Philosophy 565
Prof. Clare Batty

Quine, “Meaning and Translation”

1. The Project

Conclusion: There is no such thing as meaning. That is, Quine denies our meaning facts in the first place. We can refer to Quine’s conclusion as meaning eliminativism (or meaning nihilism).

His starting point is similar to the Logical Positivist’s. According to logical positivism, a sentence is meaningful if and only if it can be verified empirically. Meanings are verification conditions, claims the logical positivist.

Not only is Quine’s starting point similar to the Logical Positivist’s, he must subscribe to a form of behaviorism.

Behaviorism: Whatever content sentences have, it must be discoverable by taking into consideration stimuli and responses.

“In psychology one may or may not be a behaviorist, but in linguistics one has no choice. Each of us learns his language by observing other people’s verbal behavior and having his own faltering verbal behavior observed and reinforced or corrected by others. We depend strictly on overt behavior in observable situations.” (Quine, Pursuit of Truth)

“it is to such stimulation that we must look for whatever empirical content there may be.”

Goal: To figure out “how much of language can be made sense of in terms of its stimulus conditions, and what scope this leaves for empirically unconditioned variation in one’s conceptual scheme.”

What makes Quine distinctive is not his starting point, but where he ends up . . .

2. Thesis: Indeterminacy of Translation

The Indeterminacy of Translation (of Sentences):

i. There exists a multiplicity of translations of any sentence from one language into another, each of which is equally consistent with subject’s dispositions to verbal behavior (and any other relevant evidence).

ii. These translation manuals might be incompatible which each other, yet there is no fact of the matter as to which is the “right” one.

What’s at stake: Traditional understandings of meaning. Consider the commonly held claim that there is a fact about the meaning of a sentence only if there is a correct translation of it.

3. The (Very Short) Argument for the Indeterminacy of Translation

The Setup: Imagine a field linguist, who is dropped into some remote area that has hitherto had no contact with the outside world. His goal: Translate the Jungle language into English. Some facts about his situation:

i. His only source of evidence is overt linguistic behavior in certain perceptual contexts.

ii. But at least he has everything to go on that an infant has . . .

Observational Occasion Sentences: The linguist’s entering wedge into the language.

‘Gavagai.’

→ ? ‘Rabbit.’ or ‘Lo, a rabbit.’

Working Hypothesis: The native will be prompted to assent to ‘Gavagai?’ under just those stimulations that
would prompt our assent to ‘Rabbit?’; likewise for dissent.

**Stimulus Meaning (of an Observational Occasion Sentence):**

- **Affirmative:** the class of all stimulations that would prompt its assent.
- **Negative:** [defined the same way, except in terms of dissent]
- **Stimulus Meaning:** The ordered pair of aff. and neg. stimulus meaning.

4.

**Oh No!**

Distinguish between the following:

- **Rabbit:** as we ordinarily think of it
- **Undetached rabbit parts:** parts of the rabbit considered in isolation from the rabbit
- **Rabbit-fusion:** all rabbits, considered as one single ‘fused’ object
- **Rabbit-stages:** temporal stages (snapshots) of a particular rabbit

It is possible that by ‘Gavagai’, the native means any of these. But these are incompatible. But nothing about the stimulus meaning will differentiate them!