

QUINE ON THE INSCRUTABILITY AND RELATIVITY  
OF REFERENCE

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In this paper, we shall discuss the doctrines of referential inscrutability and referential relativity as they appear in Quine's recent writings, especially in the John Dewey lectures, "Ontological Relativity." The paper is divided into three sections. In the first section, we attempt to explicate the relevant doctrines; in the second, to specify the philosophical context out of which those doctrines arise; and in the final section, to outline some difficulties in Quine's presentation of the doctrines.

1 Although Quine does not use the expression "inscrutability of reference" before the John Dewey lectures, the concept of referential inscrutability plays a prominent role as early as *Word and Object*. In Chapter II of that work, Quine argues for the indeterminacy of radical translation; and the impossibility of determining referential force across unrelated languages is central to his argument. In Quine's example, a linguist is engaging in radical translation, the "translation of the language of a hitherto untouched people;"<sup>1</sup> and he is confronted with the expression 'gavagai.' The speakers of the language in question use this expression in precisely those contexts where we use the term, 'rabbit.' 'Gavagai' and 'rabbit,' it would seem, are synonymous. Quine, however, contends that such an inference would be illegitimate. Not only might 'gavagai' and 'rabbit' not be synonymous; there is not even any guarantee that the two terms will support the weaker relation of coextension. Indeed, whereas 'rabbit' is true of persisting physical objects, 'gavagai' might be a term true of rabbit-stages, undetached rabbit parts, or even particular manifestations of the universal, Rabbit.<sup>2</sup>

Nor, Quine claims, will anything in the native's linguistic behavior enable the linguist to determine which of these possibilities are to be excluded. Not even ostension is decisive here; for, as Quine argues in a

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1. *Word and Object*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, Cambridge (1960), p. 28.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 51-54.

number of places, pointing is vacuous without an appeal to the notions of identity and difference.<sup>3</sup> To know what is being pointed at, we must know what would count as one rather than two or three of the ostended objects; likewise we must know when one and the same object is being pointed at on different occasions and when, not. Unfortunately, the way in which identity and related notions are expressed in the remote language is just as inaccessible, given stimulus meaning, as the referential force of terms in that language. Indeed, the ability to fix objects of reference and the ability to operate with the concept of identity are mutually inter-dependent: one cannot have either ability without also possessing the other.

Quine, of course, grants that the linguist will isolate a set of native locutions and construe them as equivalent to our English apparatus of identity. His point is that nothing is the natives' speech dispositions will determine the relevant construction. Consequently, what one linguist translates as 'same,' another might, while still conforming to the totality of native speech-dispositions, translate as 'belongs to the same,' provided of course, that he makes sufficient compensatory alterations throughout his translation. Thus, according to the first linguist, a particular native will be saying that this rabbit is the same as that; whereas, according to the second linguist, he will be saying that this rabbit-stage belongs to the same rabbit as that rabbit-stage. The second translation might sound unnatural to us who speak, for the most part, of persisting physical objects; but this is beside the point. There is nothing, Quine argues, in the speech dispositions of the natives to determine one of the two translations to be correct rather than the other. They are on a par; each is as correct as the other, which is to say that there is nothing for them to be correct or incorrect about. We have exhausted all the evidence that can be decisive and are at a level where translation is, in principle, indeterminate.<sup>4</sup>

Now, although Chapter II of *Word and Object* deals only with the case of radical translation, Quine is willing to accept the more general claim that all translation involves the inscrutability of reference.<sup>5</sup> In "Ontological Relativity," Quine attempts to extend the inscrutability of reference beyond what is normally called translation (1) to the case where different speakers of one and the same language communicate with each other and (2) to the

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3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, p. 73. Quine denies that the case of the bilingual serves as a counter-example to the indeterminacy of translation; for he holds that two men, bilingual with respect to the same languages, could correlate terms and sentences from those languages in different ways and that nothing in their linguistic behavior would ever reveal the difference in correlation. *Cf.* p. 74.

5. Quine considers the case of radical translation because there the substantive point in question will seem more palatable. See pp. 27-28. Within the context of radical translation, etymological similarities between languages will drop out; and more important, there are, in the case of radical translation, no established methods of translation that will prejudice the reader against

more parochial case where an individual attempts to specify for himself the objects of his own thought and talk.

In these lectures, Quine is attacking what he calls *mentalism*, the view that a man's semantics is somehow determinate in his mind beyond what his overt speech dispositions can reveal.<sup>6</sup> In answer to this view, Quine appeals to the indeterminacy of translation and, in particular, the inscrutability of reference that characterizes radical translation. Then, he suggests that communication between speakers of one and the same language also involves a form of translation, what he calls *homophonic translation*. In talking with our neighbor, we pair the strings of sounds which he emits with like-sounding strings of sounds from our *idiolect*; and we make sense of his remarks by construing them as somehow equivalent to their counterparts in our idiolect.<sup>7</sup> Quine argues, however, that nothing in our neighbor's speech dispositions compels us to follow the method of homophonic translation. As in the case of radical translation, the only evidence available under-determines the method of translation we employ. On the basis of our neighbor's speech dispositions, we could as well suspend homophonic translation and reinterpret our neighbor's talk of rabbits as talk about stages of rabbits or particular manifestations of the universal, Rabbit. Doubtless, this would involve a large number of compensatory adjustments throughout our translation; but Quine holds that we could, with sufficient cunning, "reproduce the inscrutability of reference at home."<sup>8</sup>

The point is that there is an objective indeterminacy underlying the specification of another speaker's ontology. What items does our neighbor mean to talk about when he says, "The rabbits are escaping the cages"? There seems to be no objective answer to the question, no fact of the matter; nor will our neighbor's response, "What a silly question! I meant rabbits, of course!" help in resolving the indeterminacy; for once we suspend homophonic translation his use of referential expressions ceases to be decisive in settling ontological issues.<sup>9</sup>

But surely, our neighbor is in a similar position with respect to us; and if there is no fact of the matter here for him, there is no fact of the matter, period. Otherwise, there would indeed be a question of getting things right; it is just that we would never know when we had done so. In

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Quine's claims. Gilbert Harmon interprets Quine as making the strong claim (that all translation is indeterminate); and Quine responds favorably to Harmon's account. See *Words and Objections: Essays on the Work of W. V. Quine*, edited by D. Davidson and J. Hintikka, Humanities Press, New York (1969), pp. 14-26 and 295-297.

6. *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, Columbia University Press, New York (1969), pp. 26-29.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

9. *Ibid.*

this context, Quine appeals to the view (which he ascribes to Dewey) that there can be no private language. We can have no knowledge about ourselves that others could not, at least in principle, have. But if our utterances are referentially inscrutable to others, then there can be no sense in saying that we know whether we are talking, for example, about rabbits rather than rabbit-stages.<sup>10</sup>

It might seem that if the inscrutability of reference is as all-persuasive as Quine suggests, then the very possibility of thought and talk about objects is excluded. Quine does not, however, draw this moral from his arguments. Despite the inscrutability of reference, we are able to think and talk coherently about objects. The mediating factor is the presence of what Quine calls a *background language*. Thought and communication are significant only because we assume certain terms as referentially fixed. We do not question the referential force of these terms; but operating from within this background language, we can and do question the referential force of other expressions. The inscrutability of reference can intrude at any level; the net effect of the background language is simply to keep that inscrutability one step removed from the level at which we are operating. Using the terms of that language, we can talk and think about objects in a straightforward way; and relative to those terms, we can inquire into the referential point of other terms. Our background language may shift from context to context; but inquiry cannot be coherently carried out independently of some background language; in isolation from a background language, our questions become empty and our answers, unintelligible.<sup>11</sup>

As things stand, my neighbor and I are able to converse with remarkable success not only about rabbits but about such equally troublesome things as snow-storms, sidewalks, and awnings. What makes our referential use of terms intelligible both to ourselves and to each other is the presence of a fixed point of orientation. When my neighbor speaks of the fungus overtaking our common lawn, I understand what he says; I know what he is talking about; and this, just because in ordinary discourse we take our mother-tongue with its referential apparatus as our coordinate system. We need not, however. Stepping back, as in the case outlined earlier, we can appreciate the extent to which reference is inscrutable even in the home language; but to do this, we must again assume some background language. Relative to this new background language, our philosophical queries have point.

2 Just what sort of position is Quine countering when he says that reference is always relative to a background language? In passing, we mentioned the view Quine calls mentalism; but our discussion has not really clarified

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10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 48-50. In this context, Quine compares the status of referential concepts with the status of spatial concepts. Just as it makes no sense to specify the absolute position or absolute velocity of this or that body, it makes no sense to specify, in an absolute way, the referential force of this or that term.

the nature of this view, nor has it indicated exactly how Quine's relativistic account of reference stands opposed to it. Taking together the substantive force of his arguments and the brief remarks he makes about opposing views, it seems that Quine means his account of reference to answer philosophers who would hold that, at some point, the terms of language must "hook up" directly (independently of the mediation of other referential expressions) with the items in the world to which they refer.<sup>12</sup> Such a philosopher might argue as follows:

Language is about the world. We use the terms of language to identify objects and to say things about them. Generally, the relation between word and thing is indirect; it is mediated by other referential expressions. In saying what such a term names or is true of, we use other referring devices. But the relationship between word and object cannot always be indirect in this way. Otherwise, each term would have its referential force only in virtue of the referential force of other expressions, and these, in turn, would relate to the world indirectly, and so on *ad infinitum*. At no point would the referential terms of language be anchored down to the items to which they refer; and, consequently, language could not be about the world.

What we need is "an exit from the maze of words,"<sup>13</sup> and the exit is provided by a class of referential terms which are directly related to the world. In the case of these terms, referential force is independent of the intrusion of all other referential expressions. They refer, of and by themselves; and while their referential force is immediate, they mediate the referential relations other terms bear to objects in the world. Indeed, it is only through the mediation of these referentially primitive terms that expressions can finally be said to be of or about the world. Thus, these terms constitute the foundation for all referring uses of language; they tie language down to the reality it is about.

The view outlined here is closely related to the foundational account of human knowledge to which Quine has so long been opposed. The key point of such a view is that there must be a level at which an individual is able to grasp the connection between word and thing independently of the referential force of all other expressions. Such a level would involve knowledge, i.e., knowledge of what the referentially primitive terms refer to; but this would be knowledge of a peculiar sort; for an individual could never verbalize precisely what it was he had come to know. Suppose that 'x' is such a

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12. Our reconstruction of this view is based, in large part, on the fact that in speaking of what he calls "mentalism" or the "myth of the museum," Quine mentions the early Wittgenstein as representative of the tradition he is opposing. Now while one might argue that the Tractarian view deviates in important respects from the view we are here outlining, there can be no doubt that considerations similar to these were influential in the formation of Wittgenstein's early position.

13. D. F. Pears, "Universals" in *Logic and Language*, Second Series, edited by A. G. N. Flew, Basil Blackwell, Oxford (1953), p. 53.

referentially basic term. A person would know what 'x' named or what objects it was true of, but he would never be able to identify for us the object or objects involved. The most he could say is that 'x' names  $x$  or is true of  $x$ 's. The specification of  $x$  or  $x$ 's could go no further, and this, precisely because we are at a level where reference is not mediated.

Quine's response to all of this, of course, is that there are no such referentially privileged terms. To specify the referential force of any term, we must always rely on other expressions whose referential force we take as given. This is the best we can do, and it is good enough. It is good enough because we are able to talk and think about things in the world. It is the best we can do because, even in the ego-centric case, reference is inscrutable. Since there can be no private language, I cannot know facts about myself (here, facts about the referential force of my remarks), to which you, in principle, can have no access. You, in turn, cannot determine, in any absolute way, the referential force of my remarks because you can grasp the point of those remarks only by engaging in a form of translation—homophonic translation; and as the case of radical translation shows, translation always involves referential inscrutability.

3 While one might find the weapons Quine employs against the uncritical mentalist objectionable, one might, nevertheless, want to argue that Quine is correct in criticizing the view. One might argue that since there can be no non-verbal knowledge of the sort required, there can be no referentially privileged terms. Thus, one might say that if a person knows that something is the case, he can tell us that it is the case—a logical point about 'knows.' But, one might continue, if what is known is the referential force of some term, this can be expressed only in terms of other linguistic expressions; again, a trivial point: we need words to talk. In this trivial sense, there can be no "exit from the maze of words"; nor, one might add, should this be a source of philosophical perplexity. Now, although we feel that this line of argument needs to be spelled out in considerable detail, we suspect that it is on the right track. Doubtless, Quine's attack on the uncritical mentalist incorporates points closely related to these; but it involves much more; and here, we feel, one can quarrel with Quine.

Consider, first, Quine's argument for the inscrutability of reference in intra-linguistic communication. As we have indicated a number of times, the inscrutability of reference infects communication between speakers of one and the same language because a form of translation is involved. Now, even if we assume that translation always gives rise to the inscrutability of reference, the question remains: does intra-linguistic communication involve anything that can legitimately be called translation?

Quine's claims about pairing sentences are not decisive here; for supposing one could show the relevant sort of pairing to be operative in all intra-linguistic communication, he would still need to establish that the pairing is a form of translation. Now, there are good reasons for thinking that it would not be a form of translation. Translation involves, among other things, a move from sentences in one language to sentences in another

language; but it is hard to fasten on anything in intra-linguistic communication that would involve such a move.

Assume that in talking with our neighbor, we do go through the sort of pairing of sentences Quine pictures for us. My neighbor utters a sequence of sounds. I am supposed to pair this sequence with a particular sequence of sounds in my idiolect; but surely it must be possible to identify the relevant sequence from my idiolect; for if identification is impossible here, the concept of 'my idiolect' becomes the concept of a private language, and there is no notion Quine more strongly opposes. With what sequences of sounds, then, are we to pair our neighbor's sound-sequences? Regardless of the sequence we pick, that sequence will either belong to the same language as my neighbor's, in which case there can be no question of translation, or to a different language, in which case we no longer have intra-linguistic communication.

Doubtless, Quine would claim that we come down too hard on the term 'translation.' He might suggest that this is not really an essential ingredient in his argument; one need not even introduce the notion of pairing sentences with sentences. The fact remains; it is possible to reinterpret my neighbor's remarks in such a way that, while accommodating all his overt speech dispositions, I can take his apparent references to rabbits as references to rabbit-stages. But granting Quine this modification, a fundamental difficulty remains. If I am to reinterpret my neighbor's remarks in the requisite way, I must know how I am reinterpreting them—I must know, for example, that I am treating his use of the term 'rabbit' as different from my own use of that term; I must know that my construction of his talk involves taking his use of 'rabbit' as referentially equivalent to my use of 'rabbit-stage.' But to know these things, I must know how it is that I use the terms 'rabbit' and 'rabbit-stage.'

Now, this is important, for later in the argument for referential relativity, Quine wants to claim that in an important sense I cannot know these things, and what is more surprising, he uses the very possibility of so reinterpreting my neighbor's remarks to establish this. Thus, Quine argues that since reference is, from the intra-linguistic viewpoint, inscrutable and since there can be no private language, reference must also be inscrutable in the ego-centric case; but as we have just indicated, Quine can establish intra-linguistic inscrutability only if he assumes the very reverse; that I can grasp, in some determinate way, the referential point of expressions from my idiolect.

Baldly stated, Quine's argument for the inscrutability of reference in the ego-centric case presupposes that, in the ego-centric case at least, reference is *not* inscrutable. If we grant the impossibility of a private language, the crucial step in that argument is the move to the claim that reference is inscrutable in the intra-linguistic case. But surely, no one can make sense of the supposition that his neighbor might be referring to any of a number of categorically different objects unless he can understand what those categorically different objects are. Such understanding, however, is precisely what ego-centric inscrutability excludes.

Quine would probably claim that our objection fails to recognize the ever-present operation of a background language. Thus, we point to difficulties in the related arguments for intra-linguistic and ego-centric inscrutability only because we fail to see how what functions at one level as a co-ordinate system for evaluating referential force can, at another level, itself become the locus of referential inscrutability. Unfortunately, Quine cannot support these arguments by appealing to his doctrine of referential relativity; for it is precisely the doctrine of relativity that the arguments in question are meant to establish. It is because reference is, even in the ego-centric case, inscrutable that referential force must always be relative to a background language.

Put in a slightly different way, Quine's strategy is to drive us to accept what he sees as a controversial view by posing a problem that is otherwise irresolvable. Quine argues that to avoid the conclusion that all thought and talk about objects is incoherent, we must accept the view that reference is always relative to a background language. What sets the problem here is the fact that in both the intra-linguistic and ego-centric cases reference is inscrutable.<sup>14</sup> What we want to suggest is that Quine can coherently formulate his argument for these claims only if he assumes the controversial view in question, viz., that reference is always relative to a background language.

But even in isolation, the notion of a background language is troublesome. What does a background language enable us to do? One thing is clear: it enables us to raise ontological issues; relative to it, our questions about the referential point of this or that term gain sense. But does the background language enable us to settle these issues? Generally, Quine talks as though it does; but here again, relativity intrudes, for we can settle those issues only relative to the background language in which they were raised.

But this leads one to ask how the concept of a background language bears on the supposed indeterminacy of radical translation. Is the linguist able to settle, relative to his mother tongue, what would, independently of that coordinate system, be objectively indeterminate; or is the case of radical translation different from the case of intra-linguistic communication? Quine's account presupposes that the inter-linguistic and intra-linguistic cases are referentially on a par. Thus, it would seem that the concept of a background language operates similarly in the two cases. Unfortunately, if it does, there are serious difficulties in Quine's argument. If, relative to his home language, the linguist can settle questions of reference in the remote language, then radical translation would not appear to be in the sad state Quine suggests. On the other hand, if the concept of a background language does operate differently in the two cases, then it is not clear that the two cases are sufficiently similar for Quine to extrapolate, as he does, from the inscrutability of reference in the inter-linguistic case to the inscrutability of reference in the intra-linguistic case.

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14. See *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, especially pp. 47-49.

Much more could be said about Quine's account of reference. Our brief remarks serve to indicate the most problematical aspects of his view. Possibly, our criticisms have their source in a misunderstanding of what Quine is saying; but if this is true, the difficulty lies, as much as anywhere, in the obscurity with which Quine has presented his position. Thus, if we have misconstrued Quine's claims, this paper is best viewed as a challenge for the proponent of Quine's view to clarify the position.

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