Handout 6

Ontological relativity II: Quine

Remark 1. In this handout I refer both to *Ontological relativity* and *Things and their place in theories*.

PROXY FUNCTIONS. Let the sentence 'Harry is tall' be true. Suppose we introduce a function that maps every object to the world minus that object. So the image of Harry under this function will be the global complement of Harry, i.e. the world excluding Harry. Properties are identified with the extensions of predicates. So let the same function map the predicate 'is tall' to each of the complements of tall objects. Then clearly 'Harry is tall', under this interpretation, will still come out true.

Remark 2 (Rough explanation). Let the terms 'a' and 'F' be such that 'a' refers to a and 'F' is the set $\{a, b, c\}$. Then let $f(x) = W - \{x\}$, and $g(F) = \{W - \{a\}, W - \{b\}, W - \{c\}\}$. Assume that $V(Fa) = 1$. Then also $V(g(F)f(a)) = 1$.

Generally, suppose a theory T is committed to the truth of a sentence S. There is no way to say which ontology the theory is committed to, so far as the referring expressions and predicates of S can be uniformly reinterpreted with the aid of a proxy function preserving the truth of the sentence (*salva veritate*).

ONTOLOGICAL RELATIVITY. One might think that the situation is different when only my mother tongue is in play. Of course, you say, I don't know what a foreign speaker really means by his words. But I know what my fellow speakers mean.

The contrast is illusory. Permutation by proxy functions could be performed on the mother tongue just as they were on the foreign language. Secondly, in order to *interpret* my fellow speakers I should use the same kind of behavioural data as I used in translating the Turkish expressions into English. There is no reason to think I fare better in interpreting my mother tongue than I am in translating a foreign language. Equally, some other speaker may be interpreting me as speaking the proxified language, rather than the original language.

Now, however, let us talk about *me*. Cannot I know what I myself refer to by using the term 'rabbit'? Surely I can tell the difference between thinking about rabbits and rabbit parts. Hence, by using 'rabbit', I think and talk exactly about rabbits. The critic here perhaps goes along with the Quinean argument, but aims to show that its ultimate conclusion should be the rejection of behaviourism. But this response can be challenged in two ways. We can insist that the first-person perspective is generally inadmissible. Or we can say that my self-interpretation relies on my interpretation of my own past practices. Those practices are as much subject to indeterminacy as the practices of other English speakers or Turkish speakers.

What follows is that reference to objects can only be intelligible within a background language. Without any such language, reference is 'meaningless' and 'nonsensical'. How to understand this claim if we go past Quine's metaphors of physical relativity? Perhaps as follows: If truth is preserved under different permutations instituted by proxy functions, then so are all the inferential links among the sentences. Thus no change in our theorizing about the world. The original language and the proxified language, with those alethic connections unchanged, would appear to be the same language (or the same theory). But the ontology is different. How different it is, however, I cannot understand without using some further language. The ontology of *that* language can be made sense of by using one further language.

In short, it seems that for ontological questions arise to arise an attempt must be made to translate (or what I think is the same here, to interpret) certain expressions in a language. Without such an interpretation no question would arise in the first place.

IMPLICATIONS. Here are two possible morals. One is that the regress is stopped when I get by with certain behavioural responses to your utterances *without* attempting to find the real meaning of your words. Communication is possible without translation, if by that we mean assigning definitive clauses to your expressions. This perhaps what Quine means by taking the words of our mother tongue 'at face value'.

Second, there is, I think, a curious nod to Carnap. Ontological questions, worthy of the qualifier 'really', are suspect and unsettled (and unsettling). I cannot say what 'really exists' in the world without immediately providing a linguistic background against which to evaluate these claims. No linguistic background (i.e. no language) can claim absolute authority. And no ontological question—weird anyway—can be asked without any such background. The Carnapian themes of analyticity, if they were brought in with justice in the first place, have dropped away, but the upshot appears to be the same.

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