the natural sciences, he also laid the groundwork for the contemporary reemergence of classical metaphysics. For these reasons, Quine will figure prominently in any history of the past century of philosophy.

To grasp the magnitude of Quine's impact, it helps to see his work in the context in which it emerged. British philosophy in the late nineteenth century was dominated by Hegelian idealists such as Bradley and McTaggart. One of the major features of Hegelian Idealism was the view that the analysis of reality into parts was incoherent. The impression that there are really distinct objects—tables, chairs, apples, and trees—was an illusion. Rather, reality was a unified whole. G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell initiated the contemporary era in philosophy in Britain by defending “analysis” against these attacks, in part by showing that it resulted in a vindication of common sense realism.

While the common sense tradition survived in England in the work of G.E. Moore and later Austin, work on the continent took off in a different direction. The brilliant philosopher Rudolf Carnap, under the influence of Russell's student Wittgenstein, set out to show that the great philosophical questions of metaphysics, indeed the very divisions between idealism and realism that had so exercised Moore and the early Russell, were meaningless. Carnap set himself the task of dividing questions into those that are meaningful and those that were meaningless. The meaningful questions were the empirical questions of science, and the meaningless questions were the non-empirical traditional questions of metaphysics. Carnap argued that the non-empirical domain consisted of facts solely determined by definitions (plus logic). It followed that non-empirical questions had only trivial, definitional answers. Among the non-empirical questions were the classical questions of traditional ontology. These questions only had trivial answers. For example, a question such as “Are there external physical things, or just sense-data?” did not have a factual answer. One could choose to speak a language that contained words for physical things, or one could choose a language that lacked such words. The decision to speak a language about ordinary things was a decision about how to speak, rather than a commitment to what there is.

The influence of Carnap's ideas was felt far beyond Austria, as he had followers in both the United States and Britain. For example, A.J. Ayer, later Wykeham Professor of Logic at Oxford University, was

an early student of his, and subsequent prominent exponent of logical positivism in Britain. Fresh from his PhD in 1932, the 24 year old Quine set off to join the logical positivist movement, first staying for five months in Vienna and then, following Carnap, to Prague, where he regularly attended his lectures. At the time, Quine was focused on logic, the area of his dissertation work and many subsequent contributions. At the time, Warsaw was filled with brilliant logicians, and Quine followed up his stay in Prague with a stay in Warsaw, with Tarski, Lesniewski, and Lukasiewicz. So Quine began his career steeped in the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle, with logic and philosophy of language put to work in the service of eliminating metaphysics and traditional philosophy.

One of the chief lessons of the history of philosophy is that anti-metaphysical arguments invariably appeal to controversial metaphysical assumptions. In the case of logical positivism, the metaphysical assumption concerns linguistic meaning – in particular, that there is a sharp distinction to be drawn between empirical statements, on the one hand, and definitions, on the other. For the positivist, metaphysical claims are in the end “analytic”, or definitional – to be accepted or rejected solely on the basis of convention. One’s choice of convention was governed by purely pragmatic considerations. By contrast, empirical (“synthetic”) statements are not definitional, but genuinely factual. According to the positivists, philosophers had been deluded into thinking that certain questions that were merely conventional in nature – about which way to speak – had genuine factual content. The reason the traditional questions of metaphysics (for example “Do universals such as *goodness* or *greenness* exist?”) had seemed so irresolvable is precisely because their resolution was a matter of conventional stipulation, rather than empirical fact. We can choose to speak a language that entails, as a matter of definition, the existence of universals such as greenness and goodness, or we can choose not to speak such a language. But there is no fact of the matter as whether there is greenness and goodness.

The metaphysical assumption about meaning presupposed by the positivist attack on metaphysics is that there is a clear distinction to be made between matters of empirical fact and matters of convention, that is, between genuine facts and mere definitional truth. Quine’s signature contribution to this debate is his classic “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”, in which he rejects the assumption about meaning crucial to the anti-metaphysical project of the positivists. According to Quine, there is no clear distinction to be made between definitional claims and empirical claims, the analytic and the synthetic. As Quine concludes in his paper “Carnap and Logical Truth”, “The lore of our father is a fabric of sentences...It is a pale gray lore, black with fact and white with convention. But I have found no substantial reasons for concluding that there are any quite black threads in it, or any white ones.” But if the distinction between empirical statement and conventional stipulation dissolves, then the metaphysical assumption of the positivist argument is false, and the positivist project collapses.

Quine’s criticism of positivism rescued traditional metaphysics from the positivist critique. Once one abandons the distinction between questions of fact and questions of definition, there is no distinction to be made between the empirical and the a priori (assuming the latter to have a foundation in linguistic conventions). Classical metaphysical inquiries are in fact part and parcel of the overall scientific project. As Quine concludes “Ontological Questions, under this view, are on a par with questions of natural science”. However, Quine did not have what one might call a metaphysical understanding of the project of natural science. Rather, he urged that since there was no theory-neutral standpoint from which we could compare our theories to the world, our best scientific theory was the one that made the most elegant and economical sense of the pattern of our experience. Thus, when speaking of a metaphysical question, such as the existence of abstract objects such as classes, he could write that “...Carnap has maintained that this is a question not of matters of fact but of choosing a convenient language form, a convenient conceptual scheme or framework for science. With this I agree, but only on the proviso that the same be conceded regarding scientific hypotheses generally.” The traditional questions of ontology and the questions of natural science are both part of the same inquiry, with no “double standard” ruling one less important or meaningful than the other. This is perhaps the crux of Quinean naturalism; there is

just one project, the scientific one. But it includes much of traditional philosophy.

A number of philosophers now reject Quine's arguments against "the analytic-synthetic distinction", and accept a distinction between definitional truths and empirical ones. Nevertheless, even these philosophers do not think that the distinction can do the sort of philosophical work that the positivists thought it could. That is, even philosophers who reject Quine's arguments against the analytic-synthetic distinction do not think the distinction can be used to show the bankruptcy of traditional metaphysics. In short, Quine's work ended logical positivism.

Thanks to Rorty, outside philosophy Quine is perhaps best known for his pragmatism. But most philosophers today think that Quine's pragmatism was the result of various confusions he had about linguistic meaning. Though his own arguments for it were based in part on his pragmatism, far more influential in philosophy has been Quine's version of scientific naturalism. Quinean naturalism stands as a counterweight to the strand of 20th British tradition, championed in the latter half of the century by Peter Strawson, that emphasizes modesty in the face of the deliverances of common sense. If the options are common sense or subjective idealism, the choice should be clear. But Quinean naturalism allows for the revisionary stance of the natural scientist without the absurd conclusions of the idealists; the pressure on our conceptual scheme comes from observation rather than pure reason. Quinean naturalism tells us that there is just the project of science, which includes philosophy. Unfortunately, beyond this, there remains much unclarity among us about what it is to be a scientific naturalist in the mold of Quine. A great many philosophers, especially in the United States, think they are practicing philosophy in anti-positivist, scientific naturalist spirit that Quine urged, even if they do not agree amongst themselves on what constraints that imposes on their methods.

The replacement of logical positivism by Quinean naturalism occurred at least fifty years ago. Due in no small part to Quine's vigorous defense of the continuity of science and classical ontology, it was soon followed by the full-blown reemergence of traditional metaphysics (albeit with scholastic logic and grammar replaced by much more sophisticated contemporary counterparts). So of course this history is familiar to philosophers throughout the world. However, my discussions with my humanities colleagues in other departments suggest that it is considerably less familiar in the academy at large, where it still seems widely held that philosophy departments are bastions of logical positivism. Perhaps the 100th anniversary of the birth of one of the century's greatest philosophers provides a good excuse for us to urge our colleagues in other departments to revise such misconceptions.