

Quine Notes

PHIL410

Heretofore

- We now enter the third and final segment of the course, having completed two.
- The previous two segments of the course were concerned first with articulating a basic problem in epistemology (the representation/reality problem) and second with diverging traditional attempts to resolve it.
- Descartes, Hume, and Kant may all be viewed as identifying and trying to overcome the representation/reality problem. This problem, as we have seen, occurs in several contexts, themselves constitutive of the areas of human knowledge. In particular, where knowledge of the empirical order is concerned, we face the problem of Descartes's solipsism: supposing a mind to be a self-contained entity, how is it possible for that mind to acquire knowledge of the sensory world? In considering this question, we also encountered questions concerning metaphysical knowledge: what role does metaphysical knowledge play in empirical knowledge, and how/is it possible for us to acquire such knowledge?
 - o Rationalist philosophers such as Descartes and Kant assert that the mind can grasp certain primary (metaphysical) features of empirical reality that are not present in sense.
 - o An empiricist philosopher such as Hume may deny that we can entertain any thought about reality that is not provided to us in sense.
 - o In other words, we face questions concerning the role of the "a priori" in human knowledge: do we have a priori insight into features of reality "outside our heads," or does the a priori tell us only about the meanings of our words and how they are related?
- As we have seen, the solutions to the representation/reality problem offered by these philosophers appear themselves to leave us with further problems, to the extent that they can be said to resolve the problem at all. Descartes faces the Cartesian circle; Hume must explain away concepts that we seem to have; Kant's schematism must perhaps be taken on faith.
- Further solutions (or responses) to the basic problem are offered by Plato, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. Plato offers an idealist conception of knowledge and a dualist conception of reality; a rationalist, metaphysical reality is open for Plato to the mind, the world of sense itself remains obscure. Nietzsche offers a naturalist construal of human knowledge that seems to accept a significant measure of skepticism with regard to both metaphysical and empirical truth. And Heidegger seeks to eliminate the problem by adopting a methodological stance within which representation and reality cannot be divorced: what 'reality' (being) means for us is phenomenological experience. Within the phenomenological context, a metaphysical/empirical distinction can perhaps be drawn, but in neither case will we face a profound threat of skepticism. Representation and reality are equivalent, on this view.

- We now encounter three more attempts to identify our basic epistemological situation. One is empiricist, one rationalist, and a third, like the first, is pragmatist.

Quine and 20th Century Empiricism

- Quine is one of the most important of Anglo-American philosophers of the 20th Century. His work in logic and epistemology set standards defining analytic philosophy, a powerful method combining conceptual analysis with the resources of mathematical logic and set-theory. Ironically, his epistemological scruples have perhaps been better studied than emulated.
- Quine is well-known for the doctrine of “naturalized epistemology”, wherein he rejects the notion of philosophy as determining a prior ground to the sciences (à la the Moderns). Epistemology is to be viewed as of a kind with science, that branch in which science considers its own foundations. Epistemology is to be an empirical discipline, in which we explain the means by which scientific theories are developed from (relatively sparse) sense information.
- Quine follows in the empiricist tradition of Hume, Mill, Russell, and Carnap – these last three in particular determined to make philosophy scientific, but all convinced generally of the primary empiricist tenet that knowledge derives from the senses. Quine differs from his empiricist brethren, being in some respects the most radical of them, endorsing a pragmatist conception of knowledge and relativism regarding ontology. His work is much indebted to Russell and to Carnap: Russell for the logico-mathematical method, and Carnap for the positivist regime that Quine helps to defeat.

The Two Dogmas

- The two dogmas are closely related.
- The first “dogma” is the analytic/synthetic distinction among propositions (or “statements”).
 - o You will recall the distinction from Quine’s opening remarks concerning its obscurity. Kant speaks of the predicate of a statement being “contained” in the statement’s subject, but this is a metaphor. Alternately, “a statement is analytic when it is true by virtue of meanings and independently of fact” (21). Thus, ‘All unmarried men are bachelors’ is true because of the meanings of ‘all’, ‘unmarried’, ‘men’, ‘are’, and ‘bachelors’.
 - o As we saw with both Hume and Kant, an analytic statement is “independent of fact” – i.e., it “tells us nothing” of the empirical world; its truth doesn’t depend on “matters of fact” but rather on “relations of ideas” (in Hume’s terminology).
 - o Quine begins his assault on the analytic/synthetic distinction with a focus on the key concept of *meaning*. What is it for a statement to be true in virtue of its “meaning” or the meanings of its terms? Meanings turn out to be “obscure intermediary entities” that “may well be abandoned” on

Quine's view (22). To see this, we must appreciate the meaning/reference distinction:

- For a given "meaningful" term, we may first identify its reference: names "pick out" (refer to) single items; general terms apply (refer) to classes of items. E.g., 'Evening Star' and 'Morning Star' refer to the same object as is named "Venus". 'Star' and 'planet' have as their *extensions* (the items to which they refer) the classes of stars and planets, respectively.
- What is the "meaning" or *intension* of a term? Clearly, 'Evening Star' and 'Morning Star' do not have the same meaning. But what is this nebulous thing, a meaning? As a good empiricist, Quine suggests that there is no *thing* or entity such as a *meaning*. We should, rather, see that "the primary business of the theory of meaning [is] simply the synonymy of linguistic forms and the analyticity of statements" (22). That is, meanings aren't things; they are relations among linguistic terms or statements, much as Hume thought: they are "relations of ideas," where the "relation" itself is not to be considered anything but a relation; it's not a being. (Compare: if Oakes is taller than Judge, then Oakes is related by the *taller than* relation to Judge; but this is not to assert the existence of a "thing", "taller than" (*pace* Plato).)
- So, Quine asks, what is the difference between an analytic and a synthetic statement? Synthetic statements have something to do with the empirical world and will receive treatment in due course (under the "second dogma"). Analytic statements were thought to be true in virtue of their "meanings", but now it appears that 'meaning' reduces to certain relations among linguistic terms. This is to return to our beginning point. Analytic truths are truths not about extra-linguistic matters, but mere relations among the linguistic. Can we say which relations, exactly, constitute the analytic?
- Quine thinks not ...
- The second dogma is the notion that the meaning of a given statement may be "reduced" to certain information provided in sense.
 - Here, Quine cites the "radical reduction" program attempted by Carnap, for example. The idea here is that a purely empiricist science must specify correlations between sense impressions on the one hand and every other item of understanding on the other.
 - Carnap's reduction involves first a "sense-datum language" supplemented by the resources of logic and set-theory (where the latter, themselves, remain un-translated; Carnap himself preserves the analytic/synthetic distinction);
 - Statements not directly about sense data are to be reduced to the above;
 - Then, Carnap envisions a move to the "physical world", where its nature is to be specified in terms of statements of the form 'Quality *q* is at point-instant *x, y, z, t*.'

- The trouble with this program, according to Quine, is first of all that we still face seemingly insurmountable obstacles of translation, in particular as between the sense-data language and statements about the physical world. Patently, sense data are not the same thing as physical objects – witness the overall theme of this course.
- A further and greater defect, according to Quine, is that the program rests on the supposition that the *single statement* is the basic object of meaning – this is the force of the second dogma. Consider:
 - Statement: The ball of wax is white and hard.
 - Sense data: I see white here, feel pressure there.
 - Physical world: w is at x, y, z, t and p is at x, y, z, t (etc.).
 - Descartes: The ball of wax endures and is malleable.
- The problem, here, is that a simple statement about a physical object winds up being more complex than even a very elaborate listing of sense data could capture. As Descartes reminds us, there is more to the ball of wax than meets the eye. This suggests that the significance of a given statement is not to be specified in terms of sense data, but rather in terms that invoke a broader, more elaborate body of “knowledge”.

Holism

- “The unit of empirical significance is the whole of science.” (42)
- “The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs, from the most causal matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even of pure mathematics and logic, is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges. Or, to change the figure, total science is like a field of force whose boundary conditions are experience.” (42)

Metaphysics and Empirical Knowledge

Pragmatism

- Quine thinks not ...
 - The challenge is to provide an informative, non-circular account of analyticity.
 - Analytic propositions fall into two general categories: logical truths and then those truths that appear to involve “synonymy”.