

IN DEFENSE OF QUINE

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WITH THE PUBLISHING of “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” in 1953, Willard Van Orman Quine began an assault on what were, at that time, fundamental assumptions about language. His arguments about truth, meaning facts, and translation have reshaped the way language is seen. Still, almost 50 years after the first shot was fired, the debate rages on. In this paper, I will consider the arguments of Scott Soames, a contemporary respondent to Quine. In his September 1999 paper, “The Indeterminacy of Translation and the Inscrutability of Reference,” Soames presents an argument against Quine’s indeterminacy of translation claim, presented originally in his 1960 work, *Word and Object*. This paper will consider two arguments raised by Soames. The first is an objection to Quine’s argument on the basis that it is not what it purports to be—that it appears to work only because of an equivocation. The second is a claim that Quine’s argument is self-defeating. In both cases, we will see that Soames’s arguments ultimately fail to defeat Quine’s claims.

Soames’s Reading of Quine

Soames presents and considers the different ways Quine argues for the indeterminacy of translation. He sees Quine’s most convincing and interesting argument as relying on two premises:

Physicalism: All genuine truths (facts) are determined by physical truths (facts).

The Underdetermination of Translation by Physics: Translation is not determined by the set of all physical truths (facts), known and unknown. For any pair of languages and theory of translation T for those languages, there are alternative theories of translation, incompatible with T, that accord equally well with all physical truths (facts). (Soames 331)

If the above two premises are correct, then no theory of translation is comprised wholly of genuine truths. There will be, quite literally, no fact of the matter regarding some of the translation claims—translation will be indeterminate. Soames remarks that these two premises are not quite clear. Each claim is formulated in terms of a determination relation. Soames thinks that this presents a potential equivocation as to which determination relation is being employed in each statement.

The relevant conclusion can be drawn only if the determination relation is the same in each premise. Soames argues that the determination relation cannot be formulated in such a way so as to render both theses plausible. As such, he claims that Quine's argument does not hold.

Soames offers two readings of the determination relation—a priori determination (i.e. logical consequence) and metaphysical determination (i.e. supervenience). Clearly, Soames concedes, claims about translation are not logical consequences of physics. However, Soames also argues that not all truths are logical consequences of physical truths. The more viable reading of the determination relation is determination as supervenience. On this reading, Soames is willing to grant Quine's physicalism. Nonetheless, he argues vigorously that Quine has not provided sufficient reason to think that translation does not supervene on physical truth.

Begging the Question

It is worth noting at this point that Soames's argument against the (metaphysical) underdetermination of translation by physics is transparently question begging. "Prior to any skeptical argument," Soames argues, "...we naturally assume at the outset that there are facts about meaning." By helping himself to this "natural assumption," Soames sets up the problem in such a way that adding Quine's two theses yields an inconsistent triad. According to Soames, Quine's two theses are:

- (1) $\forall x (x \text{ is a genuine truth} \rightarrow x \text{ is determined by physical truths})$
- (2) Translation is not determined by physical truths

Soames's pretheoretic conviction is:

- (3) Translation is a genuine truth

Of course, the set $\{1,2,3\}$ is logically inconsistent. Since Soames assumes (3), it is impossible to sustain both (1) and (2).

In his second article, Soames's argument is even more explicitly question begging. He simply assumes that "if there are such things as meaning and reference as we ordinarily understand them, then they supervene on the totality of physical facts." This is simply the negation of (2). Unsurprisingly, Soames derives that "the underdetermination of translation by physics should be rejected." Soames seems to have developed a pretheoretic conviction that Quine's second premise is false.

Soames and his sympathizers will not see any problem with this strategy of argument. Soames will say that his pretheoretic conviction

that there are meaning facts is just a natural assumption. In the absence of an argument against his assumption, Soames sees no reason to reject it. Soames does not see Quine as having presented an argument sufficient to convince him to reject his pretheoretic conviction. As such, from his perspective, he is perfectly justified in rejecting Quine's argument on the basis that it does not cohere with his pretheoretic conviction.

For the purpose of this paper, we can grant Soames his pretheoretic conviction. We can let him assume that somehow the most natural, primitive assumption is that there are meaning facts and that the dialectical structure of the argument allows him to legitimately assume this until proven otherwise. Soames has, however, given us a route to convincing him that his pretheoretic conviction is wrong. We will explore this in the next section. First, we should note that the fact that we can engage in a legitimate discussion of Quine's second premise with Soames casts doubt on the seriousness with which we ought to take his pretheoretic conviction. We will see the complexity of the argument required to sustain Soames's pre-theoretic conviction and may very well begin to wonder whether this theoretic conviction ought to be granted. That Soames's intuition has been under fire for nearly 50 years might very well be reason enough to wonder whether we ought to grant its truth. The precariousness of Soames's conviction in mind, we grant it to him and move forward in an attempt to convince the reader who accepts his argument that Quine's argument is valid.

Toward a Method of Argument

For those who do not share Soames's conviction, his appeal to it is unconvincing and seems ingenuous. For those who side with Soames, Quine's second premise is doomed. We do, however, have a philosophically fruitful way of discussing the problem at hand. Soames allows that Quine's argument would hold, "if it could be shown both that theories of translation are not a priori, or conceptual, consequences of the set of physical truths, and that because of this, they are not necessary consequences of those statements either" (Soames 333).

This last route to convincing Soames of the validity of Quine's argument is open because Soames finds physicalism to be a plausible thesis under the reading of the determination relation as supervenience. As such, if we could convince Soames that his pretheoretic intuition were wrong, then he would be forced to accept Quine's argument for the indeterminacy of translation under the reading where the determination relation is metaphysical determination. Recall that Soames argues that translation is not a priori determined by physics. He denies, however, the implication which would sustain Quine's

argument, namely that:

(4*) If translation is not a conceptual consequence of physics, then it does not supervene on physics.

Or equivalently,

(4) If translation supervenes on physics, then it is a conceptual consequence of Physics.

We will now set out to show that (4) does, in fact, hold. Since Soames believes that translation is not a conceptual consequence of physical fact, in demonstrating (4), we would force Soames to accept that translation does not supervene on physics. Since he accepts physicalism where determination is read as supervenience, he will be forced to accept Quine's argument under the interpretation of determination as supervenience.

A Pretheoretic Conviction

The above statement (4) is a specific example of a larger claim in the philosophy of language, namely:

(4') If meaning facts supervene on physics then they are a conceptual consequence of physics.

It will be worthwhile to consider the problem from the vantage point of this added generality. Our question has shifted from one of translation specifically to the general question about the epistemology and metaphysics of meaning. In the process of sustaining Quine's argument, we will first want to show that when it comes to meaning facts, epistemology and metaphysics can be run together—that if there are meaning facts, we can know them.

It might be useful to consider some intuitive reasons why one might accept (4'). Language is a human creation and dependent on humans for its existence. All the more so, meaning facts cannot exist but that we make it so. If my words mean anything, how could I not know what they mean? At the very least, this meaning must be something accessible to some person. Our most basic, fundamental view of meaning facts necessitates that someone be able to grasp them.¹

Quirky “Meanings”

In order for Soames to be correct in his rejection of Quine, there must be meaning facts and they must not be conceptually dependent on physics. Alternatively, we will argue, this is to say that there must be meaning facts and they must be inaccessible to us. Would such facts,

were they to exist, be of any relevance to anyone? Would we ever even encounter them? How could they play a role in our language use (which is an inherently epistemological activity)?

If there are meaning facts that we cannot know, then these are irrelevant. We will never notice them; they will play no role in our language use and understanding. These meaning facts will violate our most fundamental assumptions about meaning facts—that they play some role in our language. Quine’s argument can happily be reformulated (or rather clarified) to state that his indeterminacy argument is directed only at meaning facts which would purport to be a part of our language. The existence of these odd “meaning facts” will not then serve as an argument against Quine.

At this point, the astute reader will note, our work is not done. The arguments we have given so far suffice to show that if there are meaning facts, then we must know them. We can, as it were, run together the epistemology and metaphysics of meaning. It is a further claim that the only way we could know these meaning facts would be by way of our knowledge of physical facts. This is the missing link that would justify the previous claim that equates our knowing meaning facts with their being conceptually dependent on physics. Soames recognizes the need for this further claim in a footnote, arguing that “it is important not to confuse the obvious fact that we know what our words...mean with the utterly implausible thesis that we arrive at this knowledge by deriving true claims about the meanings of our words...as a priori consequences of purely physical truths.” (Soames 335, note 14) The distinction we are drawing is somewhat different. Embedded in Soames’s conception of the distinction is the assumption that *there are, in fact, meaning facts*. (Interestingly, the claim that Soames makes in this footnote can be seen simply as the consequence of his rejection of (4’) and the assumption that there are meaning facts.) Our argument is being framed counterfactually. For us, it is a question of what would obtain were there meaning facts. As such, the aforementioned footnote cannot be seen as an argument against the position we are about to present. We agree, with Soames, that we do not derive, “true claims about the meanings of our words...as a priori consequences of purely physical truths.” This is a direct consequence of our contention that we do not derive “true claims about the meanings of our words” at all. Soames, it should be noted, would side with us in accepting the claim that were there meaning facts we would know them (since he thinks that there are meaning facts and we do know them). The point of contention arises in our consideration of how such meaning facts would have to be known. We now set out to show that such meaning facts would have to be a priori consequences of physical

truths.

The Problem of Dualism

Let us consider how it could be that we would know meaning facts by some route other than knowledge of the physical world. Imagine that each person were endowed with a mechanism that provided him a way to grasp meaning facts that did not derive from his knowledge of physics. This mechanism would have to be a physical mechanism. If so, the understanding of the inner workings of this mechanism would be a part of the corpus of physical fact. Having gained an understanding of the workings of this mechanism we would be able to “read off” meaning facts from the combination of the physical facts not related to this mechanism and those related to it. Would not the physical facts (including those of the mechanism that apprehends meaning) conceptually determine the meaning facts? It would seem that in order to sustain a view whereby man is endowed with the ability to grasp meaning facts, but that knowledge of the physical facts is not sufficient to produce knowledge of the meaning facts, we would need to appeal to some non-physical mechanism in man, i.e. a dualist theory of mind. This is because if the mechanism whereby man grasped meaning were a physical mechanism, its inner workings would be physical facts. Knowledge of those physical facts would be sufficient to gain knowledge of facts about meaning.

It has been suggested, in response to the argument above, that one might not need to be a substance dualist, but only a property dualist, to sustain the view that we come to know meaning through some mechanism of the brain, but that we cannot “read off” the meaning facts from the physical facts. We could, it is suggested, be endowed with an entirely physical mechanism (for apprehending meaning) that has non-physical properties. This position has a severe problem. It seems odd to say that something is entirely physical but has non-physical properties. After all, what is something other than its properties? If a mechanism of the brain were to have non-physical properties, then would it not be (at least partially) non-physical? It seems like the property dualist (who isn’t a substance dualist) wants to have it both ways. He wants the explanatory benefits of something non-physical, while denying responsibility for holding to the existence of something non-physical. It would seem that, were this physical thing to have non-physical properties, it would (to some extent) be non-physical as well.²

Meaning in Conflict with Empiricism

Lurking in the background of Quine’s view is the empiricist

premise that everything we know is known from (or deduced from) experience (or sensory encounter with the physical world). If there were meaning facts, we would know them. By the empiricist premise, we would know them directly from experience or deduce them from experience. Since all experience is of physical facts, we would know meaning facts either directly as physical facts (in which case they are vacuously consequences of physics) or as conceptual consequences of our knowledge of physical facts. Realizing this consideration, we see that Soames's rejection of Quine's argument will ultimately hinge on a rejection of empiricism.

It will be noted that in the previous paragraph I have relied on a specific notion of empiricism. Namely, I have taken empiricism to state that all of our knowledge is conceptually dependent on our experience with the physical. Embedded in this is the premise that all experience is experience of the physical. Some may be happy to reject this form of empiricism for a weaker form—one that would require only that experience be causally necessary for knowledge. All of our knowledge, they will claim, supervenes on the physical, but we cannot always appeal to the physical in order to justify our knowledge. This, however, will seem to add an unnecessary layer of objects to our ontology. If we cannot justify our knowledge on the basis of the physical, then either we must be able to justify our knowledge by some other means or not be able to justify it at all. One who takes this line and argues that we can justify our knowledge will need to appeal to some sort of non-physical "fact" to "justify" knowledge. This has the rather unpalatable consequence of admitting non-physical facts and some method whereby we use them to produce justifications.³ Further, we will require some explanation of how we acquire this knowledge that we do not deduce from our knowledge of the physical. One will have to maintain that we have direct knowledge (i.e. experience) of things that are not physical.⁴ In response to someone who holds that we can have direct experience of things non-physical, we will point to the previous section in an attempt to pre-empt this kind of theory by showing what such knowledge would entail, namely some form of dualism.

Competing Convictions

It cannot be proven beyond any doubt that knowledge cannot be obtained other than by experience. It cannot be proven beyond any doubt that a dualist theory of mind is false. It can also not be proven beyond any doubt that you, dear reader, are not the only person in existence. I could argue for the empiricist premise and say that experience has given us no reason to doubt it, but the skeptic can

respond that this only begs the question in my favor. If we can gain knowledge in some way other than by experience, then it is faulty argumentation to appeal only to our experiences in trying to discover whether we can in fact gain knowledge other than by experience. Of course, the argument I would present would be a classic induction argument. It would not be a deductive proof, but insofar as someone is inclined to accept any bit of inductive reasoning, he ought to be inclined to accept this bit. So, we see that in order to reject Quine, Soames needs to reject empiricism; in order to reject empiricism, he needs to reject inductive reasoning. While he will certainly be on good logical ground in doing all this, his position will become utterly implausible.

I will respond, as did Soames to Quine's argument, that I have no good reason to think that we can gain knowledge other than by experience, that inductive reasoning has served many fine uses and tends to provide me with quite substantive pieces of knowledge. We will both rest back on our pretheoretic convictions (his, that there are meaning facts—mine, the empiricist and inductive premise). Ultimately, the problem reduces to a choice between these two. We have seen, by way of the Quinean argument that empiricism (and by extension, induction) is inconsistent with the existence of meaning facts. In the face of a choice between these two, I choose empiricism and induction, time proven methods, rather than meaning facts, some not so well defined metaphysical entity.

At any rate, the point we have reached is an interesting one. Perhaps it provides us with a new way of understanding Quine's work. Quine's argument points out to us that the empiricist view cannot coexist with our pretheoretic conviction that there are meaning facts. The paper to this point has demonstrated at least this much. Quine's argument is then a much more powerful skeptical piece than Soames gives it credit for. Quine is not baselessly throwing away the pretheoretic conviction in meaning that Soames holds so dear, rather, he is presenting an argument that gives Soames a real reason to reconsider his views on meaning facts. Empiricism is at least as fundamental a conviction as the belief in meaning facts. It is the glue that has held together the project of British philosophy since the Enlightenment. Soames writes that, "in light of this [his analysis of Quine's argument as depending upon equivocation] ...The conclusion to be drawn is that Quine's argument for the indeterminacy of translation fails to provide a compelling challenge to our fundamental convictions about meaning and translation... surely the burden of proof is on those who wish to persuade us to adopt a radically skeptical attitude...." Understanding what we do now, we realize that Quine's argument provides a very

“compelling challenge.” It opposes “our fundamental convictions about meaning and translation” with even more fundamental convictions about the mind and our knowledge. It places before us two fundamental beliefs and forces us to choose one. In light of Quine’s argument, we will need to adopt a position of skepticism about one of these fundamental convictions. It will no longer do for Soames to simply nod his head toward his pretheoretic conviction that there are meaning facts in order to bolster his argument. In doing so, he is simply ignoring the (at least) equally strong intuitive claim of empiricism. Soames’s argument, which reduces to calling Quine an unjustified skeptic, fails at its most important point of attack. A most compelling reason to reject his pretheoretic conviction has been provided. Quine’s argument is neither unjustified, nor incredibly skeptical.

Is Quine Self-Defeating?

We now turn our attention to a different objection that Soames addresses against Quine. In part III of his paper (“The Indeterminacy of Translation and the Inscrutability of Reference”), Soames tries to argue that Quine’s indeterminacy argument is self-defeating. Soames argues that Quine’s arguments lead to an eliminativism about the common sense notion of truth. From this perspective, he goes on to consider what we ought to make of Quine’s physicalism. Quine believes that all truths are determined by physical truths, but what notion of truth is he talking about? Soames concludes that “Quine has to be speaking of Tarski-truths in the present-Quine-Language” (355). As to Quine’s notion of determination, Soames offers that it, “involves something akin to the Tarski-style, model-theoretic entailment of one set of sentences in present-Quine-language by the Tarski-true physical sentences of that language, plus definitions in the language.” If this is the case, Soames argues, it is likely that physics in the present-Quine-Language is impoverished. Thus, either it will not determine all facts that can be stated in the present-Quine-Language (in which case physicalism does not hold) or it will, but there will be facts beyond the present-Quine-Language (in which case the physicalism is not sufficient to produce Quine’s desired conclusion).

Soames argument pigeonholes Quine into a very specific type of determination. On Soames’s rendering of the situation in this section, Quine, by “determines,” means a priori determination. Even at that, this a priori determination has been restricted to the present-Quine-Language. At best, Soames’s reading in this section might allow for Quine conceptual determination. Still, something is horribly amiss here. What has happened to the metaphysical determination of which

Soames spoke earlier in the paper? Soames has denied Quine access to it unfairly. Assimilating facts to truths, Soames makes it seem as though physicalism must be an entirely linguistic doctrine. There is nothing in Quine to preclude him from viewing physicalism as supervenience—all facts about the world are fixed by the way in which the stuff in the world is arranged. Soames, by phrasing the problem in terms of true sentences rather than states of the world, unfairly limits the potential interpretations of physicalism. Quine's theses can have all the generality we want if we read the determination relation metaphysically, not as a priori determination.

Soames considers the possibility of something non-linguistic determining the physical truths (Soames 356, footnote 35). He offers a scenario raised by David Lewis, whereby an arrangement of elementary particles would determine physical truth. Soames argues that any way of trying to cash out this scenario would depend on "a notion of truth that goes beyond Quine's eliminativism" (Soames 356). But this critique presupposes that physicalism must be cashed out in terms of "truth" instead of fact. Soames's response to Lewis is essentially to assume that his line is right, and assuming that, to show that this way of reading physicalism will not work on Quine's rendering. Once we realize, though, that physicalism is not a linguistic doctrine, but rather a doctrine about fact, we see that we should reject Soames's way of cashing out this physicalist statement. Soames, in this footnote, once again assimilates "truth" to fact (mis)leading him to the false conclusion that Quine's argument defeats itself.

The argument he presents is a specific example of a general argument that one sees popping up again and again as regards Quine. It is sometimes argued that Quine's views on meaning render simple things that we take for granted such as communication impossible. If Quine's argument is right, it is argued, then we have no meaning facts (as ordinarily understood), and hence no way to explain communication. First, it is to be pointed out that this conception of communication as rooted in some naive view of meaning facts is baseless. Just as there is no clear theory of meaning facts, there is no clear view of just how communication works. The realist about meaning does not have an airtight view of communication to offer, nor can he offer good reason why communication must hinge on meaning facts. This view of communication as rooted in the common-sense view of meaning is, as Quine would have it, "a metaphysical article of faith." If anything, Quine's arguments should be taken as good reason to question this article of faith. Absent of any good notion of how communication works himself, the meaning realist cannot defeat Quine's views by pointing to this deficiency. It should be clear to

anyone that Quine will not reject the notion that we do in fact communicate. How communication is to be explained is a challenge both for the realist and the Quinean.

The argument just sketched can be extended to cover three corollaries to his argument that Soames brings up at the end of this section. Soames writes:

(i) Quine says, or asserts, something—namely the conjunction of physicalism and his indeterminacy theses—which has the consequence that no one ever says or asserts anything.

(ii) Similarly, Quine believes something which has the consequence that no one ever believes anything.

(iii) By producing a sequence of meaningful sentences, Quine argues for something that has the consequence that there are no meaningful sentences. (Soames 356)

Soames's third point, I have dealt with explicitly in the preceding paragraph—he uses “meaningful sentence” where I use “communicate.” His first two points suffer from similar problems. The notions of assertion and belief that Soames appeals to implicitly rely on some naive conception of meaning. We have no reason to believe that “belief” and “assertion” must be explained in terms of the common-sense view of meaning. Soames has no airtight explanation of these phenomena in terms of the naive view of meaning, nor has he offered any good reason for believing that “meaning” is a necessary part of any such explanation. Any argument raised against Quine on this basis is doomed to fail for the reasons sketched out above. The family of objections to Quine on the basis that his ideas defeat his words or beliefs ultimately depend on an unfounded interpretation of “meaning,” “belief,” “communication,” or some similar word. An argument presented along these lines cannot be sustained.

Conclusion

This paper has dealt with two arguments that attempt to combat Quine's presentation of what might be termed “skeptical” conclusions. There seems to be a tendency among philosophers (and people in general) to want these conclusions to be wrong. Many of these arguments run so far counter to the intuitions of our childhood that we want not to accept them. It would be a mistake, in reading Quine and the arguments that follow him, to allow such emotional attachments to get in the way of solid thinking and an appreciation of Quine's (seemingly harsh) brilliance.

NOTES

- ¹ The externalist about meaning might object that we do not always know precisely what our words mean. This does not detract from the point however, as even the externalist will accept that someone knows what our words mean, or even that someone has epistemological access to meaning facts.
- ² I truncate the discussion at this point, as this could well serve as the topic of a whole other paper. The objection and rebuttal are brought out in an attempt to show that the argument I present is tenable, though discussion beyond the scope of this paper might be necessary to fully sustain the point.
- ³ Alternatively, if the argument is that some of our knowledge is not “justified,” we might just begin to wonder what is going into this notion of justification. There would seem to be an intimate connection between knowledge and justification such that any bit of knowledge must somehow be justified. We might get rid of the notion of justification altogether, but if we are to have a notion of justification it would seem that anything we are to call knowledge must be justified by something. As such, for any bit of knowledge the thing doing the justification must be physical or non-physical. If Soames argues that these are all physical, then there is no challenge; if he argues that some are non-physical, then he is burdened with what seems to be a problematic metaphysics as discussed above. He might be better off simply getting rid of the notion of justification which would result in the specific challenge I have considered here being defeated.
- ⁴ Given the logical structure of the argument I have presented, one could also get around it by arguing that we gain knowledge from our knowledge of the physical world but that this knowledge is not conceptually dependent on our knowledge of the physical world. Basically this would entail maintaining that we gain knowledge from previous knowledge on some non-logical basis. I do not see how this could be made into a tenable (or even coherent) position.

REFERENCES

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