

Quine

Assessing Quine

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Quinean doctrines

- ▶ We have now encountered the following Quinean doctrines, based largely on *Word and Object*:

Indeterminacy of translation there are no facts in virtue of which one translation of an alien sentence into English is correct.

Inscrutability of Reference there are no facts in virtue of which one assignment of reference to an alien word is correct.

Ontological Relativity what exists is relative to the interpretation of our best scientific theory.

Talk outline

Gareth Evans

Conceptual Relativism

Conclusion

Identity and Predication

- ▶ Quine argues that there are many possible referents of 'gavagai'.
- ▶ Gareth Evans, 'Identity and Predication' (1975), argues that in each example, reference is either:
 1. too coarse-grained, e.g. 'gavagai' is a singular term for the universal *rabbithood* or the rabbit fusion; or
 2. too fine-grained, e.g. 'gavagai' is a predicate for rabbit parts or rabbit time slices.
- ▶ Evans' strategy is to argue that each candidate is less likely than the intended.

Option 1: coarse-grained

- ▶ Imagine the native language contains:
 - blanco** same stimulus meaning as 'White!'
 - sango** same stimulus meaning as 'Bloodstained!'
- ▶ For 'Blanco gavagai!', it is insufficient for there to be a rabbit *and* something white.
- ▶ And it is insufficient for there to be e.g. a brown rabbit with a white foot.
- ▶ There must be a *white rabbit*.

Option 1: coarse-grained

- ▶ How could Option 1 (coarse-grained) account for this?
- ▶ Let 'gavagai' refer to the rabbit fusion.
- ▶ Then 'blanco' is a predicate satisfied by an object just if some part of it is white.
- ▶ You'd expect assent to 'Blanco gavagai!' when there is a non-white rabbit with a white foot.
- ▶ This is because *some* part of the rabbit fusion is white.

Option 1: coarse-grained

- ▶ Let's say that 'gavagai' is a singular term for the universal *rabbithood*.
- ▶ Then 'blanco' is a predicate satisfied by an object iff it has a white instance.
- ▶ And 'sango' is a predicate satisfied by an object iff it has a bloodstained instance.
- ▶ You'd expect assent to 'Blanco sango gavagai!' when there is a white rabbit and a distinct, bloodstained rabbit.
- ▶ But you only get assent when there is a single, white, bloodstained rabbit.

Option 2: fine-grained

- ▶ Let's say that 'gavagai' refers to rabbit parts.
- ▶ The natives dissent to 'Blanco gavagai!' when presented with a brown rabbit with white feet.
- ▶ So 'blanco' can't refer to white parts of rabbits.
- ▶ 'Blanco' is satisfied by an object just if its is part of a white rabbit.
- ▶ Not even the white foot of a brown rabbit is a part of a white rabbit.

Option 2: fine-grained

- ▶ But this prevents 'blanco' from coupling with other terms.
- ▶ E.g. to talk about white paper, a new predicate is needed.
- ▶ The point obviously generalises.
- ▶ Generally, any predicate ' P ' becomes 'is part of a P rabbit'.
- ▶ As a result, different parts of the same rabbit are indistinguishable by the predicates of the language.

Option 2: fine-grained

- ▶ Take your favourite rabbit, Bugs.
- ▶ Say you want to distinguish his ears from his feet.
- ▶ You try to use 'is a foot' and 'is an ear'.
- ▶ But these mean 'is a part of a rabbit with feet' and 'is a part of a rabbit with ears'.
- ▶ These are both true of the ears and feet.

Option 2: fine-grained

- ▶ The same applies to rabbit time slices.
- ▶ Take a once-bloody, now-clean rabbit.
- ▶ Presented with this rabbit, the natives dissent from 'Sango gavagai!'.
- ▶ So 'sango' can't refer to rabbits with a bloody time slice.
- ▶ 'Sango' must refer to time slices of sometime bloody rabbits.
- ▶ But then time slices of rabbit become indistinguishable.

Option 2: fine-grained

- ▶ Say we want to distinguish two time slices of Bugs: Bugs_{t_1} and Bugs_{t_2} .
- ▶ We try to say: 'is bloody' and 'is clean'.
- ▶ This means 'is a time slice of a sometime bloody rabbit' and 'is a time slice of a sometime clean rabbit'.
- ▶ These are both true of Bugs_{t_1} and Bugs_{t_2} .
- ▶ In both cases, we've introduced complexity that has no empirical purpose.

Translation and theory

- ▶ What has Evans shown?
- ▶ From a certain perspective, some referential indeterminacy has been ruled out.
- ▶ But even then, the proxy function argument remains.
- ▶ Also, nothing stops a translation manual being set up where 'gavagai' means rabbit stage.
- ▶ We need to make corresponding changes elsewhere.

Translation and theory

- ▶ Doing so would be highly implausible as a theory of meaning for the native language.
- ▶ A theory of meaning needs much more than the mere pairing up of sentences.
- ▶ A mere translation manual provides no *explanation* of native behaviour.

Translation and theory

- ▶ Quine was only after the translation manual.
- ▶ Anything more, like attributing knowledge of a meaning theory to the natives, is psychological.
- ▶ But psychological explanations are just placeholders for proper physical explanations.

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Conceptual relativism

- ▶ Ontological relativity is a version of *conceptual relativism*.
- ▶ *Relativism* is, roughly, the view that something has its properties only in virtue of a certain framework.
- ▶ Famously, moral relativism is the view that the moral properties of an act are only possessed relative to cultural standards.
- ▶ *Conceptual* relativism is a metaphysical doctrine.
- ▶ It is the view that the world is not *in itself* structured.
- ▶ Human minds impose structure by applying their categories.

A mereological example

- ▶ The standard example is mereology: the study of parts and wholes.
- ▶ This example is inspired by Carnap.
- ▶ Consider a table with objects on it. A commonsense view would count 3 objects on the table: A , B and C .
- ▶ A mereologist then comes along and argues that there are not 3 objects on the table but 7: A , B , C , $A + B$, $A + C$, $B + C$, $A + B + C$.

A mereological example

- ▶ Putnam discusses this:

what is (by commonsense standards) the same situation can be described in many different ways, depending on how we use the words. The situation does not itself legislate how words like 'object', 'entity', and 'exist' must be used. What is wrong with the notion of objects existing 'independently' of conceptual schemes is that there are no standards for the use of even the logical notions apart from conceptual choices. (Putnam, Representation and Reality, p. 114)

Counting

- ▶ Putnam concludes from this discussion that we should be *tolerant* of the commonsense and mereological views.
- ▶ In the *Grundlagen*, Frege notes that we can only count things under concepts:

if I give a deck of playing cards with the words 'determine the number thereof', he does not thereby know, whether I want to find out the number of cards, or of complete games, or perhaps of the point cards in skat. ... I must add a word: card, game, or point-card. (§22)

- ▶ In this way, we may put the apparent disagreement between the commonsense theorist and the mereologist down to an ambiguous instruction.

Disagreement

- ▶ Of course, we don't want to say that they are both *correct*.
- ▶ The commonsense theorist offers the usual formalisation of 'there are exactly 3 things'.
- ▶ The mereologist offers the same for 'there are exactly 7 things'.
- ▶ These cannot both be true.
- ▶ Instead we should say that the commonsense theorist is correct *relative to their conceptual scheme* and the mereologist is correct relative to theirs.

Disagreement

- ▶ But now that we have relativized truth to conceptual schemes.
- ▶ So there is no longer any good sense in which the two sides *disagree*.
- ▶ And, if there's no disagreement, there's no real debate.
- ▶ We should reject mereology and other metaphysical questions.

Problems

- ▶ The problem with conceptual relativism is how to formulate it in a way that is non-trivially true.
- ▶ Donald Davidson, in his well-known critique 'On the very idea of a conceptual scheme' (1973), notes the following issue:

We cannot attach a clear meaning to the notion of organizing a single object (the world, nature, etc.) unless that object is understood to contain or consist in other objects. Someone who sets out to organize a closet arranges the things in it. (1973: 14)

Problems

- ▶ The thought is that not every notion can be scheme-relative.
- ▶ In particular, the world cannot be scheme-relative when we set about dissolving the commonsense/ mereological debate.
- ▶ To make sense of there being many ways to conceptualise the world (organize the closet), we must have a world (closet) and objects in it.

Cookie cutters

- ▶ A common metaphor is to think of the world as a lump of dough.
- ▶ To be an object in a conceptual scheme is to be a chunk of that dough, sliced out by a cookie cutter.
- ▶ The cookie cutter is a conceptual scheme.
- ▶ An object is clearly relativized to a conceptual scheme.
- ▶ But there is still just one piece of dough that transcends any conceptual scheme.

Formulating conceptual relativism

- ▶ The conceptual relativist wants to say something like the following:

There is no real debate about mereology. Wherever the commonsense theorist finds objects, the mereologist finds more objects. But they don't really disagree: they are each correct relative to their conceptual scheme.

- ▶ But the conceptual relativist must formulate their position within a conceptual scheme.
- ▶ And that scheme had better countenance all of the objects.

Formulating conceptual relativism

- ▶ The conceptual relativist's scheme, therefore, had better include in its domain all of the objects in the sub-domains.
- ▶ And this is exactly the scheme-transcendent position that the conceptual relativist denies.
- ▶ The point generalises:

Give me a conceptual relativism R that says both A and B are correct relative to their schemes. R must be formulated in a scheme that transcends A and B . This transcendence is ruled out by R itself.

- ▶ The point against relativism is a familiar one: from what perspective can you articulate your relativism?

Ontological relativity

- ▶ Returning to Quine, can ontological relativity even be formulated?
- ▶ It is the claim that what exists is relative to a theory.
- ▶ But is *that* claim itself relative to a theory?
- ▶ And when it claims that some objects exist according to T_1 and others exists according to T_2 , does it require a scheme transcending both?

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- ▶ We've considered three central Quinean doctrines on themes of indeterminacy and relativism about meaning and reference.
- ▶ His conclusions are striking.
- ▶ But there are controversial assumptions built in, like physicalism and behaviourism.
- ▶ And the views face severe problems, especially ontological relativity.