A Defense of Ontological Relativity

Quine's famous claim that meaning is indeterminable has raised objections from both linguists and metaphysicians. My goal in this paper is to offer a defense of the indeterminacy of meaning against these objections. As a result, my arguments will constitute a defense of the well known consequence of the indeterminacy of meaning: the doctrine of ontological relativity.

I begin by presenting the empirical constraints of a naturalist theory of meaning. Both, indeterminacy of meaning and ontological relativity follow from this. I offer two strategies purported to show how this works. As I will argue, the objections raised fail to deter both strategies and, thus, leave the indeterminacy of meaning still on its feet. Unsurprisingly, this result casts some doubt over the claims defended by theorists of meaning and metaphysicians who have assumed that meaning is determinable and that ontology is relative to theory.

Naturalism and Behavioral Meaning (some assumptions)

When trying to understand Quine's argument for ontological relativity it is important to have two background ideas in mind. First of all, Quine assumes that – as he argued in his famous "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" [1951] – the path between philosophy and the natural science has no gaps. As he argues, there is no fundamental cleavage between metaphysics and the empirical sciences.

This latter idea is supported with the assumption of a naturalist view, which according to Quine implies that "knowledge, mind and meaning are part of the same world that they have to do with and they are to be studied in the same empirical spirit that animates natural science" [Quine,1968,185].

These two ideas together yield the limits within which philosophical research is to be done. Philosophy is not supposed to be less empirical nor more metaphysical than, say, psychology.

These boundaries are incredibly important when we turn to the theory of meaning. For all the evidence available to an empirical theory of meaning will be *overt linguistic behavior*. Given our empirical constraints, the evidence is reduced to the speaker's dispositions to linguistic behavior.

The crux of these ideas is that all there is to meaning, and for that matter all there is to a naturalist approach to meaning, is behavior. This can be summarized simply as follows: meaning *is* behavioral meaning. A particular notion of language learning, which Quine briefly addresses in [1968], arises from this view. According to it, a human being is confronted with certain *stimuli* (i.e. the overt linguistic behavior of other competent speakers) and offers in turn a certain linguistic behavior. It is important to see that the basis for language learning available for competent speakers *is* itself all the evidence available for a theory of meaning.

With these ideas in mind let us go to Quine's arguments for the indeterminacy of meaning and ontological relativity. In so doing, it will be important to take these, and the underdetermination of theories, as three different claims.

Underdetermination, Indeterminacy and Relativity (three different claims)

The underdetermination of theories by the evidence is a widespread feature, which entails that for any theory T_1 of, say, *k*'s, there is another theory T_2 which has the same evidential consequences. Compare, for instance, Newtonian physics with Modern Physics. At some points both theories purport to explain the same empirical data. These theories are logically incompatible but empirically consistent. We know, however, that one of these theories is the correct one when it comes to explain all the phenomena. If it were only for the

empirical evidence, then it would be underdetermined which of these theories is true. This is the claim of underdetermination of theories.

Note that, despite the underdetermination, we can still have scientific justification to determine which of these opposing theories is true. Simplicity, parsimony and even falsifiability come up as virtues of Modern Physics that Newtonian Physics lacks. Surely many other considerations come to the defense of Modern Physics, but for this we need a scientist to tell. In any case, there is a fact of the matter as to whether Modern Physics is true or if Newtonian Physics is correct. For instance, there is a fact of the matter whether there are protons, electrons, quarks and even super strings.

It is Quine's claim that the latter is not the case for a theory of meaning. That is, unlike the underdetermination in Physics, the underdetermination in the theory of meaning is such that it precludes the possibility of determining which theory is correct. This is why the underdetermination *of translation* (i.e. theory of meaning) yields the indeterminacy of meaning. Even though, they are different claims.

Think of a theory of meaning in a language L_0 as a translation manual written in another language L_1, which for every meaningful expression in L_0 offers a translation in L_1. Given the underdetermination of theories, we can expect different and incompatible theories of L_0 to arise, each of which will have exactly the same evidential consequences. But in this case, as opposed to that of other natural sciences like Biology and Physics, even after considering *all possible evidence* it will still be indetermined whether one or the other theory of meaning is the correct one. There is no way to determine meaning because there is no fact of the matter that determines it. In Quine's famous words, we have to accept the indeterminacy of meaning.

Quine considers two ways for pressing in favor of the indeterminacy of meaning from the underdetermination of translation. He dubs them, 'pressing from above' and 'pressing from below'[Quine,1970]. The former is concerned with the translation of theories, the

latter with the translation of terms. Both are cases of radical translation. For reasons that we will see later on, Quine is more interested in defending the first one.

A) Indeterminacy from above

Indeterminacy *from* above is indeterminacy *from* the whole of a theory. When translating the set of sentences that constitute a theory, different sets of sentences (constituting different theories themselves) will result as the translation. This is the indeterminacy *from* above.

Imagine the following situation. You have to translate a foreigner's Physics. Her theory A happens to be incompatible with another theory B, which she does not accept. Theory B, however, has exactly the same evidential or empirical consequences as B. This is, as you may recall, just a simple matter of underdetermination of Physics. Since all the evidence you have in order to make a translation is the observational one, you start by translating the observational sentences of the foreigner's theory A, and from there you end up with a full translation that yields a Physics theory. The problem is that, just as the foreigner's theory A is underdetermined by the evidence, your translation – and hence the theory you come up with – is underdetermined by the observational sentences *in your translation*.

This result is problematic because, for all the evidence you have now there are at least two incompatible theories A and B from where you have to choose. There are many ways to choose. You might find theory B simpler than A and thus endorse B. Even worse, you might find both A and B terribly cumbersome in terms of translation rules and then "regard the foreigner as holding neither A nor B; [or] attribute to [her] rather some false physical theory which we can refute, or some obscure one which we despair of penetrating, or we might even regard [her] as holding no coherent physical theory at all."[Quine,1970,180]

The important thing to note here is that there is no possible evidence that we can come up with in order to determine which translation is the correct one. The actual linguistic behavior of the foreigner physicist yields no difference in favor of one or the other; and no

other possible linguistic behavior will. There is no way to determine the meaning of the theory that she holds; and perhaps this very question is senseless since there is no fact of the matter as to whether she holds one translation or the other.

B) Indeterminacy from below

Indeterminacy *from* below is indeterminacy not from a set of sentences but *from* individual referring terms. When translating single referring terms of a language, different referring terms will result as the translation. This is the indeterminacy *from* below.

Here we have to deal with the famous case of gavagai. The evidence you have is that an utterance of 'gavagai' accompanies every time there is one particular stimulus: a rabbit. How are you supposed to translate 'gavagai'? There are, at least, three different options compatible with the very same stimulus: (i)undetached part of rabbit; (ii)time slice of rabbit; (iii)instance of rabbithood; and (iv) rabbit. All the evidence available is not enough to determine which of these is the correct translation; and no further tests with the competent speaker will offer you a different kind of evidence that might help picking up the correct translation. If I may say it once more, there is no fact of the matter as to whether the speaker is talking about instances of rabbithood or time slices of rabbit.

(i)-(iv) are logically incompatible and, nonetheless, consistent with all possible evidence. This, however, is not just another case or underdetermination. For, in this case, there is no way to determine what the reference of 'gavagai' is. We reach, again, the indeterminacy of meaning but this time by means of the indeterminacy of reference. If we try to build up a theory of the language of the speaker we will get indeterminacy of meaning in general, being unable (at least) to determine whether such speaker or community talks about things, time slices of things, undetached parts of things or just instances of universals.

It is time now to go for the third thesis that is at stake here: the doctrine of ontological relativity. According to Quine's view, ontological relativity follows naturally from the indeterminacy of meaning and reference. Let us see how.

C) Ontological relativity

Ontological relativity claims that one cannot tell what entities one's theory is committed to *except* within another theory. If so, there is no theory-independent way to say what sorts of things exist.

The claim of indeterminacy is, however, just a claim about meaning and reference. As opposed to Physics, it is the theory of meaning which is radically underdetermined by the evidence. You might then wonder how ontological relativity, a universal claim about entities, is inferred from such a particular thesis.

Ontological relativity is easily understood when one considers cases like those of radical translation but within one's own language. Take the case of indeterminacy from above. Instead of a radically foreign physicist we have now a metaphysically minded physicist who by the noon of a gray and snowy Sunday in Ann Arbor starts wondering about the ontological commitments of her interpretation of string-theory (i.e. Theory A). And so she starts writing down a list of what there is in the universe as follows from her endorsement of theory A.

If we take this list of things with the indeterminacy of meaning in mind, we will start wondering about what sorts of things will appear in it. Our problems with the indeterminacy of reference will inevitably jump in. Is she accepting that there are things according to theory A or according to another logically incompatible but empirically consistent interpretation of string-theory that we may call theory B? For all we know, the evidential consequences of endorsing theory A are just the same as those of endorsing theory B. And thus, it is under determined whether the list is filled with B-type or A-type entities. For all our physicist knows, there is nothing within theory A that decides this issue;

and there is no reason why there should be, for this problematic issue concerns the *meaning* of the terms used by the physicist, not the Physics theory that she endorses. This is how the indeterminacy of meaning and reference undermines the possibility of knowing, from within one's theory, what sorts of entities one's theory is committed to.[1]

There might be many ways to answer this question, but going back to ask our physicist is certainly not among them. What we need is a metatheory that includes Physics, and which tells us what sort of entities our physicist is committed to. Of course, as always, there will be different logically incompatible metatheories that will nevertheless match up equally well with the evidence (in this case with Physics). We might then know what sorts of entities Physics is committed to, but only relative to one or the other metatheory. This is the claim of ontological relativity.[2]

Up to now we have seen how from the widely accepted underdetermination of theories, together with the acceptance of a particular set of facts as evidence for a theory of meaning, we get the indeterminacy of translation. I presented two different ways of making this point; as we shall when dealing with the objections, the strategy *from above* is more relevant. I have also shown how ontological relativity turns out to be a fact of every theory once we accept the indeterminacy of meaning and reference. I will now present some objections against these arguments.

The Peculiarity of Meaning and what Ontological Relativity *really* is

[1] A similar point can be made by following the strategy from below. One may wonder whether contemporary physics is committed to the existence of protons or just time slices of protons, or perhaps only undetached parts of protons, or maybe nothing more than just instances of the universal PROTON; mutatis mutandis for *electron*, *charm*, *spin*, *color* and what not.

[2] This, of course, will not stop at the first level of metatheory. The indeterminacy of meaning holds universally, and metatheoretical terms are not specially protected against it. In order to know what ontology is a metatheory committed to one might have to start doing some meta-metatheory, and so on. The mill will not stop, but our curiosity for knowing in absolute terms what is there might.

It is an assumption that motivates all natural sciences that the objects of their study exist independently of there being any theory about them. Hence, independently of, say Physics, there is a fact of the matter as to whether there are protons or not. Furthermore, there is a fact of the matter as to whether protons are or are not the way Physics takes them to be. In general, if scientific research has any purpose at all it is because there is a fact of the matter as to whether there are these or those sorts of things. But this contradicts the claim that there is no theory-independent way to say what there is. If our ontology is a matter of fact and not just an invention of our theories, then that theory A or theory B is the correct answer to the question 'what is there?' must not itself be relative to theory.

We must find a way to reject Quine's conclusion. Here is one: the step from the indeterminacy of meaning to the relativity of ontology seems clear; but what about the inference from underdetermination of translation to the indeterminacy of meaning? After all, as we can see for the case of Physics, the underdetermination of theory should not engender irrealism about the objects of the theory. If, despite the underdetermination of Physics, we can still *know* which theory is correct, why this cannot be the case for a theory of meaning?

Reply: the theory of meaning is a special one

In order to properly address this worry it is important to understand how Quine's general view on meaning works. There are at least two ways in which a theory of meaning is distinct or special, as opposed to the other natural sciences.

I said above that, as a consequence of the naturalism assumed by Quine, overt linguistic behavior constitutes all the evidence (even all possible evidence) available for a theory of meaning. In this sense, a naturalist theory of meaning is distinct from, say, Physics. For the former the evidence is publicly accessible (and certainly macroscopic),

while for the latter one the evidence available requires, more often than not, a privileged access to it.

As a consequence of this there is another way that a naturalist theory of meaning is special, as opposed to Physics. This one has to do with the depth of the knowledge in question. On the one hand, for Quine, any competent speaker of English knows pretty much all that is required from a theorist to know about meaning in English. On the other hand, it is not true that any average human being that has experienced the physical world (for as many years as you want) knows pretty much all there is to be known about physics. The depth of education and knowledge of physics required to be a competent physicist is far greater than the depth of the linguistic knowledge required to be a competent theorist of meaning.

Going back to the objection, a proper reply will be the following. It is true that *in general* the underdetermination of theory does not yield the indeterminacy of the objects. This is true about Physics, Biology and all natural sciences; however, the theory of meaning is special in a way that an analogy between the former and the latter is not justified. This is precisely why there is indeterminacy of meaning and reference and not of, say, protons and electrons, or DNA and molecules of water. Let this be enough to reply against the claim that the inference from the underdetermination of translation to the indeterminacy of meaning is an unmotivated one. There is, as far as I can see, a more pressing objection coming up.

That ontology is relative to theory appears to be a strongly idealist claim. It entails, for instance, that no theory-independent correct answer to the ontological question of what is there may be given. But we have strong realist reasons inviting us to reject such claims. Thus, a natural criticism to ontological relativity is that it is idealist.

The upshot of this objection is to distinguish between epistemological and metaphysical claims and to argue that Quine's argument only has an epistemological reach. In other words, what Quine shows is that we do not have the *epistemic* capability to determine what the meaning of a sentence or the reference of a term is. Let us dub this as the thesis of *epistemological indeterminacy*. What the argument does not show is that the *objects* of the theory are *metaphysically* undetermined. Let us dub this as the thesis of *metaphysical indeterminacy*. Notice that for this objection to stand it is not necessary to know that the objects in question are *metaphysically* determinable; it is enough to show that we do not know this to be false, even if we know the thesis of *epistemological indeterminacy* to be true.

For Quine to be able to infer *metaphysical indeterminacy* from *epistemological indeterminacy* it must at least be the case that wherever there is the latter there is the former. But this is not true since you can have the latter without the former.

Consider a world created by an *omnipotent* god. This god knows exactly what sorts of things there are and how to individuate them. In all other respects, this world is exactly like ours. By hypothesis, this god not only can but does determine what an object is – even what meaning and reference is - by mere *metaphysical stipulation*. However, the world is such that there is no evidence that uniquely points out how to determine what a particular object is. We can even grant that if another god, who did not create this world, wanted to find out how to individuate objects would not be able to come up with a unique way to correctly do so.

Knowledge, nonetheless, is factive. Thus, if the creationist god does know what sorts of things there are, then there must be a fact of the matter about what sorts of things there are. This, however, does not yield us with any evidence concerning what sorts of things there are in such particular world, for only god knows and our limitations impede us from accessing god's mind. The facts of the world are underdetermined for us, but there is no ontological indeterminacy. Thus, in this world *epistemological indeterminacy* is true while

metaphysical indeterminacy is false, in particular there is no indeterminacy of meaning, for god has established this as a matter of fact, and without it the thesis of ontological relativity simply does not follow.

Reply: what ontological relativity really is

But what about the charge of idealism; can we accept a doctrine that entails that whatever it is that there is depends on our theories? Before answering we should ask ourselves what the thesis of ontological relativity *really* claims. The way I see it we might not even have to answer such a pressing question.

As I stated above, ontological relativity claims that a metatheory is needed in order to *know* what ontological commitments a theory has. This is certainly different from claiming that there are no facts of the matter as to whether, say, the objects postulated within Physics exist or not. That there are protons or not is certainly, as the objection claims, independent of whether there is or not a theory that postulates them. This would contradict ontological relativity only if it were to claim that the *existence* of protons is relative to theory. But, as I said, this is not the case. What is it, then, that ontological relativity claims?

Ontological relativity is *not* a metaphysical claim about what sorts of things there are, all of them being relative to theory. Ontological relativity is a claim about the ontological commitments of our theories, about our access to what sorts of things there are, all of it being relative to theory. Its main goal is to avoid the temptation of assuming a fundamental cleavage between empirical knowledge and what could be called (if at all) 'metaphysical knowledge'. We need theoretical (empirical) posits in order to know what sorts of things there are, as much as we need theoretical posits in order to know how the earth moves. In this sense, ontological relativity can thus be understood as a consequence of Quine's original [1951] claim that Philosophy and the Natural Sciences are not two distinct kinds of

knowledge presupposing two distinct kinds of access (one *a priori* the other *a posteriori*) to reality.

As to whether there is a fact of the matter concerning what *really* exists, nothing within ontological relativity impedes us from having such assumption. Ontological relativity can therefore not be justly criticized as idealist.

In my defense of ontological relativity I have argued, up to now, that there is an important distinctness of a theory of meaning, which accounts for the indeterminacy of its objects. Some, like Chomsky [1968], have rejected such distinctness, arguing that the evidence available to a naturalist theory of meaning includes more than just overt linguistic behavior. These observations cast some doubt as to whether a theory of meaning is so radically underdetermined as to yield indeterminacy of its objects. In the following section I will present this objection followed by a reply.

Quine's Empirical Assumptions

In different texts Quine explicitly assumes that, in general, learning a language *is* to learn how to imitate some other's linguistic behavior. The central assumption is that "even in the complex and obscure parts of language learning, the learner has no data to work with but the overt behavior of other speakers."[Quine,1968,187]. It is precisely this assumption which seems to lead to the indeterminacy of meaning, and one which Chomsky rejects in a rather convincing way.

Chomsky [1968] points out a gap between the knowledge of language that a competent speaker actually has and the one that the radically meager data that Quine assumes would allow them to have. If we accept Quine's assumptions our knowledge of language would by an unexplained mystery. Let us see this with more detail.

It is part of a competent speaker's ability to produce an infinite number of different sentences. However, the uttering of an infinite number of different sentences is not among the things that a competent speaker *actually does*. Quine's empirical assumption can only explain the latter.

Parallel to the ability of *producing* an infinite number of sentences there is also the ability of *understanding* – and in a sense *knowing* – an infinite number of sentences. However, a competent speaker is never confronted with an infinite number of stimuli. Quine's empirical assumption can only account for knowledge of a greatly reduced language with a minimal set of sentences.

Quine is missing an important distinction between competence and performance. A speaker may very well be competent and still unable to perform properly. Imagine that, for some terrible accident you lose your tongue. You thereby lose the possibility of performing properly, but you certainly do not lose your knowledge of English because of this accident. Thus, in order to account for the knowledge of language that competent speakers have, something else than overt linguistic behavior is needed; but, what else? Chomsky's famous claim is that "knowledge of a 'universal grammar', in the widest sense, is an innate property of the mind, and that this given system of rules and principles determines the form and meaning of infinitely many sentences(…)." [1968,59].

This seems to offer ground for an objection to the indeterminacy of meaning. Once we have more evidence available, we can at least hope that there will be a way to determine whether one or the other theory of meaning is correct. It will depend, presumably, on how well the theory matches up with the rules set up in the innate faculty of language.

Reply: still indeterminacy (from above)

As you may recall, in pushing the point of indeterminacy of meaning, two different strategies were followed. According to one, we get the indeterminacy of meaning from the

indeterminacy of the translation of theories (from above). According to the other, we get the indeterminacy of reference from the indeterminacy of the translation of terms (from below). Needless to say, a proper way out of this problem must show how we can avoid indeterminacy for *both* strategies.

Now if Chomsky´s proposal is going to help it must be that the rules of the universal grammar somehow determine which one is the correct theory of meaning. But it is highly implausible that this will happen when we face the indeterminacy *from above*. Whether a proper translation of the foreign physicist's theory is Theory A or the logically incompatible but empirically consistent Theory B, is something that quite probably will not appear among the rules of universal grammar.

Even more, not only does it seem implausible that a rule that determines how to choose between theories of Physics exist, it also seems true that it does not. If such thing as a Physics-theory-determining rule exists innately, then it must be that we are innately determined to produce and understand one particular Physics theory and not other logically incompatible but empirically consistent ones. However, we (sadly) know that there is no such thing as a unique Physics that we humans are innately determined to produce and understand. It might be that the faculty of language allows for the production and understanding of an extensive number of different theories. In any case, we still will not be able to determine which resulting theory is the correct one by looking at the innate properties of the human mind.

As Quine himself notes, "the problem is not one of hidden facts, such as might be uncovered by learning more about the brain physiology of thought processes."[1970,180] The problem is that there is no fact of the matter as to whether the foreigner endorses Theory A or Theory B. It can be expected to find different physiological mechanisms, or even different innate rules, for "genuinely distinct mental state[s]", but it is mistaken to

expect different mechanisms or different rules for every difference that can be made in translating a theory.

Let us now look at a suggestion from Lewis [1984] that seems to solve the problem of indeterminacy independently of whether or not there is more evidence to meaning than just overt linguistic behavior.

Inegalitarian Ontology and the Eligible Referents

Lewis [1984] defends that some further theory-independent constraints may come into play when considering which theory of meaning is the correct one.

Following Lewis we can argue that for a theory of meaning and reference to be the correct one it must conform to, say, constraint *G*. If conforming to constraint *G* does not require an interpretation or theory of the world according to which there are *G*'s, then the determinacy of meaning and reference would not be relative to such theory. The claim is that the world might be such that it conforms to *G*. For instance, take *G* to be the list of properties that an electron has. The correct theory of reference for 'electron' is determined as that which offers a translation that conforms to *G*, and for such to be the case no interpretation of the world that talks about electrons is necessary.

Such constraints are not arbitrarily assigned. After all, that is just the way the world is supposed to be. How can we find them out? Lewis offers two apparently easy steps. First, assume an "inegalitarian" ontology, according to which there are elite properties (e.g. spin, charm, color, etc) and less elite properties (e.g. tasty, green, feline, etc). The elite properties will yield the most elite objects (e.g. electrons, protons, etc), while less elite properties yield less elite objects (e.g. pies, grass, cats, etc). Now, in order to determine which are the elite

properties, and hence which are the elite objects, we call for help from Physics.[3] After all, Physics is in the business of finding out what there is and it seems to be pretty good at it.[4]

Once we have this then we have an extra-theoretical constraint to which any theory of meaning should conform. Such constraint is this: translate the terms in a way that the referent is either an elite object or one that is "connected to the most elite by chains of definability". If we follow this constraint, the indeterminacy of reference will not arise since we are already being told what the reference is.

Reply: indeterminacy from below comes from above (can not have one without the other)

Lewis' proposal assumes that Physics simply tells us what there is independently of any theory; a view that Quine does not endorse.[5] For the sake of the argument let us assume that this view of Science is correct. This given, I have two objections against this proposal.

First of all, it seems uncontroversial that Physics will not tell us whether there are instances of protonhood, or just time slices of protons. Thus, different logically incompatible translations of 'proton' may be given, all of which will be consistent with what Physics says about protons. More distinctions can be made with respect to the meaning or reference of 'proton' than what Physics will. Thus, Physics itself will be neutral to whether the meaning or reference is one or the other. The indeterminacy of reference is still standing.

In the second place, the proposal cannot even get started. It requires from us to know what there is according to Physics; and to do so we need to determine what the sentences of the theory mean. Physics may discover what there is independently of any theory, but we cannot *know* what Physics talks about independently of any interpretation of Physics. In

[3] See Lewis, [1984,227-229].
[4] I thank Jim Joyce for this observation.
[5] The difference between Quine and Lewis is that the former argues [1951] that doing science is a matter of how to best construct our web of belief, while the latter believes that it is a matter of discovering what there is in an independent manner. I owe this observation to Jim Joyce.

order to avoid the indeterminacy of reference Lewis needs to avoid, first, the indeterminacy of meaning as it is pressed *from above*. Whatever set of sentences we get from physicists, there will be different logically incompatible ways to understand them (all equally compatible with Physics) all yielding different elite objects. Thus, we cannot single out the eligible referents unless we pick among these interpretations of Physics. It goes without saying that doing so is tantamount to accepting the doctrine of ontological relativity although, this time, from above.

We have seen two different arguments purporting to show how to avoid the indeterminacy of meaning given the particular limitations that a naturalist theory of meaning has. Chomsky's claim is that there is more to meaning than what Quine assumes; this being what Chomsky calls an "innate knowledge of language". Lewis' claim is that there are further non-theoretic constraints that help reducing the set of possible translations that can be offered, in such a way that yields some grounds from where to determine which translation is the correct one.

I have argued, nonetheless, that none of these objections achieve their goal. On the one hand, even if we accept that some innate properties of the mind should be considered as evidence, the indeterminacy of meaning still stands. This is owed to the fact that the distinctions that can be drawn at the level of meaning cannot be traced at the level of those innate properties. The gap between all the semantic differences that can be drawn between theories and *all the possible evidence* is still too big to avoid the indeterminacy of meaning.

On the other hand, taking the objects of Physics as constraints assumes that we have solved the problem of the indeterminacy of theory-translation. The proposal, however, says nothing as to how can we solve this latter problem without accepting the doctrine of ontological relativity, which is exactly the claim that the objection was initially aiming against. It seems, therefore, that the doctrine of ontological relativity still stands on its feet.

Final Remarks

The stubbornness with which the indeterminacy of meaning stands against the objections is startling. No matter where we look (in or outside the human mind), or how deeply rooted our evidence might be (by piggybacking on any natural science), no empirical evidence can cope with the distinctions that can be made at the level of meaning. There is, as I have argued all along this paper, no fact of the matter as to whether this or that expression has this or that meaning and not a different one. Meaning does not seem to be among the kinds of things that one can expect to investigate on in just the same way as Physics, Biology and Chemistry do with atoms, cells and molecules.

There are at least two paths one can follow after accepting this conclusion. One might follow Quine in claiming that philosophical research is just as empirical as that of any natural science, and, thus, stop worrying about meaning. For, whatever that is, it is not a natural kind.

Another option is to accept that philosophical research (or at least a part of it) is distinctly non-empirical; and perhaps start worrying about meaning, for it does seem to be of high relevance to pretty much all areas of Philosophy.

Common to these options is the claim that *meaning* is closer to that arena of knowledge which escapes the empirical domain, and which Quine scornfully (and perhaps correctly) dubbed as 'traditional metaphysics'.[6]

While time has apparently shown Quine to be mistaken as to whether rigorous, and perhaps even scientifically minded, metaphysics is possible,[7] it still seems to be true that one cannot get into problems of meaning without getting into some or other metaphysical trouble.

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[6] "Meaning" according to Quine's famous "Two Dogmas of Empiricism", "is what essence becomes when divorced from the object of reference and wedded to the word." [1951]

[7] As the work of people like Kit Fine shows, even Aristotelian essentialist metaphysics (that threatening jungle) should be taken seriously; that is, as an area where certain knowledge can be obtained.

It is difficult to see what should be done on the light of this.

It seems to me that a fair amount of philosophers have followed the path less attractive to Quine, by (at least) assuming that empirical constraints are not the proper ones for a theory of meaning. This seems to have offer the grounds for a different objection to the doctrine of indeterminacy of meaning; an objection that has not received much of attention here. According to this view the very notion of a *theory of meaning* has been misconstrued, from the beginning, in empirical terms. Determinacy is expected to be reached once the empirical constraints are given in favor of other more *adequate* ones; perhaps that of *possible worlds*.

This strategy, however, cannot be taken as having successfully met *all* of Quine's challenges; for there is at least one very strong objection which contemporary metaphysics seems to have left behind. Quine [1951] signals that, in order to get into traditional *a priori* metaphysics, one must arbitrarily – 'dogmatic' is the term used by Quine – accept unexplained distinctions such as that between *matters of meaning/matters of fact*, and, furthermore, between *essential/accidental* properties. Metaphysicians nowadays[8] accept this burden, sometimes intending to clarify the notions involved in terms of other equally unexplained notions such as *the nature of a thing* and *what makes the thing be what it is*. Some of these philosophers, however, seem happy to accept the burden and assume the notions as primitive.

Without intending to solve this quandary, I would like to say three things. First of all, there are many different incompatible ways of understanding the *essential/accidental* distinction, such that it is far from clear which notion is taken as primitive.

Second, metaphysical claims concerning the *essence* of x (say, of human beings, of moral codes, of political regimes, of…) seem to be too strong (powerful claims may follow from them, e.g. that humans are essentially rational, or democratic or …) for us to simply take

[8] See Fine [1994].

essence as primitive words and arguments are, in general, very powerful tools, we can never overstress how careful we need to be in their use, and metaphysics does not seem to be an area where we can be even a little bit careless as to whether we know what we are talking about or not.

Third, and last, as philosophers we should be worried for – as Quine forcefully claimed – *dogmatically* assuming notions of which we have no clear understanding. I do not think anyone can happily bite this bullet from Quine. I take it that a distinctive task of Philosophy is precisely that of a critical rejection of uncritical assumptions and not the other way around.

If we are to do metaphysics we should perhaps make sure that we reply to Quine's remarks, and not just ignore them.

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