Quine's Indeterminacy
A Paradox Resolved and a Problem Revealed

By Alexander George

To the memory of James Higginbotham,
who taught me about Quine, and much more.

MANY SUSPECT THAT W.V. QUINE'S DOCTRINE OF THE INDETERMINACY OF translation leads to paradox. I do not think that it does. Understanding why it does not requires appreciation of some of the most basic and profound features of Quine's philosophy. Pursuing this, however, leads to a different problem for Quine, one for which he has no solution.

Section I

THE INDETERMINACY OF TRANSLATION HOLDS THAT THERE IS NO UNIQUE CORRECT WAY of answering the question "How are we to understand the sentences of another's language?" According to the doctrine, if there exists one correct way of assigning meanings to the sentences of another's language, then there will be many equally correct ways. There is no fact of the matter as to which of these different, though equally adequate, semantical hypotheses is the correct one: they all are. In this section, I shall focus on a particular case of this indeterminacy: the indeterminacy of reference, sometimes called by Quine the inscrutability of reference or ontological relativity.[1] According to this claim, if there exists one correct referential hypothesis regarding the terms of another's language, then there will be many other equally correct ones. Put in terms of ontology, if it is correct to attribute one system of ontological commitments to another person, then it will be equally correct to attribute others.[2]

Now, there is nothing special going on when Quine seeks to determine which referential hypothesis regarding a foreign speaker's language is correct. That is, Quine is not imagining that, say, this language is relatively impoverished in some fashion. In fact, we can suppose Quine and the foreigner to be comparably situated with respect to one another in so far as determining the reference of each other's terms is concerned. Whatever basis Quine has, or lacks, for coming to conclusions about what this speaker is referring to, the speaker also has or lacks

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with respect to the reference of Quine's terms. But now Quine seems to be on the brink of paradox, for he also insists that there is a single correct referential hypothesis regarding his own terms: "rabbit," he says, of course refers to rabbits, and not to cabbages.[3]

The apparent conflict can be brought out even more sharply by imagining that Quine's interlocutor, Smith, speaks English and is disposed to use his language just as Quine is. As before, Quine will argue that "rabbit" in Smith's mouth can correctly be taken to refer to something other than rabbits. Quine will also acknowledge that he and Smith are symmetrically situated with respect to one another, at least as far as working out what the other refers to is concerned. And yet, Quine will insist that his own term "rabbit" refers to rabbits. How can this be?[4]

One must banish the lingering thought that Quine takes himself to have some privileged access to facts that bear on the question of what his own terms refer to. The thought is that he can, as it were, consult his own referential intentions, to which only he is privy, in working out the reference of his terms, while he cannot likewise consult Smith's intentions. But of course this cannot be so, for Quine insists that the evidence pertinent to selection of a referential hypothesis is publicly available. Whether speakers have such private referential intentions or not, Quine holds that they are irrelevant to hypotheses about reference.

How then can this apparent tension in Quine's views be resolved?

A full resolution requires appreciating two key features of Quine's thought. The first deals with his understanding of the doctrine of indeterminacy and most particularly of the referential hypotheses it concerns. It is tempting to think of a referential hypothesis, say the claim that Smith's term "rabbit" refers to rabbits, as asserting the existence of a relation between a term in his language and particular objects. And of course, on a certain relaxed construal, this last gloss is correct.[5] But if we crudely assimilate this claim to, say, one about paternity (e.g., "This man is the father of that child"), which involves a natural relation between two objects, we will not be able to make sense of Quine's views.

For one thing, such an assimilation will prevent us from understanding Quine's insistence that indeterminacy, rather than underdetermination, follows from the fact that multiple referential hypotheses accommodate all possible behavioral evidence equally well. For by his lights, hypotheses about hidden goings-on in the natural world are merely underdetermined by the evidence. Quine's realism in part consists in his insistence that either the world conforms to a clear hypothesis about its covert nature or it does not, even if observable evidence might not settle the matter. If we view claims about reference as claims about a hidden natural relation that holds, independently of our knowledge, between terms and objects, then the fact that there are competing referential hypotheses that are equally well supported by all the observable data should tell us nothing about whether there is a fact of the matter as to which hypothesis is correct.

For another, the assimilation of referential hypotheses to claims about unobservable natural relations really does threaten outright inconsistency in Quine's views. For it is doubtful that Quine could then insist that his term "rabbit" refers to rabbits; that the same term in Smith's mouth can correctly be said to refer to cabbages; and that there is no additional pertinent physical, physiological, or behavioral difference between him and Smith.[6]

But a key feature of Quine's perspective is that he does *not* understand referential hypotheses in this way. He believes that their cash value is completely exhausted by a claim about how another's terms can be mapped onto our own in such a way as to accommodate all observable behavioral data. For Quine, the upshot of his claim that Smith's term "rabbit" can be correctly judged to refer to rabbits is that a pairing of Smith's term to Quine's own term "rabbit" is part of a correct translation scheme. That's *just what it is* for Smith's term to have that reference. Quine's position is that if we can find a thoroughly adequate manual of translation that pairs Smith's "rabbit" with our term "cabbage," then to ask whether Smith really refers to cabbages by this term is not to ask anything at all. "To say that 'gavagai' denotes rabbits," Quine insists, "is to opt for a manual of translation in which 'gavagai' is translated as 'rabbit', instead of any of the alternative manuals."[7] For Quine, "when we interpret those terms as denoting such and such objects, all we are really doing is to propound translations of those terms into terms of our language."[8] It is a fundamental feature of Quine's position that he would dismiss anyone who, while acknowledging these translational facts as may be, still wished to know to what Smith's terms really referred.

This feature of Quine's conception is often missed and yet is critical to understanding his philosophical orientation. It is also of great interest in itself, indeed of greater value than the doctrine of indeterminacy that Quine seeks to justify on its basis. Of course, Quine's orientation largely went without saying for him, whereas that doctrine did not. As a consequence, this feature of his conception of reference is not as well appreciated by his readers, who understandably are left perplexed by his ensuing discussion. I shall eventually turn to the argument for indeterminacy, but before doing so I shall make a few observations about this central feature.

It might be worth noting quickly that we have here a deep methodological affinity between Quine and Wittgenstein[9], one that might benefit from a more extensive treatment. Specifically, Wittgenstein constantly asks us to examine the cash value of certain claims instead of conjuring up misleading pictures for ourselves of what their content really comes to. The grammar, as Wittgenstein put it, of referential claims suggests an easy assimilation to conjectures about relations in the natural world, but when we explore how these claims really function in our exchanges, we see that they are put to quite different kinds of use. For Wittgenstein, these uses form an uncircumscribable collection of heterogeneous practices.[10] For Quine this use, for scientific purposes, is best understood in terms of the search for stimulus-meaning-preserving correlations between one language and another.

If we keep this understanding in view, we can better appreciate why Quine arrives at indeterminacy rather than underdetermination from the alleged fact that multiple referential hypotheses will equally accommodate all the observable evidence, no matter how extensive. For it is merely an illusion, induced by our faulty assimilations, that the referential hypotheses about another's language report on some behind-the-scenes subject matter that is responsible for this evidence. The content of these hypotheses does not transcend what we somewhat misleadingly call "evidence" about the facilitation of fluent communication. Should multiple hypotheses accommodate these facts equally

well, then of course there is no question of only one's being right, i.e., of one's doing more justice than the others to the pertinent facts.

Another way of summing up this feature of Quine's view is to say, as he often does, that reference is relative. It is helpful to distinguish between the relativity of reference and its indeterminacy (though Quine himself does not do so). While indeterminacy of reference is a thesis that Quine argues for, its relativity is a perspective that Quine adopts within which the indeterminacy thesis is formulated and defended. For Quine, the reference of another's terms is relative to a choice of a manual of translation that will correlate them with our own. This is a position not so much defended as assumed.[11] I take it to flow from his observation of how we employ the locution "refers" when applied to another's words: what we call "determining to what another speaker refers" *just is* the practice of working out which correlation of his words to ours best accommodates the behavioral data. That is "all we are really doing" when we seek to understand to what his words refer. Reference is relative in the sense that what another refers to turns on the correlation between his words and ours (which is what a manual of translation effects) that best saves the observable behavior. This by itself does not commit one to indeterminacy: one might agree that reference is relative in this sense, but hold that there is a single correct correlation between another speaker's words and our own. Indeterminacy is a further claim—to the effect that there are many correct ways of effecting such a correlation—and it requires an argument, which Quine devotes a great deal of energy to providing. (We shall explore this claim further in Section II below.)

With this background in mind, let us return to the apparent paradox of Quine's claiming that there is indeterminacy as to what "rabbit" refers to in Smith's language, even as he insists that there is none when it comes to what it refers to in his own:

> there is no fact of the matter in interpreting any man's ontology in one way or,
> via proxy functions, in another. Any man's, that is to say, except ourselves.[12]

Given Quine's understanding of what it comes to hold that a referential hypothesis regarding another's words is correct, to say that Smith's ontology is indeterminate is in effect to say that one can pair his terms to our own in many different ways, each one of which is compatible with all observable behavior. But if we grant the existence of multiple, adequate pairings and we assume that Quine and Smith are symmetrically situated with respect to all considerations pertinent to choice of referential hypotheses, then Quine must acknowledge that Smith in turn will have many ways of pairing Quine's terms to his own, each one of which will do full justice to the observational constraints. Why then does Quine not go on to infer that there is no fact of the matter as to what his own terms refer to?

The answer to this question brings us to the second central pillar of Quine's views, that we must always "work from within."[13] Quine does not come to a conclusion about what his own terms refer to by examining the pertinent behavioral evidence. On the contrary, such an examination presupposes that a language or theory is in place, within which the examination can proceed. And one component of this language or theory is, for instance, just the claim: "rabbit"

refers to rabbits. Quine's recognition that his own behavior does not uniquely determine how others might pair his terms to their own proceeds from within a language that already settles what Quine will say about the reference of his own terms. That is because in this language the expression "refers to," the apparatus of quotation, and so on, function in such a way that Quine will immediately assent to, for instance, the query "Does 'rabbit' refer to rabbits?" (and dissent from, say, the query "Does 'rabbit' refer to cabbages?"): this is how such expressions are used in his language, and to work from within it is to take that seriously.[14]

Quine begins his inquiry "at home in our language, with all its predicates and auxiliary devices."[15] There, in terms of these, he finds himself with something obvious to say about the references of his words: for instance, "rabbit" refers to rabbits. We all "[acquiesce] in our mother tongue and [take] its words at face value."[16] So taking them is part of what it is for that language to be one's mother tongue. Quine insists that

> Within the home language, reference is best seen (I now hold) as unproblematic but trivial, on a par with Tarski's truth paradigm. Thus "London" denotes London (whatever *that* is) and "rabbit" denotes rabbits (whatever *they* are). Inscrutability of reference emerges only in translation.[17]

For Quine, claims like "'rabbit' refers to rabbits" are as obvious as the claim that "'rabbits are herbivores' is true if and only if rabbits are herbivores." To be "at home" in our language is just to find such claims utterly "trivial."

By contrast, matters stand differently when we ask questions about another's words. For what another's expressions refer to is *not* something that is made obvious to us simply by our having settled into a language. As noted, Quine finds that a locution like "Dupont refers to rabbits by 'lapin'" is employed in such a way that correctness of the claim consists in the relevant pairing of terms being part of a manual of translation that accommodates the observable data.[18] Such correctness is not obvious and indeed requires a substantive inquiry. Quine goes on to argue that where there is one such manual, there will be others. That is, there is no one correct system of referential hypotheses concerning the terms of another speaker: indeterminacy obtains.

It is natural to press the original objection by reminding Quine that his words are themselves subject to translation. After all, he can imagine being in Smith's position and attempting to work out the reference of his, Quine's, own terms. Indeed, this is structurally identical to the position that Quine is actually in with respect to Smith, and Quine concludes in that case that the reference of Smith's terms is indeterminate. Hence, Quine should conclude that if he were in Smith's position, he would deem the reference of his, Quine's, own terms to be indeterminate. The paradox seems still with us.

But we must not be taken in by the structural identity of these positions. For if Quine "were in Smith's position," then this exercise would not be one of his determining the reference of his own words—that would continue to be as "trivial" as before—but rather those of another speaker, the philosopher formerly known as "Quine." The point is that whenever Quine contemplates a devious permutation of the reference of his own terms he does so from within a "home

language," the reference of whose expressions is just obvious. From within this new *lingua firma* he may note that his (former) term "rabbit" could after all be taken to refer to cabbages. But if we were to press him to say what he now means by "cabbage," his response would be "Cabbages, of course!"

This dialectic might inspire the final thought that Quine can after all come to appreciate the indeterminacy of his own terms' reference (and hence go the way of paradox) by running through his argument from an as yet referentially uncommitted position. Indeed, it seems that we could draw conclusions about the indeterminacy of our own terms from the considerations that Quine presents only if we could imagine ourselves exploring the matter from a position that stands aloof from any claims about the reference of our own expressions. But now we can see that this further thought again pays no heed to Quine's clarion call always to "work from within." To be at home within a language demands that one not patronize it, in this case that one not stand aloof from any associated judgments about the reference of one's own terms. Hence, the position we are imagined to be taking up would need to be one of linguistic exile. But such a position, Quine urges, is an Archimedean fantasy, no position at all. Inquiry takes place within a language.

This does not mean that we cannot question what we had formerly taken to be obvious. Quine can always ask whether his term "rabbit" really refers to rabbits. If this is not understood to be a question whose answer is immediate and "trivial," then it is a question about translation. And if so, it must be being asked from the perspective of a new background language relative to which the question is indeed a substantive one—and distinct from trivially answered questions about the reference of terms in this background language. Once this is appreciated, we see that what initially looks to be Quine's raising of a substantive, and determinacy-threatening, question regarding the reference of his own terms is really something quite different.

In sum, if we keep the two pillars of Quine's conception in clear view, we can arrive at a better understanding of his thoughts about reference and of his dissolution of the threatened paradox. For non-trivial questions about reference turn out to be questions about correct translation of a target language into the home language. And to make oneself at home (however temporarily) in a language is to take seriously certain claims about the reference of its terms. In a sense then, even to raise questions about indeterminacy presupposes that one will find obvious certain judgments about the reference of one's own terms.

Section II

To say that the doctrine of the indeterminacy of reference is not after all paradoxical is not to say that there is a good argument for it. Indeed, there is something fundamentally troubled in Quine's discussion. Let us recall how it proceeds in its full generality by considering the indeterminacy of translation. Quine argues that where there is one adequate hypothesis concerning the meaning of a sentence in another's language there will be many. A semantical hypothesis is adequate if it is a part of a manual of translation that accords with all observable checkpoints. A common complaint is that this criterion of adequacy remains steeped in a discredited behaviorism. I am not sympathetic to this objection,

because it seems to grant that Quine has succeeded in articulating a criterion of adequacy (albeit of an objectionable behavioristic nature). The trouble, as I see it, comes earlier, in Quine's very articulation of what these observable checkpoints are.

This might at first seem surprising since Quine has described them in exacting detail. They are a speaker's dispositions to verbal behavior. These in turn have been normalized by focusing on the speaker's dispositions to assent to, or dissent from, queried sentences under observable conditions of stimulation.

> Query and assent, query and dissent—here is the solvent that reduces understanding to verbal disposition. It is primarily by querying sentences for assent and dissent that we tap the reservoirs of verbal disposition.[19]

The problem comes in articulating what Quine has in mind by assent.[20]

This proves to be an unexpectedly vexing task because of the constraints Quine imposes on a satisfactory articulation. One constraint is that the activity of assenting be an observable phenomenon. After all, such dispositions constitute the data, "the ultimate data,"[21] to which manuals of translation must do justice. And it is central to Quine's conception of social meaning that all the facts pertinent to fixing meaning are public. "There is nothing in linguistic meaning," he affirms again and again, "beyond what is to be gleaned from overt behavior in observable circumstances."[22] So there is no question of identifying assent, as Quine understands it, with mental agreement, conceived as something that is not overtly observable.[23] But then what conception of assent does Quine have in mind?

It might be thought that the question being pressed now is a bad one. For Quine occasionally suggests that even the translation of assent and dissent is indeterminate to some degree.[24] But this suggestion does not solve the problem at hand so much as highlight it. For we may restate the problem before us by asking what it is the translation of, which Quine occasionally takes to be somewhat indeterminate.

At one point, Quine suggests that we identify assent with some subset of "the totality of activated fibers in the motor muscles, including those of speech."[25] There are a number of reasons why this response cannot stand. For one thing, it is incompatible with other demands that Quine places on an adequate characterization of assent. One such demand, we have already seen: publicity. While there may be some circumstances when "activated fibers in the motor muscles" are observable, for instance in the operating room, most occasions when we seek to determine what another is telling us or whether someone rates as a master of the language are not such as to put these fibers on observable display.

Another flouted demand stems from the work to which Quine places his notion of assent. As we saw, assent forms part of the verbal dispositions that characterize the facts to which translation manuals (and so referential hypotheses) are to do justice. What is it, though, for a manual to be faithful to such facts? Not all sentences of a speaker's language will be helpfully associated with a stimulus meaning, i.e., the ordered pair of stimulations that prompt the speaker, respectively, to assent to and to dissent from the sentence when queried. Some, the occasion sentences, will.[26] If a sentence of the speaker has a stimulus meaning, then any adequate manual of translation must associate that sentence with one of

our own with the same[27] stimulus meaning: that is what correctness of a manual of translation consists in. Hence for this conception of correctness to make sense, stimulus meanings must be identifiable across speakers.

And this is precisely what is doubtful given the conception of assent as "activated fibers in the motor muscles, including those of speech." For there is, as Quine himself acknowledged, no reason to think that there is any homology between the sets of fibers in the motor muscles of one speaker and those of another: he derides this supposition as "the myth of homologous nerve endings."[28] In addition to requiring specific (and perhaps implausible) assumptions about human physiology, a conception of correct translation erected on the basis of such a notion of assent seems more generally to be on the wrong track. For as Quine asked early on, "What will we do when we get to Mars?"[29] Quine did not want an account of social meaning that rules out ahead of time any possibility of communication with creatures whose anatomies are different from ours.

So we have seen that assent, as it figures in Quine's stimulus meanings, can be understood neither as a mental act nor in terms of the activation of fibers in the motor muscles of the speaker. The obvious thought is that Quine should best keep to a formulation of assent in terms of the behavior of the speaker. And usually Quine is quite clear about this. For instance, he suggests that we

> adopt the term *surface assent* for the utterance or gesture itself. My behavioural approach does indeed permit me, then, only to appeal to surface assent; assent as I talk of it must be understood as surface assent.[30]

Let us assume that we can find a conception of "utterance or gesture," a level of description of "behavior," that does not flout the publicity constraint and that also makes sense as applied across all human beings and perhaps even other potential conversational partners. Does this resolve the question as to Quine's conception of assent?

It does not. For what we need still is an understanding of what makes an "utterance or gesture" an instance of assent. Clearly we cannot say that a gesture will count as assent so long as it manifests agreement, for then we would have the mental tail wagging the behavioral dog. But then what is it for some display of behavior to be an instance of assent?

It might seem as if Quine has told us, for he has offered a handy test that we can employ in the field to work out which behavioral display is likely to be assent.[31] We simply wait until the native utters a sentence and then we immediately query him with that very sentence. The behavior elicited, Quine suggests, stands a good chance of being an instance of assent.

But to think that this provides us with an answer to our question is either to misunderstand Quine's intention here or to misunderstand the question. This field technique is designed to help us discover *when* the speaker is assenting, but it does not provide an analysis of what it is for a display of behavior *to be* assent. In a sense, we do not yet know what it is that the technique helps us to discover. What we have here is merely a heuristic intended to be useful in the discovery of assent, not an account of what makes some behaviors and not others count as

assent. We do not know what this is a heuristic for until we have been given an understanding of what assenting consists in. Modifying a closely related remark of Quine's, we might say that discovering when assenting takes place is one thing; defining what it is that one thus discovers is another.[32]

We might put the point by raising the question of why we are confident that this is indeed a good heuristic for discovering the "utterance or gesture" that is another speaker's assent. Our failure to appreciate that we lack an answer to this question is of course due to the fact that we understand what "assent" means in ordinary life and this understanding underlies our impression that the heuristic indeed works. But again, Quine is at pains to stress that this familiar conception of assent is not his notion. In sum, at best what we have here is merely a heuristic for discovering instances of what Quine calls "surface assent," not an analysis of what we have thereby discovered, of what "surface assent" consists in. Absent such an analysis, what we have is a candidate for a heuristic whose adequacy we are simply not yet in a position to judge.

It seems that the most natural, and perhaps only, response Quine can offer is that what makes some behavioral display of a speaker assent is that it is what gets paired with "Yes," our sign for assent, by a correct manual of translation. To be so paired is what it is for an "utterance or gesture" of another speaker to be assent. Thus, when arguing that German, French, and Japanese have multiple expressions for assent, Quine simply says: "'Yes' goes into 'ja' and 'oui' after affirmative questions but into 'doch' and 'si' after negative questions; 'hai' goes into 'yes' after affirmative questions but into 'no' after negative questions." Which utterances of the native speaker our "Yes" "goes into" in an adequate manual of translation determines which of his utterances are assent.[33]

This proposal certainly is in the spirit of one of Quine's central tenets, which we explored in the previous section. For what is it that we actually do when we work out whether a speaker of another language is assenting? We do not delve into his mind or into his brain. We rather determine whether pairing his "utterance or gesture" to our "Yes" leads to a successful translation of his language. One might be tempted to protest that this proposal tacitly assumes that "Yes" is *our* sign for assent—and how do we know that? But as before, Quine would urge that this question is really unintelligible. To say "Yes" is to assent – we do so in just those words – much as for me to use the word "rabbit" is for me to refer to rabbits.

But we must now note some consequences of this proposal. For one thing, it problematizes certain claims Quine has made regarding observation sentences. Quine has insisted that there is a difference in the determinacy of their translation as compared to that of other sentences: "The predicament of the indeterminacy of translation," he writes, "has little bearing on observation sentences."[34] At times, he has formulated this by saying that the translation of observation sentences is determinate while the translation of other sentences is not; at other times, he has said that indeterminacy of translation comes in degrees and that the translation of observation sentences displays more determinacy than that of others. On the present proposal, however, it is unclear whether Quine can maintain either of these claims. Quine insists that:

> The equating of an observation sentence of our language to an observation sentence of another language is mostly a matter of empirical generalization; it is a matter of identity between the range of stimulations that would prompt assent to the one sentence and the range of stimulations that would prompt assent to the other.[35]

In other words, translation of observation sentences involves the identification of their stimulus meanings and the matching of sentences across languages with identical (or nearly so) stimulus meanings. Because the stimulus meaning of a sentence is the ordered pair of stimulations that prompt assent and prompt dissent, when the speaker is queried with the sentence, facts about the stimulus meaning of a sentence are bound up with facts about what constitutes assenting behavior for the given speaker. But on the present proposal, what constitutes assent depends on the adequacy of an entire manual of translation: a speaker's behavioral display counts as an instance of assent just in case it is mapped onto our "Yes" by an adequate manual of translation. In consequence, what counts as a correct translation of observation sentences is not something that is prior to, or independent of, what counts as a correct translation of the entire language. Hence, it is unclear in what sense translation of observation sentences is not subject to the indeterminacy, or not subject to it to the same degree, that allegedly affects translation of other stretches of the language.

Relatedly, on the present proposal even facts about which sentences of a speaker's language count as observational are bound up with facts about what is a correct translation of the entire language. For whether a speaker's sentence counts as an observation sentence depends in part on whether:

> If querying the sentence elicits assent from the given speaker on one occasion, it will elicit assent likewise on any other occasion when the same total set of receptors is triggered; and similarly for dissent.[36]

And this will depend on what counts as assenting behavior for that speaker, which will in turn depend on what is a satisfactory manual of translation for the entire language. This is not a point about the ordering of tasks in translational practice. It is a point about how, on this proposal, facts about which sentences of a speaker's language are observational turn out to be, of a piece with, not independent of, facts about which translations of the entire language are correct. If translation of another speaker's language is indeterminate, then so too is the very identity of the class of observation sentences for that language.

But a less internal and far more pressing problem than any of these is that this proposal is simply circular. It identifies assent as that behavior of the native that is mapped into our "Yes" by an adequate manual of translation. Quine has understood such adequacy to consist in a manual's doing justice to all the observational checkpoints, that is, that sentences paired with one another by the manual of translation have identical (or nearly so) stimulus meanings, if they have well defined stimulus meanings at all: stimulus meanings, Quine says, constitute "the objective reality that the linguist has to probe when he undertakes radical translation."[37] But we cannot characterize this "objective reality" without appeal

to the notion of assent, for this notion is intrinsic to that of stimulus meaning. Hence, this characterization of what assent consists in is circular.

Another way of putting this point is as follows. If the checkpoints that constitute "objective reality" when it comes to translation are to be independent of what they are checks on, then facts about stimulus meaning must hold independently of which manual of translation is deemed correct. And, given the definition of stimulus meaning, this would require that what counts as assent holds independently of which manual of translation is judged correct. But this is precisely what is not so on the present proposal. If facts about the checkpoints, "the ultimate data," are to be independent of the correctness of the competing manuals that seek to accommodate those checkpoints, then either Quine must reject the current proposal of what assent consists in, according to which assent is parasitic on the correct manual of translation, or he must offer a conception of what makes a manual correct that makes no reference to facts about assent. If he fails to do both, then what "the ultimate data" are will depend on which manual of translation is correct: the identity of the data will depend on the truth of the hypotheses amongst which the data were meant to adjudicate.

This conception of assent, then, wreaks havoc with Quine's philosophy. It casts a shadow over his claim that identification and translation of a speaker's observation sentences can be approached independently of translation of the speaker's entire language. And so of course it makes questionable his claim that the translation of observation sentences is different in kind or degree, as far as indeterminacy is concerned, from that of any other stretch of language. In a sense, then, the very notion of observation sentence is called into question, for the category was intended in part to mark off those sentences whose translation was deemed more determinate than those of other sentences. Most importantly, this conception of assent is simply circular given Quine's behavioral analysis of what successful translation consists in, a circularity that subsequently infects other notions such as that of the correctness of translation itself.

In order to make progress on his own terms, Quine would need to provide a description of the array of facts to which a correct translation must do justice, an array of facts that hold independently of whether this or that translation is correct. Without this, he cannot even so much as formulate what the indeterminacy thesis comes to. Which facts might plausibly play this independent adjudicatory role, while simultaneously passing Quine's austere muster, is a question left unanswered. As is the question whether, in reference to these facts, an argument could be formulated as to why, where there is one correct manual of translation, there will be many.

As just noted, such progress requires either that Quine put forward a conception of assent that makes it independent of correctness of translation or that he offers an account of correctness of translation that is independent of assent (and so of stimulus meanings). He never did the first. Towards the end of his career, we find Quine gesturing toward the second in scouting a far more nebulous conception of what correctness of a manual of translation consists in.[38] A manual is correct, he latterly says, if it makes for "smoothness of dialogue and influence on behavior."[39] "What is utterly factual," Quine ultimately suggests, "is just the fluency of conversation and the effectiveness of negotiation."[40] Gone is any attempt

to elucidate in behavioristically acceptable terms what such fluency consists in.[41] Correct translation now amounts to promotion of "smooth conversation"—but what "smooth conversation" is, or what it is for a manual to promote it, or what it means for one manual to promote it to a greater degree than another, are all questions left unanswered. As is, consequently, the question why we should believe that where there is one correct manual of translation, there will be others.

I find great value in what for Quine was a natural philosophical orientation, so natural that he makes it not the focus but the framework of his discussions. Instead of assuming that talk of meaning or of reference is to be straightforwardly assimilated to talk of planets or particles, we should look to see how this talk actually gets deployed, what its cash value is in human exchange. And when we do, we shall see that claims about the semantics of another's expressions are intimately connected to claims about how best to translate his words into our own. So far, so good.

But then Quine became absorbed in the project, which reached its climax in *Word and Object*, of formulating a behavioristically acceptable analysis of the notion of correct translation. This was surely motivated by a general desire to provide the study of language with (from Quine's perspective) a clear scientific basis. It was also motivated by the more specific goal of arguing for indeterminacy, a project that requires a sharp enough conception of "the objective reality" that one could plausibly argue that, where there is one manual of translation that does it justice, there will be many. And it is this project that I suspect is fundamentally troubled. It demands that we be able to describe behavior independently of identifying a correct manual of translation in a way that yields evidence for claims about meaning.[42] Learning that such a level of description is a fantasy and that the conceptions of language and maturation that make it seem a necessity are consequently in need of revision are discoveries of great importance to which Quine's work eventually leads us.[43]

Notes

[1] Quine does not intend any distinction here; see, e.g., *Pursuit of Truth*, revised edition, Harvard, 1992, pp. 51–2.

[2] Quine eventually thought the most compelling argument for this claim involved consideration of what he called "proxy functions" (see, for instance, *Pursuit of Truth*, pp. 31–3). They form no part of the statement of the claim but are rather a device appealed to in its defense.

[3] Some have sought to resolve the quandary by suggesting that Quine would deny this. (See, for instance, A. Malachowski, "Searle on First Person Meaning and Indeterminacy," *Theoria*, 54, 1988, pp. 25–30.) But as we shall see, Quine is quite clear that he finds such judgments as "'Rabbit' refers to rabbits" trivial.

[4] That it cannot be, and that Quine's argument is subsequently reduced to "real absurdity," was argued by John R. Searle in his "Indeterminacy, Empiricism, and the First Person," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Volume LXXXIV, No. 3, March 1987, pp. 123–46; p. 130. The view is commonly encountered: for instance, Hans-Johann Glock thinks that Quine's indeterminacy thesis must lead him to say that he does not know what his own words mean. And he adds that "the denial of this first-person authority constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum* of Quine's behaviourism" (from

his *Quine and Davidson on Language, Thought and Reality*, Cambridge, 2003, p. 206).

⁵ And Quine himself occasionally writes this way as well: "I use the word ['refer'] to relate linguistic expressions to objects. *Real* objects, I am tempted to say, despite the redundancy" (from "Replies to the Eleven Essays," in *Philosophical Topics*, 12, 1981, pp. 227–43; p. 229).

⁶ This argument of course assumes that referential facts are not surd facts that obtain independently of all other physical, physiological, and behavioral facts.

⁷ *Pursuit of Truth*, p. 52.

⁸ "Replies to the Eleven Essays," p. 243. Quine repeatedly makes this point. "To say what objects someone is talking about is to say no more than how we propose to translate his terms into ours" (from "Things and Their Place in Theories," in *Theories and Things*, Harvard, 1981, pp. 1–23; p. 20). "We translate *pierre* as 'stone' and *nombre* as 'number,' and we mean no more than this in saying that we interpret the French as treating of stones and numbers" (from "Sticks and Stones; or, The Ins and Outs of Existence," in *Quine in Dialogue*, edited by Dagfinn Føllesdal and Douglas B. Quine, Harvard 2008, pp. 312–24; pp. 322–3).

⁹ And J. L. Austin, as well.

¹⁰ See § 10ff of *Philosophical Investigations*.

¹¹ I expect this is why Quine sees little point in distinguishing them; for instance, see fn. 1. Or consider: "Such is ontological relativity," he writes in a late essay, "or the indeterminacy of reference. What is relative about it is that the ontology to be ascribed to the speakers of an alien language comes to be relative to the chosen manual of translation, from among empirically equivalent manuals" (from "Assuming Objects," in *Confessions of a Confirmed Extensionalist and Other Essays*, edited by Dagfinn Føllesdal and Douglas B. Quine, Harvard, 2008, pp. 449–60; p. 458). That there will always be such "empirically equivalent manuals" is a point independent of the view that another's ontology is relative to a correct translation manual. Nothing hangs on these terms: I only wish to separate two claims, one of which provides the stage-setting for the other.

¹² "Things and Their Place in Theories," p. 23.

¹³ See his "Posits and Reality," reprinted in *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays*, revised and enlarged edition, Harvard, 1976, pp. 246–54. See also Chapter 1 of *Word and Object*, MIT, 1960.

¹⁴ This immediacy of response, the utter obviousness of such claims, might even be a source of the idea dismissed (on Quine's behalf) above: that a speaker has privileged access to his or her referential intentions.

¹⁵ "Ontological Relativity," in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, Columbia, 1969, pp. 69–80; p. 48.

¹⁶ "Ontological Relativity," p. 42.

¹⁷ Hahn and Schilpp, p. 460. "Domestically," Quine says, "it is simply true and trivial to say that 'stone' denotes the stones and 'number' denotes the numbers" (from "Sticks and Stones; or, The Ins and Outs of Existence," p. 323). Or again: "When we say of a Francophone that he uses the word 'pierre' to refer to stones, we are only saying how we are pairing his nodes with ours: we are translating his word 'pierre' by our word 'stone'. When we say that *we* use *our* word 'stone' to refer to stones, we are sounding an empty tautology" (from "The Sensory Support of Science," in *Confessions of a Confirmed Extensionalist and Other Essays*, pp. 327–40; p. 340).

¹⁸ Clearly the use of "refers" in self-ascriptions is different: in judging what his own terms refer to, Quine does not take stock of his own stimulus meanings. As Quine puts it, there is no question here of translation. This might prompt the objection that Quine makes first- and third-person uses of "to refer" unrelated but for the employment of two homonymous expressions. But there are many locutions whose first- and third-person uses differ (while still overlapping in other ways) without this prompting the worry that there are really two distinct concepts in

play. Pursuing this properly would take us too far afield, but one text for any future sermon would have to be Wittgenstein's discussion in *The Blue Book* of the solipsist's worry about our use of "pain." Relevant also is his remark in *Philosophical Investigations* after distinguishing several different uses of the word "understanding":

> Then has "understanding" two different meanings here?—I would rather say that these kinds of use of "understanding" make up its meaning, make up my concept of understanding.
>
> For I want to apply the word "understanding" to all this. (§ 532)

[19] "Mind and Verbal Dispositions," in Samuel Guttenplan (editor), *Mind and Language,* Oxford, 1975, pp. 83–95; p. 88.

[20] Actually, a problem also arises regarding his characterization of stimulation. For a related discussion, see Alexander George, "Linguistic Practice and Its Discontents: Quine and Davidson on the Source of Sense," *Philosophers' Imprint*, Volume 4, Number 1, February 2004.

[21] *Pursuit of Truth*, p. 46.

[22] *Pursuit of Truth*, p. 38.

[23] This has not stopped commentators from foisting precisely this view on Quine. Glock, for instance, writes: "Assent and dissent, by contrast, are *not* mechanical reactions or mere bodily movements, but forms of *intentional* (linguistic) behaviour." Glock simply dismisses Quine's protestations to the contrary as "futile" maneuvers: assent, Glock says, cannot play the epistemological roles Quine wishes it to play unless it "is intimately interwoven with epistemic and intensional notions" (*op. cit.*, p. 180). In my view, these charges proceed way too quickly to have any traction with someone gripped by Quine's conception.

[24] For instance, see Quine's "Reply to Hintikka," in *Words and Objections*, D. Davidson and J. Hintikka (eds.), D. Reidel, 1975, pp. 312–15.

[25] "In Praise of Observation Sentences," reprinted in *Confessions of a Confirmed Extensionalist and Other Essays,* pp. 409–19; p. 418.

[26] See, e.g., *Word and Object*, pp. 36–7.

[27] Or nearly the same. For Quine notes that "sameness of stimulus meaning is too strict a relation to expect between a native occasion sentence and its translation—even in so benign a case as 'Gavagai' and 'Rabbit'. […] The fact is that [the linguist] translates not by identity of stimulus meanings, but by significant approximation of stimulus meanings" (*Word and Object*, pp. 39–40). Usually, Quine simply represents "the linguist as trying to match observation sentences of the jungle language with observation sentences of his own that have the same stimulus meaning" (*Pursuit of Truth*, pp. 39–40).

[28] "Propositional Objects," in *Epistemology Naturalized and Other Essays*, pp. 139–60; p. 158. See also p. 157, where he describes the myth as "absurd" and adds that "it surely ought not to matter." And likewise, *Pursuit of Truth*, p. 40.

[29] "Propositional Objects," p. 158.

[30] "Mind and Verbal Dispositions," p. 91.

[31] For instance, see *Pursuit of Truth*, p. 39.

[32] "Discovering where stimulus synonymy holds is one thing; defining what it is that one thus discovers is another" ("Reply to Hintikka," p. 313).

[33] "Reply to Hintikka", p. 312.

[34] "Epistemology Naturalized," in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays,* pp. 69–90; p. 89.

[35] "Epistemology Naturalized," p. 89.

[36] "Empirical Content" in *Theories and Things*, pp. 24–30; p. 25.

[37] *Word and Object*, p. 39.

[38] That said, Quine to the end hewed to his *Theories and Things* assent-based explanation of what counts as an observation sentence for a single speaker (see, e.g., *Pursuit of Truth*, p. 40), even though he never did provide an account of what it is for a speaker to assent.

[39] "Reply to Manley Thompson," in Lewis Edwin Hahn and Paul Arthur Schilpp (eds.), *The Philosophy of W. V. Quine*, Open Court Press, 1986, pp. 564–8; p. 566.

[40] *Pursuit of Truth*, p. 43. "[S]uccessful negotiation and smooth conversation," he repeats later (p. 47).

[41] Or perhaps it is merely dormant. For Quine's late talk of "influence on behavior" and of a correct manual's "[correlating] sentences compatibly with the behavior of all concerned" indeed makes one wonder whether the hope remained alive to the end (*Pursuit of Truth*, p. 48).

[42] For additional discussion, see "Linguistic Practice and Its Discontents: Quine and Davidson on the Source of Sense."

[43] Thanks to Warren Goldfarb, Elisa Mai, and Nishi Shah for helpful conversations.