THE THEMES OF QUINE'S PHILOSOPHY

Willard Van Orman Quine's work revolutionized the fields of epistemology, semantics, and ontology. At the heart of his philosophy are several interconnected doctrines: his rejection of conventionalism and of the linguistic doctrine of logical and mathematical truth; his rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction; his thesis of the indeterminacy of translation; and his thesis of the inscrutability of reference. In this book Edward Becker sets out to interpret and explain these doctrines. He offers detailed analyses of the relevant texts, discusses Quine's views on meaning, reference, and knowledge, and shows how Quine's views developed over the years. He also proposes a new version of the linguistic doctrine of logical truth, and a new way of rehabilitating analyticity. His rich exploration of Quine's thought will interest all those seeking to understand and evaluate the work of one of the most important philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century.

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THE THEMES OF QUINE'S PHILOSOPHY

Meaning, Reference, and Knowledge

EDWARD F. BECKER

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To my daughters
Julia Becker and Evelyn Jerman

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PREFACE

Willard Van Orman Quine was the most important and influential philosopher of the second half of the twentieth century. His work in epistemology, semantics, and ontology revolutionized all three of those fields. One need not accept his positions, but no philosopher can afford to ignore them.

At the heart of Quine's philosophy are several interconnected doctrines: his rejection of conventionalism and of the linguistic doctrine of logical and mathematical truth, his rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction, his thesis of the indeterminacy of translation, and his thesis of the inscrutability of reference. The ultimate objective of this book is to determine the extent to which these doctrines are true. To reach this objective, however, we must first undertake the difficult task of understanding them. Only after we have done this will we be in a position to criticize them and to suggest how they might be improved upon. Our task is thus partly expository, partly critical, and partly constructive. It is hoped that the book will be of interest to specialists on Quine, but it is written so as to be accessible to any reader with a fair amount of philosophical sophistication who is willing to study the Quinean texts with which it deals.

Although Quine is a brilliant writer, his philosophy has often been misunderstood. There are a number of reasons for this. First, many of Quine's doctrines are so original that readers accustomed to more conventional ways of thinking may have difficulty understanding them. Second, much of Quine's writing is subtle and highly concentrated. Finally, and most important, there are many passages in Quine's work that give rise to serious questions of interpretation.

The first four chapters of the book present a sustained and detailed attempt to understand the Quinean doctrines mentioned above. It is not the purpose of these chapters merely to provide a summary of Quine's views. Rather, they aim to help the reader engage with Quine's philosophy by providing a detailed analysis of various

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Quinean texts. The problems that arise in the interpretation of these texts are not glossed over; they are faced and (I hope) resolved. The intended result is that the reader will not only understand Quine's views but also understand the texts in which those views are expressed and thus understand how those texts justify the proposed interpretations.

There is an additional obstacle to understanding Quine's philosophy. On a number of important points Quine has changed his mind. A reader who is unaware of these changes may thus be at a loss to understand how one Quinean text can be reconciled with another. In addition to dealing with individual texts, the first four chapters also compare texts from various stages of Quine's career, noting the changes that have occurred in his views over time.

Quine's thinking on the topics under discussion progressed from fairly modest doubts about a certain doctrine concerning the nature and bases of logical and mathematical truth to the rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction and finally to his radical doctrines of the indeterminacy of translation and the inscrutability of reference. The four expository chapters mirror this progression by taking up Quine's doctrines in the order in which he first expressed them. The first chapter discusses Quine's doubts about conventionalism. It begins with an introductory section that is deliberately written at an elementary level so as to make it accessible to readers not familiar with the issues it discusses. Then comes a detailed analysis of Quine's classic early essay "Truth by Convention." An important feature of this analysis is a discussion of the difficult passage in section III of the essay in which Quine argues that the attempt to make sense of conventionalism leads to an infinite regress. Conventionalism is one form of the linguistic doctrine of logical and mathematical truth, according to which such truths are, in some sense, "true by language." The chapter concludes by broadening the discussion to this more general doctrine, focusing mostly on Quine's essay "Carnap and Logical Truth."

One way of expressing the linguistic doctrine is to say that the truths of logic and mathematics are "analytic." The second chapter treats of Quine's rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction, beginning with a detailed discussion of his famous essay "Two Dogmas of Empiricism." A number of issues in the interpretation of this essay are discussed. An important conclusion of the discussion is that, despite his apparent rejection of verification in

"Two Dogmas," Quine is a verificationist (and was a verificationist when he wrote "Two Dogmas").[1]

Quine had suggested in "Two Dogmas" that making sense of synonymy and of the analytic/synthetic distinction would involve explaining them in behavioral terms. In *Word and Object* he explores the possibility of doing this. Subsequent sections of the second chapter deal with his treatment of analyticity in that book, explaining his arguments for the conclusion that the needed behavioral account cannot be found. Briefly, his point is that such an account would have to invoke a distinction between assent based purely upon our understanding of language and assent based partly upon non-linguistic information about the world, and that we cannot make sense of such a distinction. Chapter 2 concludes by noting that in his later writings Quine gave up the doctrine for which he is most famous, not only conceding that one can make sense of the analytic/synthetic distinction, but even making proposals of his own as to how this may be done. In *The Philosophy of W. V. Quine* he takes the view that, although we can make sense of the distinction we cannot make sense of it in a way that is epistemically relevant.

In "Two Dogmas" Quine expressed doubts concerning the possibility of explaining synonymy; in *Word and Object* and later writings he tried to show that those doubts were well founded by defending his doctrine of the indeterminacy of translation. The third chapter deals with this doctrine. The chapter begins with a discussion of the content of the indeterminacy thesis. Two versions of the thesis are distinguished: weak indeterminacy, which says that translation is under-determined by behavior, and strong indeterminacy, which says that it is under-determined by behavior plus scientific method. It is argued that the balance of the textual evidence supports equating Quinean indeterminacy with weak indeterminacy. It is further suggested that the indeterminacy thesis can be distinguished from what is termed the "infactuality thesis," the thesis that there is no fact of the matter as to which of various translations is correct. The next three sections of the chapter discuss Quine's various arguments for the indeterminacy thesis. The third of these arguments, and the one that Quine finally settled upon, infers indeterminacy from the conjunction of holism (the thesis that what get confirmed by experience are whole chunks of theory, not isolated sentences) and verificationism. Quine's

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[1] To say that the conclusion is important is not to deny that other interpreters have arrived at the same interpretation. Roger Gibson, for example, has interpreted Quine as a (holistic) verificationist. See *The Philosophy of W. V. Quine: An Expository Essay*, pp. 80–81.

reliance on this last argument shows how fundamental holism and verificationism are to his philosophy.

The fourth chapter discusses ontological relativity and the related – perhaps identical – doctrine of the inscrutability of reference. As with the indeterminacy of translation, Quine has given various arguments for the inscrutability of reference. These are spelled out in one of the early sections of the chapter. The rest of the chapter is devoted to a detailed attempt to make sense of the most obscure passage in all of Quine's writings, the second section of his essay "Ontological Relativity," in which he explains the doctrine that goes by the same name. An entire section of the chapter is devoted to discussing the numerous and baffling problems of interpretation raised by a passage, eight paragraphs long, toward the beginning of this section of Quine's essay. The following section, one of the longest in the book, attempts to resolve these problems. It turns out, surprisingly and satisfyingly, that many of them can be resolved by a study of Quine's own later writings, in several of which he acknowledges the problems with "Ontological Relativity" and either explains what he meant, revises his view, or simply admits that he was confused and abandons his position. The interpretation of "Ontological Relativity" at which we arrive makes sense of the text, but leaves Quine with a position that is subject to various objections. In the last section of the chapter we show how Quine, in his writings after "Ontological Relativity," revised his position so as to arrive at a view that is both more intelligible and more defensible than the one he had taken in "Ontological Relativity."

Whereas the first four chapters are expository, the fifth is critical and constructive. Building upon the understanding of Quine developed in the expository chapters, it tries to show where Quine goes wrong and suggests how his position can be improved upon. It argues that we can grant Quine one of his most important premises, his behaviorism, and still show that he was mistaken about the indeterminacy of translation, the inscrutability of reference, and the impossibility of distinguishing assent based on understanding of meanings from assent based on information about non-linguistic facts. It is suggested that one-word sentences, invoked by Quine in many of his arguments, can be interpreted in different ways and that some of Quine's arguments either equivocate between these interpretations or interpret one-word sentences unrealistically. An improved version of stimulus synonymy is proposed, one that is arguably much closer than Quine's version to synonymy as intuitively conceived. It is further argued that the

indeterminacy thesis is trivial unless it is construed as the thesis that an informant could not act in such a way as to convey his meanings to a linguist. The second-to-last section of the chapter looks at indeterminacy from this perspective and argues that there is little or none of the kind of indeterminacy discussed by Quine. The last section of the chapter suggests a partial reconstruction of the analytic/synthetic distinction. The basic idea here is that an analytic sentence is one whose truth follows from a Tarski-style theory of meaning in the manner of Donald Davidson. This idea works well for the truths of truth-functional and quantificational logic and a suggestion is made for extending it to "definitional" truths.

In the "Concluding remarks" the book comes full circle with a discussion of the topic with which we began, conventionalism. Following a discussion of the views of David Lewis on this matter, it is concluded that we have indeed vindicated conventionalism in one sense of that ambiguous term.[2]

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[2] The book deals selectively with the secondary literature. It references a fair amount of the literature that is concerned with the interpretation of the Quinean doctrines with which it is concerned, noting points of disagreement and giving credit to earlier writers who have interpreted Quine along similar lines. Not much is said, however, about the extensive literature on the theory of meaning. The reason for this is that the Quinean doctrines with which we are concerned pertain primarily to the *epistemology* of semantics rather than to the substance of this or that semantical theory. We are concerned with how – if at all – we are able to obtain knowledge of meanings, not with the meanings of particular expressions or even of whole categories of expressions. The only substantive semantic theory that is discussed in any detail is the theory of Donald Davidson, which plays an important role in the reconstruction of analyticity proposed in section 5.8.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I first became interested in Quine's philosophy through a course on theory of meaning taught by Donald Davidson at Stanford University during the spring quarter of 1962. Davidson's work has continued to influence my thinking about Quine over the intervening years, although I doubt that he would have approved of the twist that I have given to his views in Chapter 5.

My doctoral dissertation, written while I was a graduate student at The Johns Hopkins University during the late 1960s, was a very remote ancestor of this book. I am grateful to Stephen Barker and Peter Achinstein, who were, respectively, my supervisor and first reader, for their helpful comments on my youthful attempts to understand Quine's philosophy.

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Jennifer Brand and Nick Webb helped me in the early stages of what turned out to be a lengthy search for a suitable picture for the book's cover. In the end Douglas Quine, Willard Van Orman's son, graciously sent me electronic versions of numerous images of his father from his personal files. The picture that graces the cover was selected by the editors, with my concurrence, from the images sent by Douglas. I thank him for his help and for his permission to use the image.

Last but certainly not least, I am grateful to Professor Quine himself. A leave from my university allowed me to attend his last seminar at Harvard during the spring of 1978; it was the first time I had met him. Although the seminar was on set theory, he was kind enough to read and give me his reactions to some early drafts of my attempts to rehabilitate synonymy and coextensiveness. In our conversations I was struck not only by his brilliance of mind, which I had expected, but by his deep intellectual integrity and openness to criticism. I regret that I was not able to finish this book while he was alive. I am sure he would have straightened out my thinking on many points.