

Metaphysics // Fall 2017

Handout 8

Things and theories: Quine

ONTOLOGY AS ROOTED IN ORDINARY LANGUAGE. Ontological commitment is a product of selectivity. Once we notice salient features of the environment, ‘concentrate’ on them, we celebrate them in predication, such as in ‘Milk is white.’ Individuative words come about as a result of higher selectivity, higher attention. Second, we introduce relative clauses ‘that’, ‘which’, ‘who’. Only after this essentially linguistic development reference and objectual talk fully mature. 233
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Ontology and reference are philosophical inventions. Ordinary language has no special concern with ontology, and the idea of ontological commitment is vague. First, there are no precise criteria of identity for objects. Without such criteria, ontology flounders. Secondly, it is not even clear, from the analysis of ordinary speech, which ontological assumptions an ordinary speaker is making. 236
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SOME SUGGESTIVE QUOTATIONS. Sometimes it is best to let Quine speak for himself. So:

Bodies: We can see how natural it is that some of the occasion sentences ostensibly learned should have been such as to foreshadow bodies, if we reflect on the social character of ostension. The child learns the occasion sentence from the mother while they view the scene from their respective vantage points, receiving somewhat unlike presentations. The mother in her childhood learned the sentence in similarly divergent circumstances. The sentence is thus bound to be versatile, applying regardless of angle. Thus it is that the aspects of a body in all their visual diversity are naturally gathered under a single occasion sentence, ultimately a single designation. (235)

Ontology by analogy: Does every noun demand some array of denotata? Surely not; the nominalizing of verbs is often a mere stylistic variation. But where can we draw the line? It is a wrong question; there is no line to draw. Bodies are assumed, yes; they are the things, first and foremost. Beyond them there is a succession of dwindling analogies. (236)

Ontology and laymen: Scientists and philosophers seek a comprehensive system of the world, and one that is oriented to reference even more squarely and utterly than ordinary language. Ontological concern is not a correction of a lay thought and practice; it is foreign to the lay culture, though an outgrowth of it. (236)

Identity: Our liberal notion of physical objects brings out an important point about identity. Some philosophers propound puzzles as to what to say about personal identity in cases of split personality or in fantasies about metempsychosis or brain transplants. These are not questions about the nature of identity. They are questions about how we might best construe the term ‘person.’ (238)

Abstracta: So we assume abstract objects over and above the physical objects. For a better grasp of what this means, let us consider a simple case: the natural numbers. The conditions we need to impose on them are simple and few: we need to assume an object as first number and an operator that yields a unique new number whenever applied to a number. In short, we need a progression. (241)

So, when we feel the need of ratios and irrationals, we can simply reach for appropriate subclasses of one of the progressions of classes. We need never talk of numbers, though in practice it is convenient to carry over the numerical jargon. Numbers, then, except as a manner of speaking, are by the board. We have physical objects and we have classes. (241)

A physical object, one feels, can be pinned down by pointing—in many cases, anyway, and to a fair degree. But I am persuaded that this contrast is illusory. (242)

Ultimate ontology: A field theory in which states are ascribed directly to place-times may well present a better picture, and some physicists think it does. At this point a further transfer of ontology suggests itself: we can drop the space-time regions in favor of

the corresponding classes of quadruples of numbers according to an arbitrarily adopted system of coordinates. We are left with just the ontology of pure set theory, since the numbers and their quadruples can be modeled within it. There are no longer any physical objects to serve as individuals at the base of the hierarchy of classes, but there is no harm in that. (243)

Inscrutability: The conclusion I draw is the inscrutability of reference. To say what objects someone is talking about is to say no more than how we propose to translate his terms into ours; we are free to vary the decision with a proxy function. The translation adopted arrests the free-floating reference of the alien terms only relatively to the free-floating reference of our own terms, by linking the two. The point is not that we ourselves are casting about in vain for a mooring. Staying aboard our own language and not rocking the boat, we are borne smoothly along on it and all is well; 'rabbit' denotes rabbits, and there is no sense in asking 'Rabbits in what sense of "rabbit"?' Reference goes inscrutable if, rocking the boat, we contemplate a permutational mapping of our language on itself, or if we undertake translation. (245)

Scepticism: Radical skepticism stems from the sort of confusion I have alluded to, but is not of itself incoherent. Science is vulnerable to illusion on its own showing, what with seemingly bent sticks in water and the like, and the skeptic may be seen merely as overreacting when he repudiates science across the board. Experience might still take a turn that would justify his doubts about external objects. Our success in predicting observations might fall off sharply, and concomitantly with this we might begin to be somewhat successful in basing predictions upon dreams or reveries. At that point we might reasonably doubt our theory of nature in even fairly broad outlines. But our doubts would still be immanent, and of a piece with the scientific endeavor. (247)