

Quine's Metametaphysics

W. V. Quine stands out as one of the foremost characters of 20th century analytic philosophy – in this chapter I will aim to show that a significant part of the enduring value in his work should be accorded to his contribution to metametaphysics. This will include showing how some less regarded, more contentious aspects of Quine's thought can be seen as indispensable to his thought; I will problematise the widespread belief that one can extract core aspects of Quine's metametaphysics in isolation without eroding their warrant.

In §1 I introduce the basic picture, giving the broad context. I then, in §2, explore Quine's most clearly metametaphysical work and the desired backdrop for many analytic philosophers: 'On what there is'. Finding the story evident therein to be incomplete, I undertake progressively deeper analyses, focusing on other elements of Quine's corpus in turn. In §3, I examine the crucial introduction of naturalism in 'Two dogmas of empiricism'. In §4 I explore how the principle of charity becomes significant in *Word & Object*, and in §5 I show how the eponymous principle of 'Ontological relativity' aims to save us from the puzzles of indeterminacy. In the process we will see how Quine's concerns stemming from naturalism in general, and from the problems of indeterminacy in particular, make it hard to extricate the basic picture from his more controversial full-blown approach. This is bad news for those who wish to use Quine as the neutral backdrop to analytic metaphysical debate in general, but good news for those who value the distinctive philosophical tradition within which Quine's work is a key development.

1: The view from a distance

There is widespread agreement that Quine's ideas, for better or worse, had a substantial impact on metaphysics, in particular on that part of the discipline called *metametaphysics*.ⁱ The term seems to postdate the period of Quine's greatest influence, though not Quine's life as a whole;ⁱⁱ metametaphysics has, however, become a much greater focus in the 21st century, prompted especially by the 2009 collection *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*. That collection in turn was to no small extent inspired by Peter van Inwagen's 'Meta-ontology' (1998), which purported to articulate Quine's methodology for ontology and thereby to expose the foundations of a popular tradition – by some lights, the *dominant* tradition – in contemporary analytic philosophy.

Quine's contribution, however, is often reduced by commentators to one paper – 'On what there is' [OWTI] (1948) – which is taken to be the key locus of critical consideration of method in analytic metaphysics. This is not a view restricted to those just casually acquainted with Quine, having been encouraged even by those who are intimately familiar with his work. For instance Hilary Putnam, who studied under Quine and developed many themes from his work, writes that

Ontology became a respectable subject ... when Quine published a famous paper titled 'On what there is'.

It was Quine who single-handedly made Ontology a respectable subject. (2004: 78–9)ⁱⁱⁱ

This focus is to some extent warranted – without doubt the paper is significant – but can lead us to forget the larger body of Quine's work that may be relevant. It can also slip into a yet narrower focus which further reduces Quine's contribution to metametaphysics to a few easily misinterpreted sound-bites. We are, most of us, familiar with the adage '[t]o be is to be the value of a variable' (Quine 1948: 34), typically referred to as the Quinean criterion of ontological commitment, but this brief claim may well conceal a great deal, and may even leave us with a problematic approach if we rely on the radically incomplete picture it provides. So I will claim.

Here, therefore, is our strategy: we will first examine and unpack that sound-bite along with some other elements of Quine's views on the methodology of metaphysics that feature in OWTI (§2). I will then move on in §§3–5 to discuss the theses of metametaphysical import that feature elsewhere in the 52 (!) years of academic work that Quine embarked on after his seminal paper. I will conclude with a brief statement on the viability of compartmentalising Quine's metametaphysics into independent principles and adopting them piecemeal. It is hoped by many analytic metaphysicians that this can be done easily; I will contend that it is far from easy.

A brief warning before I proceed, for those more familiar with this area of debate: my goal is to explore *Quine's* metametaphysics, not *Quinean* metametaphysics. I will broach the question of the comparison and contrast between these, but it is not our central concern; the majority of that task must be left for elsewhere (on this subject see especially Price 2009; I also engage with the question at length in my 2015). To briefly indicate the controversy: in the literature we see mention sometimes of *Quine's* metametaphysics, sometimes *Quinean* metametaphysics, and sometimes *neo-Quinean* metametaphysics, seemingly dependent on the individual's view on the extent of correspondence between Quine's actual contribution to the field and a school of thought whose locus is van Inwagen (1998, 2009; for other descriptions of 'Quinean' metaontology see, e.g., Eklund 2006, Jenkins 2010 and Berto and Plebani 2015). As a result I will be taking a more historical focus than has been the norm. By approaching the question of the methodology of metaphysics via Quine's developing body of work, we will be able to focus more heavily on Quine himself than on his consequences.

2: 'On what there is'

A curious thing about the ontological problem is its simplicity. It can be put in three Anglo-Saxon monosyllables: 'What is there?' It can be answered, moreover, in a word – 'Everything' – and everyone will accept this answer as true. (Quine 1948: 21)

Thus begins OWTI – with a deceptively simple statement about how to conceive of the ontological/metaphysical project. We want (perhaps among other goals) to know what there is, or what exists. And we can say what there is without having to engage in any difficult work, as long as we don't mind trite (facetious?) answers – *everything* exists. The problem, as Quine acknowledges, is that we don't know what that 'everything' comprises, so we must put in more hours.

Of course it's not as simple as that anyway – objecting to the one-word answer, someone might insist that not *everything* exists – not, say, Vulcan, Pegasus, or round squares. In order to see why non-existent objects don't disturb Quine's easy answer, and why he can insist on this simple statement, we need to delve further into the paper. As it begins Quine looks to be stuck should he deny that some kind of entity exists, because in saying of some kind *K* '*Ks* do not exist,' he seems to admit that *Ks* are *something*. If this were the case, Quine's only way to engage in ontological disputes in the negative would be to refuse to say anything whatsoever, but this looks unsatisfying, indeed implausible. Surely it is coherent to deny that *Ks* exist!

The solution is to avail ourselves of quantification. Quine follows Russell: there's nothing strange in saying 'The current King of France does not exist,' provided we take this as a disguised instance of quantification. We do not intend to say 'There is a current King of France, and as it turns out, he doesn't exist,' but rather 'There is no such entity as the current King of France,' or perhaps more informatively 'There is no entity fitting the description "is the current King of France"'. To speak more formally, we mean to say something that can be represented as ' $\neg \exists x(KoF(x))$ ' or equivalently ' $\forall x(\neg KoF(x))$ '. We can represent the negative fulfilment of our ontological task as taking a description and either stating that there is no such thing, or stating that each thing there is fails to satisfy the description. This is the significance of the aforementioned phrase 'to be is to be the value of a variable' – we are saying that an entity of kind *K* exists just when it is a replacement instance of a bound variable in a statement that says, or has as a consequence, ' $\exists x(Kx)$.'

This is a basic, but important, component of Quine's metametaphysics. It forms the beginnings of a methodology. Accepting it cuts off a range of putative ways of investigating ontology and renders the questions 'Are there *Ks*?', 'Do *Ks* exist?' and 'Is " $\exists x(Kx)$ " true?' equivalent. Other notions in the vicinity, like 'subsistence', are either subsumed within this equivalence or disallowed as having no clear sense. This is perhaps the most basic way in which Quine 'made Ontology a respectable subject' – by putting forward a proposal about how to interpret the question of ontology and thereby limiting the previous threat of disputants talking past one another. In order to disagree with Quine on ontology, one would have to either lay out their differences in terms of entities quantified over or explicitly reject Quine's conception of the ontological question.^{iv}

But this way of tracking ontological debate is far from complete. For all that Quine has said at this point, for all that the above version of the Quinean criterion says, the mere use of a term '*K*' might be enough to make

true the statement ' $\exists x(Kx)$ ', and thereby to make the statement 'The King of France does not exist' a contradiction. Perhaps mere ability to speak about *Ks* demonstrates that they are something, even if they might be a particular class of entity (say, the class of entities that are *non-concrete*). This is not a result Quine wants to leave open, and it's why we need a second, stronger statement of the Quinean criterion for ontological commitment:

a theory is committed to those and only those entities to which the bound variables of the theory *must be capable of referring* in order that the affirmations made in the theory be true. (1948: 33, my emphasis)

We now have a further condition – if you don't *need* to speak of *Ks*, then you are not committed to *Ks*' existence. This makes it clear that we should accept only the minimum number of entities (or kinds) to allow our theory to be true. In order to hold my theory of the world true, I don't need to be capable of referring to an entity fitting the description 'current King of France' because I need the description only in order to repudiate the entity, so my theory is not committed to his existence. The only context in which I use that term is in my disputes with the person who is confused about history and/or contemporary politics, and ' $\exists x(KoF(x))$ ' is by no means a consequence of my claims in such disputes.

We find ourselves, then, in a position to represent ontological debate. Two interlocutors start with a term '*K*', and one of them claims to hold a theory which, in order to be true, must accept (explicitly or implicitly) statements like ' $\exists x(Kx)$ ' while the other claims to hold no such theory. This also allows for some understanding of how to *resolve* ontological debates: for when we interrogate what sentences there are which, to be true, require the truth of ' $\exists x(Kx)$ ', we may find that those sentences (i) have different consequences from those we first suspected, or (ii) are not sentences we wish to accept after all. But this still leaves much unanswered about how we resolve ontological debates.

OWTI closes with some remarks in this line that are seldom considered by most who take Quine's metametaphysics to be influential – Quine asks how we adjudicate between rival ontologies, and after initially saying that our adopting a particular ontology is 'similar in principle to our acceptance of a scientific theory' (ibid.: 35) he goes on to say that we have many options and these can be pursued *in tandem*. As an example he imagines that to account for our experience we could give a physicalistic theory, on which the values of variables are physical objects of different sorts, but that we could instead give a phenomenalist theory, with sense data the values of variables. He then says that, in the absence of strong reasons to think one preferable, 'the obvious counsel is tolerance and an experimental spirit' (ibid.: 38). Unless we run into trouble with one or the other ontology, we can allow them to sit side by side as alternative theories. This result might look unwelcome: for in the debate over the existence of Pegasus, (with which Quine begins his investigation), I'm not satisfied with the result that I can now maintain that Pegasus doesn't exist if all this means for my opponent and me is that we retreat to our respective theories and mind our own business. After all, we are *opponents*, and both want to make sense of the claim that in this or another case the other ought to come around to their way of thinking. Furthermore, the mention of tolerance naturally evokes Carnap's 'principle of tolerance' (see, e.g., Carnap 1937, §17) which has been generally understood as a pluralist position very much in tension with Quine's view.

In OWTI, Quine says little by way of clarification. Alongside his gestures toward scientific theory, he also makes what looks a highly dogmatic claim: he speaks simply of how an 'overpopulated universe ... offends the aesthetic sense of us who have a taste for desert landscapes' (ibid.: 23). Relative to its actual significance, this quote has played a bigger role in establishing Quine's reputation than any other. Its presence suggests one of two options for Quine: we either exercise radical (possibly Carnapian) tolerance, if we listen to the earlier-mentioned remarks, or engage in dedicated pursuit of the desert landscape, of an ontology as minimal as we can think of. This latter has made the reputation of Quine's metametaphysics that of the approach of *eliminativism*. Typically, Quine's vague remarks about tolerance are forgotten, and his vague remarks about sparseness are taken as seriously as can be. Hence we see claims such as that '[t]he Quinean method is eliminativist by design' (Schaffer 2009, 372) – immediately biased in favour of casting out putative entities. If we work only on the basis of what is given to us here, though, it's also consistent with Quine's metametaphysics to take a tolerant attitude toward ontologies – I simply exercise my own preference (desert landscape, jungle scene, or something altogether different) and leave others to theirs. Quine's closing comments are suggestive of a quietist, perhaps pragmatist approach, in that we simply allow these ontologies

to develop inasmuch as they prove useful and rely on survival of the fittest to leave us with the system(s) best suited to our circumstances, but there isn't much by way of a motivation for this attitude here.

The degree of openness found in OWTI *may* be virtuous (if it is to serve as the foundation of a broad school of thought, one might think, it had better be consistent with various developments). Nevertheless Quine himself certainly had a more developed programme that manifested elsewhere in his work, and in the next section I begin the task of considering the metametaphysical ideas that are introduced or developed beyond OWTI.

3: 'Two dogmas of empiricism'

In order to develop Quine's metametaphysics beyond OWTI, we will first move on to perhaps his only work that rivals it for notoriety: 'Two dogmas of empiricism' [TD] (1951a). Here is Quine's famous critique of empiricism via its 'dogmas' of analyticity and reductionism, and his introduction of the epistemological holism that is now well-known under the label of the 'web of belief'. Why, though, insist that this work is relevant to metametaphysics?

First, because it seems a good candidate for a development of the ideas gestured at in OWTI regarding the 'scientific' attitude to our metaphysical (among other) theories, so if we want to clarify these, TD is a good place to look. This might seem outweighed by the fact that the dogmas introduce new philosophical territory: we're now engaging in philosophy of language (analyticity) and epistemology (reductionism), so why bring in metaphysics? But aside from the fact that the holism here introduced shows that precise subject divisions are not Quine's style, it should also be clear that it's part of investigating the nature of metaphysics to ask how one comes to know the answer to metaphysical questions, and what it means to ask or answer one. Interestingly, Quine later describes himself as doing 'the epistemology of ontology' (1983, 500).^v This is natural, for we can't properly understand a research programme without some notion of what would constitute a significant result within that research programme. Let us move on, then, to examine what TD introduces to Quine's metametaphysics.

Both here and in previous work Quine demonstrates a complex relationship with the empiricist tradition. On one hand, Quine is widely held to undermine at least one strand of the empiricist project – that exemplified by logical positivism – and TD is a substantial contribution to that. On the other, Quine clearly has extensive sympathies with this way of thinking: the closing section of TD is titled 'Empiricism without the dogmas', and therein he stresses '[a]n empiricist I continue to think of the conceptual scheme of science as a tool, ultimately, for predicting future experience in the light of past experience' (41). Later he is even more committal:

I haven't thought of myself as destroying [logical empiricism, but] as contributing to what it seemed to me needed further development ... What I was taking issue with was pretty much, I think, in the domain of logical rigour, and also of being more completely empiricistic. And certainly I felt that I was insisting on the ideals of the Vienna Circle more than they, and saying what I thought they ought to be saying. (Quine and Fara, 1994)

In order to see how the tension can be resolved we need to examine TD's move from empiricism to naturalism.

We saw above that in OWTI Quine shows commitment to empiricist ways of thinking: when speaking of deciding between ontologies, he sees the 'phenomenalist' scheme as important because it takes 'epistemological priority' (1948: 38). Quine's conflicted comparison of the phenomenalist and the physicalist conceptual scheme shows his empiricist scruples: the former makes better epistemological sense because it takes as its most basic ingredients entities that are immediate to experience – sense data^{vi} – but the physicalist conceptual scheme inherits the virtue of association with the successes of physics despite the entities it takes for granted being unobservable theoretical posits whose very positing takes extensive work to set up. This conflict continued to bother Quine and in TD the reason emerges. In critiquing the 'dogmas' of analyticity and reductionism, Quine crystallises a growing loss of faith in the idea that our words, concepts, or sentences can be fruitfully understood as being traceable back to their ultimate implications for our experience. We'll briefly examine why.

Quine starts by examining the notion of analyticity, or truth in virtue of meaning. The idea that some sentences are known to be true simply in virtue of the meanings of the words of which they're composed, like 'Vixens are female foxes,' or 'Bachelors are unmarried,' has a long history, and played an important role in the logical positivist project. For them it validated a distinction between empirical knowledge, whose method of delivery is clear (via the senses), and apparently *a priori* knowledge. The latter had been a sticking point for empiricists because it was mysterious how such knowledge was acquired if not through the senses – but if categorised as based purely on meaning, analyticity would involve no special content, being founded merely on linguistic competence. However Quine finds the notion of truth in virtue of meaning impossible to unpack properly, since (i) we lack reason to believe in special discoverable entities, *meanings*, appeal to which would be a marker of truth, and (ii) the notion of sameness of meaning, which is needed to be able to isolate meanings, is hard to clarify. We cannot make the notion easier to manage by applying epistemic standards, e.g. universal willingness to assent to the sentence under the same conditions, since this doesn't exclude various empirical claims that inspire universal assent (compare 'Vixens are female foxes' and 'There are dogs'). Furthermore we can propose hypothetical, perhaps even actual, cases where someone might deny apparently analytic truths. To claim that such a person must be linguistically incompetent would, it seems, beg the question since what Quine is seeking is a criterion by which to identify truths assented to by all competent language-users; to explain dissent by reference to lack of competence gives up on an explanatory criterion. After discussion of several other candidates for making sense of analyticity, e.g., semantic rules, Quine concludes that the notion cannot do the work that the logical positivists require of it.

The way this feeds into Quine's metametaphysics becomes clearer once we consider Quine's thoughts on the second dogma: reductionism. Quine insists that we must give up on the idea that there corresponds to each of our statements a selection of possible empirical data that count as the evidence for or against it. If this were true one would be able to state definitively the implications of any one statement, but it doesn't stand up to scrutiny. Even for observational statements that seem just to report on data, there are parts of my theory that I might reject in order to hold those observational statements constant, or vice versa. If I make an observation of a neutrino's activities that imply that it travelled beyond light-speed, I must choose between abandoning an important and deep-seated principle of my theory (that faster-than-light travel is impossible) and claiming that something in my apparent observations was faulty. I will choose one or the other depending on the circumstances and the wider implications, and as far as Quine is concerned, the rational choice is the path of least disturbance. The manoeuvres needed to settle the disturbance of rejecting what one has just seen will often be less drastic than those needed to revise a central principle, though the balance may shift if sufficient numbers of observations accumulate.

This is, of course, a statement of *epistemological holism*: we cannot rationally accept or reject any claim without reference to the rest of our theory, so the siloed enquiry reductionists require is a distortion. Quine regards reductionism and analyticity as really the same dogma viewed from different angles: just as observing that matters of meaning and of fact both contribute to the truth of a sentence can make us mistakenly think we can isolate that sentence's meaning-giving and fact-stating aspects, awareness that observations bear on some statements more than others can make us mistakenly think we can pinpoint what's necessary to finally confirm a statement and thereby conclusively settle its truth value. Rather everything faces the ongoing test of coherence with our best theory, which is our overall science – and with this step empiricism develops into naturalism. This is important because it applies to all statements, including apparently metaphysical ones: we cannot perform a study into the deep nature of things that operates independently of the enquiries making up our broad science. But the finding cuts two ways – just as there can be no isolated metaphysical enquiry, there can be no wholesale ruling-out of metaphysical statements. It's this aspect of Quine's work that was taken to scuttle the logical positivists' project, since the famous verification principle had aimed to rule out metaphysical statements as meaningless because neither verifiable nor meaning-giving. Now, on Quine's picture, one couldn't rule out a category as meaningless in advance since a lack of relevant implications for the remainder of our theory cannot be guaranteed.

How should we see this addition to Quine's metametaphysics? What should we add to our stock of ideas from Quine on the nature, or methodology, of metaphysics? I think it is clear: In TD, epistemological holism becomes inevitable because naturalism becomes a key part of Quine's metametaphysics. In saying this I go

against van Inwagen especially, who says that Quine's attitude to science was 'a consequence of certain of his epistemological commitments and not of his metaontology' (2009: 506, n. 53). As I've already mentioned, the epistemological aspect of this addition is no reason to suppose that it's not metametaphysical.

And we need it in order to understand two points I briefly explained above. Without naturalism we don't get the result, important for Quine, that metaphysical statements *are* candidates for inclusion in our theory, and nor do we get the result that metaphysical statements are meaningful only insofar as they are connected to and impact on the rest of our theory. For the holism required by (perhaps constitutive of) Quine's naturalism tells us that every respectable facet of knowledge is continuous with science, which is governed by what has come to be known as the Quine-Duhem thesis.

So we've found a significant additional principle in Quine's metametaphysics by looking beyond the core of OWTI. Now we'll move on to look at something that's developed more extensively in Quine's great constructive project, *Word & Object*, though much of the groundwork is laid earlier.

4: *Word & Object*

In *Word & Object* [WO] (1960), Quine develops the insights of TD with a more constructive focus. This is a project of rational reconstruction – through his famous thought experiment of radical translation, he considers what a stranded linguist might be able to learn about a wholly alien language, with this developing into an account of the theory that could be regarded as underpinning such a language, or our own. The lack of fixity such theories turn out to have is the notorious finding of the indeterminacy of translation.

In getting this result, though, we find another idea introduced that is of great interest for metametaphysics. For so far we've just seen that the ontological question is to be understood as requiring us to establish what we must quantify over if our statements are to be true, and that our statements are to be taken as a corporate body rather than split into independent clusters. But who's to say that we shouldn't take large quantities of the statements we typically utter to be false? Our corporate body of truths might, one could say, be very small, very distant from what is typically taken to be true, or both.

However, in what might be fairly described as an offshoot of Quine's naturalism, we see in WO an attempt to preclude that. Our construction of an overall theory needs a guiding assumption, otherwise we can make sense of nothing at all – and that is that by and large people are getting things right. This guiding assumption is what has been called the *principle of charity*.

Some would be surprised to see this take a central role in an account of Quine's work, since it has been more often associated with, for instance, the work of Donald Davidson (see his 2001). However it is indeed important for Quine. When exploring the creative revisions that go on in the process of radical translation Quine says that '[t]he maxim of translation underlying all this is that assertions startlingly false on the face of them are likely to turn on hidden differences of language' (1960: 59), and in an accompanying footnote he explicitly mentions the principle of charity, attributing its original use to N. L. Wilson (1959). He goes on to say that 'the more absurd or exotic the beliefs imputed to a people, the more suspicious we are entitled to be of the translations; the myth of the prelogical people marks only the extreme' (ibid., 69).^{vii} The idea is that since interpreting someone requires me to attribute beliefs to them, I need to impute some degree of coherency and rationality to the beliefs in order for these attributions themselves to be coherent or rational. Otherwise I will have no reason to suppose, for instance, that two occurrences of a symbol are more likely to signify the same than are two occurrences of different symbols, and without such assumptions I can't undertake any interpretive work at all.

As Davidson puts it, there are two directions of pull to charity. We have to be able to assign sense to utterances, and that means an assumption of at least some sharedness in what is believed to be true – 'we must maximize agreement, or risk not making sense of what the alien is talking about' (2001, 27), but we must also be able to understand why certain sentences and not others are assented to, and this means the imputation of rationality – 'we must maximize the self-consistency we attribute to him, on pain of not understanding *him*' (ibid.). So if I take there to be a distinction between cats and dogs, but on my initial

interpretation my interlocutor recognises no such distinction, that suggests that *ceteris paribus* my interpretation is probably wrong. On the other hand if my interlocutor seems to routinely display a particular attitude and then my interpretation suddenly attributes to them something radically at odds with that attitude, that suggests that *ceteris paribus* my interpretation is likely to be wrong *even if* the first, more internally coherent, attitude is one I take to be false.

Again, one might ask why this is relevant to Quine's metametaphysics, since it's one question whether this forms part of Quine's overall view, and another whether it deserves to be seen as part of his metametaphysics. The cheap response would be to exploit the holism in play and say that just as we can't cordon off metaphysics as a special enquiry thanks to holism, we can't cordon off just part of Quine's approach as the metametaphysical part. That would be an uninteresting result, and misleading – even if these divisions aren't sharp for Quine, for him there are still different parts of our theory, some more physical/psychological/chemical/metaphysical/*metametaphysical*, than others. The reason I place this principle within Quine's metametaphysics is that it advises us how widely our responsibilities range when doing metaphysics. We can't draw the limits of our overall theory within a narrow sphere, for instance saying that fundamental physics has been shown to be the most respectable picture of reality so metaphysicians can safely ignore the question of how to make sense of talk of the macroscopic world. The option is open within Quine's approach that we find talk of macroscopic objects to be mistaken, but we need sufficient reasons to overturn the weight of our apparently true statements about macroscopic objects. This also identifies more clearly what we're interested in when doing metaphysics: we're interested in truth. We're not especially interested in entities, or essences, or fundamentality, but in *what is the case*.

One of the most significant aspects of the work Quine does in WO we have so far neglected, but this is because it is more comprehensively explored elsewhere. The significant idea is that of *indeterminacy*, and while it plays a significant role in WO it is developed more, and with greater clarity, in Quine's infamous paper 'Ontological relativity'.

5: 'Ontological relativity'

The thesis of the indeterminacy of translation is well-known in analytic philosophy, as is the thesis of the inscrutability of reference (though probably less so), and though they are introduced in WO, they are the central concern of 'Ontological relativity' [OR] (1968). In order to see their relevance to Quine's metametaphysics, however, our first task is to clear up a terminological issue. It's easy to get the mistaken impression that the indeterminacy and the inscrutability thesis are fundamentally different, but while there is a distinction between the two, they are at root similar. Indeed Quine himself later indicates that the choice of words was unfortunate and that 'indeterminacy of reference' would have been a better label for what he wished to convey (1992: 50). We'll now see why.

The thesis of the *indeterminacy of translation* is that two translations of a language might agree on their attributions of truth to previously encountered statements in that language while diverging on other, remote, regions of the language. We're invited to imagine two radical translators, operating independently, who each generate hypotheses about the meanings of the statements of the community they're translating and amend them based on observation, refining their hypotheses until they build up a vocabulary they match with their own to render them capable of communicating with that community. Given the many ways that one could consistently interpret and systematise a community's behaviours, Quine sees it as implausible that there wouldn't be multiple successful translations that differed somewhere in what they took some statement to signify.

The thesis of the *inscrutability/indeterminacy of reference* is that two translations of a language might agree even on the above and yet diverge regarding reference. That is, what worldly things the translations take the language's terms to be picking out can differ *without* one theory assigning any statement of the language 'true' where the other assigns that statement the value 'false'. A simple example of this idea is complement-based interpretation. To take a sample sentence, 'My cat is an animal,' one can ask why this should be taken to be about my cat as opposed to speaking about *everything but* my cat. The obvious answer, that the statement would turn out false if I took it to be speaking of the *my-cat-complement* (which is not an animal

but a vast and odd aggregate of physical space), goes nowhere because by stipulation the complement-based interpretation takes predicates like ‘is an animal’ to range over the complements of their objects. So when I say ‘My cat is an animal,’ I can consistently be interpreted as saying ‘The my-cat-complement complement-is an animal.’ Both sentences are true, but on the latter interpretation what I am actually talking *about* is not my cat, and what I am attributing is not an intrinsic property. Rather I am talking about everything but my cat, and I am attributing a clearly extrinsic property.^{viii}

One common view of the indeterminacy theses is that they have sceptical results: I cannot know what someone else means, and I cannot even know what they refer to. This would suggest that whenever I try to understand anyone else I’m taking a leap, performing a radical translation.^{ix} But this negative interpretation, on which I might be succeeding at all the tasks that seem to be constitutive of communicative success and yet be getting my translation wrong, sits poorly with Quine. No: since Quine holds that language is an inherently public phenomenon - ‘[i]n psychology one may or may not be a behaviorist, but in linguistics one has no choice’ (1992, 37–8) – the standards set for it in terms of communicative success are all that’s required to be right. Rather than saying that one, or both, of a pair of translators can be failing despite apparent success, Quine wants to say that both of them can succeed despite their different interpretations. Hence in both cases, we are not dealing with mere inscrutability (inability to tell), we are dealing with *indeterminacy*.

To further develop the difficulty, the indeterminacy of translation may be based on a controversial claim that linguists may feel they can challenge, but the indeterminacy of reference is based on far less. The former is a hypothesis about what remains unfixed by past utterances and yet implied by an interpretation. It may therefore be too restrictive, too permissive, or both. It may be too restrictive in that the resources Quine allows his radical translators aren’t all that rich, and they actually might do more as good translators to pin down the statements that come out as true; it may be too permissive in that it allows good translations that differ on remote parts of theory to pronounce on things toward which the community bears no attitudes whatsoever. However the indeterminacy of reference is secured on simpler, technical grounds. We can secure it by appeal to the basic representative machinery of model theory.^x If we can offer any model on which a theory comes out true, then we can offer multiple models, some of which will assign to the expressions used in that theory different referents. One such model would be mathematical; we can preserve truth while taking our ordinary-object terms to range over not medium-sized dry goods but the natural numbers.

This might ring alarm-bells – at this point, does Quine’s metametaphysics collapse, bringing the whole notion of his methodology for metaphysics to nothing? No. Quine doesn’t think this is where the story ends, though he is aware how dire the situation looks:

We seem to be maneuvering ourselves into the absurd position that there is no difference on any terms, interlinguistic or intralinguistic, objective or subjective, between referring to rabbits and referring to rabbit parts or stages; or between referring to formulas and referring to their Gödel numbers. (1968: 200)

This would be absurd at the very least on Moorean grounds – we couldn’t be justified believing in such a state of affairs with anywhere near as strong a conviction as that rabbits are not rabbit-parts, and formulas are not their Gödel numbers.

This is where the last of Quine’s key metametaphysical principles comes in: *ontological relativity*. This is the thesis that ‘[s]pecifying the universe of a theory makes sense only relative to some background theory, and only relative to some choice of a manual of translation of the one theory into the other’ (1968: 205). We make sense of reference relative to a background theory, in effect by accepting that theory as the metalanguage when explaining the object of our study.

For Quine it is untenable to pin down an absolute reference relation, because any attempt to give it would provide the materials for truth-preserving reinterpretations. But instead of conceding that we cannot make sense of reference at all, Quine treats it as theory-relative. When speaking of an interpretation of one theory in another, we treat the interpreting theory as fixed and understood; when speaking of an interpretation of our own theory, we treat the theory through which we clarify the original as understood. There is then a difference between referring to rabbits and referring to rabbit-stages, because there is a difference from the perspective of our theory: as Quine playfully puts it, “‘rabbit’ denotes rabbits, whatever *they* are’ (1992, 52:

emphasis in original).^{xi} Whether the theory we talk about is indeed understood will then depend on our success in satisfying the demands of (charitable) naturalism.

The scale of the metametaphysical implications should immediately be clear. We must hold that our metaphysics is relative to the theory in which we situate it. In one sense this isn't worrying – after all, it was our theory that we wanted to gain a better understanding of. In another, though, it's highly disruptive. Much of traditional metaphysics trades on the notion of investigating the deepest nature of things, with a key assumption being that this is going to lead to a result that is not parochial but all-encompassing. Certain notions are entirely incompatible with this principle – *fundamentality* as it features in much metaphysics, for instance, since this is supposed to identify what is most basic in a special metaphysical sense that is intended to float free of standard theorising. But for Quine we have just recognised something that in other realms is obvious:

to ask what reality is really like ... apart from human categories, is self-stultifying. It is like asking how long the Nile really is, apart from parochial matters of miles or meters. (1992, 9)

Furthermore, to bring this back to our starting point, while we have moved far afield of the sparse beginnings of OWTI, OR really works from that base – by taking on this machinery of representation, and accepting that our interest is in quantification, we furnish the tools for recognising that any of countless theories could systematise our sundry statements, provided those theories had the right structure. The concerns that motivate the principle of ontological relativity are not local to a later, specific project of Quine's, but extend all the way back to the base that has been hoped to be uncontroversial.

Quine was aware throughout that his view was a re-imagining of metaphysics – as pointed out earlier, he tended to avoid the term in his work. Tellingly, when Carnap criticises Quine for using the term 'ontology' to describe his philosophical project, protesting that the term is meaningless, Quine responds that 'meaningless words ... are precisely the words which I feel freest to specify meanings for' (1951b: 66). As is being slowly recognised through the re-evaluation of the history of logical positivism and the Quine-Carnap debate by historians of analytic philosophy, Quine develops the project of the logical positivists, putting aside the untenable goal of ruling out any metaphysics whatsoever and instead finding a niche for something legitimately describable as metaphysics. That niche is in helping to clarify – to pick up a term that had a great deal of traction for Carnap and for Quine – to *explicate* – key parts of our theory. Quine was aware that this was his trajectory from early on: he states in TD his intention to oversee both 'a blurring of the supposed boundary between speculative metaphysics and natural science' and 'a shift toward pragmatism' (1951a: 20). Quine's introduction of his criterion for ontological commitment, supported by charitable naturalism and underpinned by the thesis of ontological relativity, transforms the subject-matter of metaphysics: it moves from the pursuit of a deeper truth underlying all theories to an attempt to clarify our theories that never claims to step beyond them.

Conclusion

A great deal more could be said about we've briefly explored above: it has been possible only to trace the shape of Quine's metametaphysics across several stages of its articulation, without going into detail about either the opportunities presented by the approach or the serious challenges it no doubt faces. However this first step has at least three substantial dividends. First, by drawing out the implications of Quine's metametaphysics we bring it into the light, allowing the kind of comparative work that is blocked if the theory remains a shadowy, purportedly neutral, background presence. Second, we thereby broaden the scope of our understanding of what metaphysics can be by acknowledging a metametaphysics that takes on a serious methodology despite circumscribing the ambitions of the subject, opening up an interesting space between fundamental metaphysics and more wholeheartedly deflationary projects. Finally, we introduce an interesting challenge for those availing themselves of parts of the Quinean machinery. If they embrace the more radical underpinnings, this is in itself interesting (and, I hazard, it's for the better!), but if they will not, it raises the question whether they can construct a coherent alternative that retains its appeal.

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i For prominent instances of this explicit claim, see Manley 2009 and Berto and Plebani 2015.

ii The term certainly goes back at least as early as 1988, though this occurs in a discussion of Derrida (see Silverman 1988, 206). Given Quine's well-known disdain for Derrida, this instance at least is likely to have passed him by.

iii It may be helpful to get a point out of the way early regarding ontology and metaphysics. On my assumptions in this chapter, ontology is a part of metaphysics, so those who have spoken about Quine's contribution specifically to

metaontology are, I take it, intending thereby to speak about his contribution to metametaphysics. For reasons that will arise later, Quine rarely used the term ‘metaphysics’ (he didn’t even use ‘ontology’ all that much), and the terms ‘metaontology’ and ‘metametaphysics’ both postdate the majority of Quine’s work.

I will use ‘metametaphysics’ throughout, though little hangs on this as I see it. My own view, which I note here in case my conception informs my approach, is that Quine preferred the term ‘ontology’ because it held fewer associations with the approaches he disapproved of, being content to let his opponents keep the term ‘metaphysics’. Nevertheless ontology for Quine is not self-contained, as his approach relies on cooperation (and occasional conflict) between ontology and *ideology*. If the project these two jointly comprise can correctly be called ‘metaphysics’, then Quine’s conception of how to engage in that project can correctly be called ‘metametaphysics’.

- iv Of course plenty do so: for instance some insist on a distinction between being and existence, others on a distinction between different modes of existence, and yet others that these notions should not interest us in ontology whatsoever and that we should instead conceive of the ontological question as “What is fundamental?”. More on how fundamentality fits (or doesn’t) into Quine’s conception of metaphysics later.
- v As well as this formal context, Quine also describes it as a central aspect of his work informally, in a 1994 interview with Rudolf Fara.
- vi Quine would go on to reject the utility of sense data thanks to his embracing naturalism, noting that these were posits rather than theory-free building blocks – ultimately, not fruitful posits. Nevertheless he saw the attraction of the apparent immediacy they offered.
- vii The ‘myth of the prelogical people’ that Quine rightly repudiates says that one should, when translating from an unknown language, not suppose that speakers’ beliefs will follow logical patterns. He encounters the mistake in the work of Lévy-Bruhl, who disturbingly posited two distinct mindsets in humanity – ‘primitive’ and ‘Western’ – with the former amenable to contradictions and other logically anomalous beliefs.
- viii This is merely an illustrative way of distinguishing between theory and complement-theory – ways of making the intrinsic/extrinsic distinction are orthogonal to what we’re discussing here.
- ix This chimes with some of Davidson’s comments on the topic: see, e.g., Davidson 2001: 125.
- x Hilary Putnam focuses heavily on model theory when developing these ideas from Quine, which play an important role in his earlier work (e.g. Putnam 1977); for detailed analysis of Putnam’s model-theoretic arguments see Button 2013.
- xi This is not to completely dissolve indeterminacy of reference in the home-language. We can imagine an alien community whose simplest/strongest explication of their own theory (I am taking the liberty of ignoring the question how we translate their beliefs) quantifies over rabbit-stages. When interpreting *us*, they might translate ‘rabbit’ to their rabbit-stages. They would not thereby make a metaphysical mistake, provided they had provided a successful way to interpret our theory in their own.