Quine "Ontological Relativity"

John Zimmerman

Ryan McCausland

Philosophy 308: *The Language Revolution*

Professor Marcus

Two Dogmas Argument

Two Dogmas Argument against analytic/synthetic distinction:

(1) If there is an analytic/synthetic distinction, there must be a good explanation of synonymy
(2) The only way to explain synonymy is to posit determinate meanings
(3) **But there are no determinate meanings; the museum of meanings is a myth**
(4) Therefore, there is no good explanation for synonymy
(5) Thus, there is no analytic/synthetic distinction

Myth of the Museum

- Within a realist's museum:

  - Language provides the labels for 'meanings' as mental entities or real concrete objects

  - "Uncritical semantics is the myth of a museum in which the exhibits are meanings and the words are labels. To switch languages is to change the labels" (Quine 1969: 27).

Myth of the Museum (cont.)

- **BUT:**

  - Although we can change labels (languages), the exhibits will be unaffected by any change of labels

  - The meaning (exhibits) will still maintain determinate properties regardless of a change

- Quine objects to this 'museum theory' of language

Quine's Argument Against

- Quine's argument against the museum theory is epistemic

- Our understanding of language can only come from the observation of behavioral evidence, which is the only evidence we have

- We base our translation on the actions we observe, which are indeterminate

Indeterminacy of Translation

- A translation between languages is the presentation of a synonym between terms or sentences of the different languages
  - "Hello" in English and "Bonjour" in French

- Quine argues that translation, however, is indeterminate; there are no determinate meanings of these terms or sentences

- Given a public stimuli, it is not practical that different linguistic responses can be discovered to be exactly the same in meaning or reference

Quine's Translation Manuals

- The observation and comprehension of behavioral evidence is dependant on experience, so different individuals will form their own translation manuals
  - How do we decide which translation manuals are correct?

- According to Quine's definition of a translation manual, behavioral evidence would be needed to decide which translation manuals are correct and which are not
  - No such objective behavioral evidence exists
  - Therefore, translation is subjective and thus indeterminate

Trimmed Bush Example

- "Different persons growing up in the same language are like different bushes trimmed and trained to take the shape of identical elephants. The anatomical details of twigs and branches will fulfill the elephantine form differently from bush to bush, but the overall outward results are alike" (Quine 1960: 8).

Trimmed Bush Example

- The external product appears the same, but the way in which the external product was formed (twigs and branches) varies

- Different translation manuals may appear the same externally, but the process by which each is constructed is different.

- Quine argues we cannot consider simply a translation of *words or sentences* but must instead examine the *entire language*

Inscrutability of Reference

- Inscrutability of Reference: On the level of terms

- Inscrutability of reference indicates that there is never just **ONE** possibility to which object a certain word or sentence of a language refers

- Quine argues that if Inscrutability of Reference holds, Indeterminacy of Translation will also hold

Inscrutability of Reference

- "...suppose there were an expression in a remote language that could be translated into English equally defensibly in either of two ways…I am supposing that one and the same native use of the expression can be given either of the English translations…" (1969: 29).

- French construction "ne...rien"

- Quine doesn't love this argument because the units are small

Radical Translation

- To illustrate the Indeterminacy of Translation consider a field linguist and native seeing the same public stimuli:
  - A rabbit scurries by and the native says 'gavagai'

  - The linguist may believe the accurate translation to be 'rabbit'

  - The linguist will go about asking 'gavagai' in certain situations to try and determine the meaning of the translation

Radical Translation (cont.)

- "Thus consider specifically the problem of deciding between 'rabbit' and 'undetached rabbit part' as translation of 'gavagai'...Now the trouble is that whenever we point to different parts of the rabbit, even sometimes screening the rest of the rabbit, we are pointing each time to the rabbit" (1969: 32).

- Therefore, both meaning and reference are indeterminate

Group Discussion of HW Passage