

Quine: Naturalism Unravelled

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1 Quine and Naturalism

Often, what makes a philosopher influential is more the power of their vision of how things are than the cogency of the arguments they marshal for it. Kant is a paradigm. His arguments are invariably tortured and unpersuasive; but his picture of transcendental idealism is one which has attracted generations of subsequent philosophers. Another is Quine.¹ What often passes for an argument in Quine is certainly not tortured prose; quite the opposite: it is simply a rhetorical turn of phrase. His view of the world nonetheless captured, perhaps mesmerised, an enormous number of 20th century English-speaking philosophers.

Quine's vision deployed the language of first-order classical logic as a canonical framework, but what was driving it was his naturalism. Like many English- and German-speaking philosophers in the first half of the century, Quine was educated in the natural sciences; and he simply took it for granted that the sciences, particularly physics, provide our best access to the world. Other things had to revolve around science. Arguably, he articulated a naturalist picture more thoroughly than any other philosopher in the period; but because of this, he made its problematic nature more visible. There are many aspects of thought/activity that do not fit comfortably into a naturalist picture; mind, morals, and mathematics to name three. In each case, the topic puts pressure on naturalism; and a touch-stone of naturalism is how well it is able to respond to this pressure. Quine was aware of these pressures, and addressed them—some at greater length than others.

¹Quine's vision was articulated in many papers and books over his working life, but its centrepiece is *Word and Object* (Quine (1960)).

As far as mind went, Quine was essentially an unreconstructed behaviourist. The problems with behaviorism are now, of course, well known. Fortunately, then, there are less problematic—I do not say unproblematic—philosophies of mind which a naturalist may adopt. The stories concerning the other two areas are more complex. In this essay, I will show that pulling at the loose ends generated by Quine’s discussion of these topics starts to unravel his naturalism.

2 Mathematics and Modality

Naturalism is a kind of empiricism. Indeed, Quine is well known for his insistence that the *a posteriori* is everything; the *a priori* is a myth.² Now, the status of mathematical entities and the truths about them has always been a problem for empiricists. Because of its centrality to science, mathematics could not simply be written off, in the way that, for example, theology could be. But mathematics is the heartland of the *a priori*. After his early years, when Quine flirted with logicism and nominalism, Quine became a platonist, though of a very novel kind.

Mathematical entities are indeed abstract and causally inert. We postulate them in the same way that we postulate other entities which are not directly observable, such as light waves and electrons. Specifically, we hypothesize various facts about them, which are confirmed, if they are, as everything else is: holistically.³ Our mathematical and scientific postulations together face the tribunal of experience. To the extent that they give the right results, they are confirmed; to the extent that they give the wrong result, they are revised/abandoned.

Quine’s philosophy of mathematics is highly problematic. Crucially, there are parts of mathematics that would appear to have no empirical application. Results about higher infinities are an obvious example. Other examples are intuitionist and inconsistent mathematics. (One does not have to be an intuitionist or a paraconsistent logician to find these mathematical structures interesting.) In response to this kind of challenge, Quine distinguishes between parts of mathematics that are ontologically serious and “recreational mathematics”.⁴ But the distinction has all the hallmarks of an epicycle. Moreover,

²Especially in his essay ‘Two Dogmas of Empiricism’, Quine (1953), ch. 2.

³Quine (1960), esp. ch. 7.

⁴Quine (1986), p. 400.

Quine's account gets the phenomenology of doing mathematics all wrong: pure mathematicians *have absolutely no interest whatever* in the empirical applications of their results. The criteria for their acceptance/rejection are quite different from those in the empirical sciences. It could, I suppose, be argued that this is a short-sighted illusion. But it remains the case that much mathematics has been invented and accepted *prior* to any empirical application; indeed, as I have already observed, without any application at all.

It is not my aim to pursue these matters here, however. What I want to focus on is the effect of Quine's move in respect of naturalism. Naturalism is traditionally physicalist: there are no objects of a non-physical kind. What, exactly, this means, is moot: the ontology of modern physics is quite different from that of traditional physics. Never mind. A rejection of things outside of space and time has been central to naturalist attacks on transcendental theology, dualism in the philosophy of mind, and so on. Quine's move in the philosophy of mathematics clearly requires a rejection of this crucial plank of naturalism. What remains is not an "ontological naturalism", but a "methodological" one. Objects may be of various ontological kinds, but whatever their kind, they are to be investigated by the methods of the natural sciences, and the empirical cash-value of claims about such objects may be very remote indeed, mediated by all sorts of other factors.

In this move, Quine opened to gate to all kinds of naturalistically unwholesome things. The obvious example of this is the category of possible worlds. Science tells us what *is* the case; it has no truck with what *must* or *might* be the case. Quine himself was fiercely against any form of modal mysticism.⁵ Worlds beyond the actual are creatures of darkness.

But David Lewis, Quine's student, turned his own methods against him. We do engage in discussions, not just about how things are, but about how things *might* be. This vitamin might be a cure for cancer; that certainly is not. And reasoning about non-actual situations is essential for counterfactual reasoning, which clearly has empirical consequences. 'If I were to leave in five minutes,' I reason, 'I will be late'. So I leave now, and am on time, whilst you, who leave in five minutes time, are late. Indeed, counterfactuals are central to much of science. For example, many scientific concepts are dispositional, such as opacity, hardness. These have to be understood in terms of counter-factuals ('if I were to shine a light...'). Since science itself

⁵E.g., Quine (1960), ch. 6.

requires us to make sense of situations other than the actual, we should make these entities ontological postulates, even though they have no causal interaction with us. Such was Lewis' argument.⁶

And it is one which undercuts Quine's whole attack on modal notions, since worlds can be used to provide an account of all the modal notions which Quine scorned. But we do not need to discuss this here. What Lewis showed is that Quinean naturalism puts no sort of thing off limits: a transcendental god, mental substances; as long, only, as it has some—possibly very remote—observational connection. It is hard to think of anything that does not. So much for naturalism as an ontological doctrine.

3 Norms and Values

Let us now turn to the issue of norms and values. Norms and values are not the same, but they are intimately connected. Essentially, the good is what one ought to do. There are of course, many kinds of good, and corresponding oughts: moral, aesthetic, etc. But all of them have been a problem for naturalism. Natural objects might have the properties of being round or square, but not, it would appear, of being good or bad; and, notoriously, one is not supposed to be able to get an *ought* from an *is*. What are to be made of these notions on a Quinean picture?

Quine has much less to say about the matter than he has about mathematics. One of the few places he discusses them explicitly is in his essay 'On the Nature of Moral Values'.⁷ The essay is explicitly about moral norms and values, rather than values and norms in general. But in lieu of explicit statements to the contrary, we must assume, I think, that his views on moral norms and values extend to the general category. It is not easy, from Quine's essay to extract a view about the status of normative/evaluative statements. What *is* clear is that Quine adopts a standard behaviorist line about the conditioning of people into the appropriate attitudes. We come to have norms and values by a process of conditioning; first at the hands of our parents; then by social factors at large. Even if he is right about this—which is, of course, contestable—it explains only why people have the evaluative and normative beliefs they do. What we need to be concerned with here is the content of

⁶Lewis (1986).

⁷Quine (1981), ch. 6.

such beliefs—beliefs such as ‘You ought not to kill innocent people’. Are they true/false; and if so, what makes them so?

The standard verificationist line about these matters was expressivism. Evaluative/normative judgments are not truth-apt. They are simply expressions of emotion. This is a hard line to maintain, and there is no evidence that it is Quine’s. Normative and evaluative judgments obviously are truth-apt since they can occur embedded in contexts which require them to be so, e.g., ‘Obama believes that Bush condoned torture and ought not to have done so’. Moreover, we reason using them as premises and conclusions. For example:

You ought not to do *e*.
Doing *c* will cause you to do *e*.
Hence you ought not to do *c*.

There are no *logical* relationships between two expressions of emotion.

Another way in which one might attempt to naturalise at least ethical judgments is by reducing them to empirical ones in a utilitarianism fashion. Thus, ‘*x* is the right thing to do’ simply means ‘doing *x* will maximise happiness’. But, standard problems with utilitarianism aside, it remains the case that the reduction is missing something: it could not work unless happiness itself were valued. As Quine says, discussing utilitarianism (p. 64), ‘there must remain some ultimate ends, unreduced...’. Almost by definition, a reduction of a norm must produce something with normative force. Any adequate reduction of a normative category is not going to remove norms entirely.

Perhaps the closest Quine comes to giving an answer to the question at issue is when he says (p. 63):

Science, thanks to its links with observation, retains some title to a correspondence theory of truth; but a coherence theory is evidently the lot of ethics.

Ethical judgments, then, can be true, but not in the same way that empirical judgments are. Truth for these is coherence (whatever that is) with those value judgments into which we are initially conditioned. This is an awkward position for Quine to hold. Nowhere else does he show sympathy with the claim that ‘true’ is ambiguous. Thus, for example, in *Philosophy of Logic* Quine gives what is essentially a Tarskian account of truth.⁸ This is most

⁸Quine (1970), chapter 3.

naturally seen as a correspondence theory of truth—at least, it is certainly not a coherence theory. And someone who subscribes to such an account of truth will take “coherence truth” to be no truth at all. For a start, it quickly collapses into an awkward relativism. Had Quine grown up, not in the USA, but in the Soviet Union (and so been conditioned differently), his evaluative “truths” about the cold war would have been quite different, and in no objective sense worse.

Actually, I think that the best line for Quine to take about these matters is an error theory, of the kind espoused by Mackie.⁹ According to this, a judgment such as ‘So and so is morally wrong’ is simply false, since there is no objective (natural) property of wrongness to refer to. But such statements are at least truth-apt, and so can be embedded in the appropriate contexts—including propositional attitudes, such as belief. Indeed, Quine might well take it that it is useful for people to believe certain normative/evaluative statements—though false—since their doing so will have desired behavioural consequences.

4 Epistemology and Psychology

The fact that Quine wrote so little on the matter of evaluative/normative judgments suggests—correctly I think—that he cared little about the matter. He should have. The status of norms rears its ugly head in an area that was central to Quine: epistemology. *Prima facie*, at least, epistemology is essentially normative. It provides criteria for what one ought to believe (and why). That is, it produces norms of rationality. As readers of Quine will know well, however, Quine wanted to give traditional epistemology away. In his essay ‘Epistemology Naturalised’, he advocated subsuming epistemology under psychology. He says:¹⁰

Epistemology, or something like it, simply falls into place as a chapter of psychology and hence of natural science. It studies a natural phenomenon, viz., a physical human subject. The human subject is accorded a certain experimentally controlled input—certain patterns of irradiation in assorted frequencies, for instance—and in the fullness of time the subject delivers as out-

⁹Mackie (1977).

¹⁰Quine (1969), ch. 3, pp. 82-3.

put descriptions of the three-dimensional external world and its history. The relationship between the meager input and the torrential output is a relation that we are prompted to study for somewhat the same reason that prompted traditional epistemology; namely, in order to see how evidence relates to theory, and in what way one's theory of nature transcends any available input.

All that epistemology—or at least its legitimate successor—then, can do is describe the conditions under which people *do* come to form beliefs. But something essential has surely been lost in the process. People form beliefs under all kinds of conditions. Some people form beliefs because they are the result of scientific investigation; some people form beliefs because they read them in the Bible; some people form beliefs because it makes them feel good.

Some methods are better than others. And no good naturalist, Quine included, is going to dispute this. Forming beliefs by the scientific method, for example, is better than forming them by the Poison Oracle of the Azande.¹¹ Why? Merely to say that this is what scientists (as opposed to the Azande) do is quite inadequate—precisely because it is purely descriptive.

The natural thing to say is that the scientific method is better because it produces the best results. Best results? Such a claim is evaluative, and so goes beyond mere psychology. Maybe we can say then the scientific method is better because it is more conducive to producing *true* results. The problems with this are two. First, truth does not stare us in the face, and we often have no grip of what is true independent of the method by which it was produced. Those who like science will take something to be (probably) true because it is the result of scientific investigation. Fundamentalist Christians will take something to be (definitely) true because it is stated in the Bible. So to argue for the scientific method in this way would be quite circular. Worse, for the argument to work, when it is said in favour of the scientific method that it is more conducive to producing true results, we have to hear, *sotto voce*, 'and truth is a good thing'. Or else the method still has nothing to recommend it. We have not escaped the evaluative. Nor is truth, unfortunately, a uniformly shared value. I am sure that you have heard, for example: 'I don't care whether or not my beliefs are true. They make me happy. That's enough'.

There is no replacement for the normative, then, and this means that we are thrown back on Quine's account of this, according to which there is no objective justification for such claims. If it is simply a matter of coherence

¹¹Evans-Prichard (1937).

with what has been conditioned, well... Quine's views about science cohere with his scientific conditioning; and the fundamentalist Christian's cohere with his religious conditioning. So? And patently, if it is an error theory that is invoked, the claim scientific methodology is better is an error!

A central plank of naturalism has always been the rational preferability of a scientific approach to things. If this is to be justified, so it would now seem, we must have some way of understanding the normative which transcends naturalism, or at least Quine's account of it.

5 Scientism

There is an heroic move which is possible at this point. Quine might insist that all that there is is the physical world—or physical and mathematical world—and all that cognition requires of us is a scientific description of that. All the rest, norms and all, just drops out of the picture. As we have just seen, there is a sense in which this kicks away the ladder: one can no longer argue that naturalism is better. But naturalism would not be the only philosophy to do this. Think of the end of the *Tractatus*. It could yet be true that all cognition requires is a scientific description of the physical world.

But this move would seem to have little to recommend it. Let us grant, at least for the sake of the argument, that there is only the one reality Quine says there is. There may still be many different sorts of truth about it; and a description in the language of mathematics and physics does not exhaust these. Consider people playing a game of chess. Suppose that one person moves in such a way as to mate their opponent. This is as objective a truth as any, but it cannot be captured in the language of physics. We can say that a wooden piece of a certain shape was moved from one of the 64 squares to another. This may indeed be a physical description of the same event. But one who knows only this about it would be missing something important: the way which the event fits into certain rule-governed activities, certain social practices, and so on. Quine might insist that this is not particularly interesting. But interest is subjective. Quine may not be interested in this—though I presume that outside of his philosophical arm-chair he is. But it remains the case that this is just a proposal to ignore a realm of objective truth. Why do this?

Reflecting on the chess example, and similar ones, suggests that even if there be one reality, there are likely to be a number of different kinds of truth

about it: the physical, the social, the normative, etc. Moreover, each of these kinds may well have a distinctive methodology for determining what is true. One may apply the scientific method to determine a physical truth. But one solves a chess problem—or a mathematical problem—with quite a different method. And the investigation of norms and values may involve different methods again. (For example, the role of a physical experiment in science, may be played by a literary thought-experiment.) This is not to belittle science and its investigations. It is to reject the claim to its hegemony and its Procrustean scientific imperialism.

6 Conclusion

Naturalism is a somewhat diffuse doctrine. However, traditionally it has clearly had an ontological face and a methodological face. We have seen that Quine's response to the problem of mathematics involves a rejection of ontological naturalism. We have also seen that, though less obviously, his account of the normative/evaluative undercuts the methodological face of naturalism—or at least its pretention to universality. It is not unknown in the history of philosophy for the person who pursues a programme most strenuously to succeed, in the end, only in breaking its back. (Think, for example, of the role of Hume in the 18th century empiricist tradition.) So it may be with Quine and naturalism.

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