

Frederique Janssen-Lauret and Gary Kemp (Eds.)

Quine and His Place in History

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Paolo Leonardi

W.V.O. Quine was the greatest philosopher of the second half of the twentieth century. His work has had a profound impact on most areas of philosophy, while his influence can be seen in the thought of Grice, Strawson, Davidson, Putnam, and Kaplan, as well as Dummett, Kripke, Burge, and Evans, among others. Leading features of Quine's work include a radical empiricism, with no skeptical inclination, and a view of philosophy as being continuous with science. Among his most influential theses is the denial of the analytic/synthetic distinction, that is, the claim that the whole complex of theories is what undergoes a confirmation test, meaning that if the test were not passed, the failure can be patched by changing any part of the complex. Given all this, Quine certainly deserves a place in history. Yet it is still too early to tell precisely what that place should be, and the title of this book – most likely the choice of the publisher – does not really reflect its content, which comprises a series of interesting papers that often examine and discuss Quine's claims from a non-historical perspective, sometimes noting its roots in American pragmatism or in the work of Bertrand Russell.

The book is enriched by the presence of a previously unpublished paper entitled "Levels of Abstraction", which Quine presented at the *First International Conference on Unified Science*, held in New York in November 1972 and organized by Ed Haskell. In addition to this are Quine's letters in response to Gary Ebbs' review of *Pursuit of Truth*. In "Observations on the Contribution of W.V. Quine to Unified Science Theory", Ann Lodge, Rolfe A. Leary and Douglas B. Quine provide valuable and little known information concerning Quine's interaction with Ed Haskell on the latter's project of a unified science. The other essays in the collection are dedicated to the task of interpreting Quine's work and discussing some of his key theses, continuing for the most part what could have been done 20 or 30 years ago, when he was still alive – a fact which highlights how relevant and lively certain Quinean issues remain to this day.

Three papers come closer to what this reader at least expected from the book's title: "The Web and the Tree: Quine and James on the Growth of Knowledge" by Yemima Ben-Menahem; "On Quine's Debt to Pragmatism: C.I. Lewis and the Pragmatic A Priori" by Robert Sinclair; and "Quine, Wittgenstein and 'The Abyss of the Transcendental'" by Andrew Lugg. Ben-Menahem compares Quine with a relevant American philosopher from more than two generations prior to Quine, and whom the latter never cites. She succeeds in pointing out some similarities and shared interests, which perhaps were silently taken on by Quine via C.I. Lewis. Quine took Lewis' classes while a student at Harvard, and Lewis also served as a referee for Quine's dissertation. The idea of Quine being pragmatistically inclined – which also recurs in some companions to his work – encounters a major limit in the form of his denial of being so inclined. Quine is American philosophy becoming World philosophy, as the next ring in the thread of Central European and British scientific philosophy of the first half of the last century – he owes a lot to Carnap, Tarski, and Russell. Studying Quine from a pragmatist background puts him in context and emphasizes his wider relevance.

Lugg's contribution marks a more dramatic departure from Quine's style of philosophy. The title of Lugg's piece quotes a Quinean dictum in its title, "The Abyss of the Transcendental". The comparison with Wittgenstein is not a novel one; indeed, many such comparisons have already been offered. Moreover, the comparison is unbalanced, creating an excessively Quinean Wittgenstein: giving "wide berth" to "philosophical claims that do not survive scientific and logical scrutiny" (189) is true of Quine, but it does not properly fit Wittgenstein. In no sense was Wittgenstein antiscientific or alogical, though he did not see philosophy as dependent on science. "I am not aiming at the same target as the scientist and my way of thinking is different from theirs", writes Wittgenstein ([1977] 1980: 7e). Indeed, later in the essay, Lugg acknowledges where Wittgenstein stands (196), but the author goes on to claim that Wittgenstein's and Quine's respective projects are compatible. In this light, the essay reviews the similarities and differences between the two thinkers. For instance, both view meaning as use, but while Quine explains away names, Wittgenstein is said to have held that "the meaning of a name is sometimes explained by pointing to its bearer" ([1953] 2009: I, 43). This presentation of ostensive training in later Wittgenstein is misleading here. Furthermore, it is quite possible to identify and then play down certain similarities and differences between almost any pair of philosophers and their work. Looking at dates and timelines, one could have inquired into what Quine might have picked up from Wittgenstein and how he developed this. This is precisely what Sinclair does in his essay on Quine's relation to C.I. Lewis, which shows step by step how Quine further weakened Lewis' view on the a priori.

C.I. Lewis introduces the a priori as that “which is true no matter what”, immediately adding that “what is anticipated is not the given, but our attitude toward it” (1929: 197). Lewis’ idea is that if the conceptual principles and criteria that express our attitude fail in ordering and simplifying our experience, we reject them and seek out another set of principles (79). According to Lewis, Sinclair notes, they can be “not useful but not false” (82-83). Quine came to think that no theoretical core in principle avoids coming to be judged as false. A wrong classification is a false one. If a principle is true, it is proved so only by virtue of it being fruitful and passing any test to which it is applied – there is no foundation, only survival.

Peter Hylton’s crystal clear presentation of Quine’s philosophy of language starts from Russell’s logically perfect language to show how Quine had a more limited project of a regimented language as the language of science. That is to say, for Quine, the language of knowledge is “first-order logic with identity” (109), enriched, using Russell’s paraphrase of definite descriptions, by predicates. Such a language does not allow one to express everything that languages do; rather, it is meant to express all that is relevant to science and hence to knowledge, and to demarcate what there is – therein lies its ontological relevance. “In regimenting theory the aim is to maximize the simplicity and clarity of our knowledge as a whole” (111). This framework allows Quine to argue that what exists are only physical objects, and that the serious parts of our knowledge can be formulated by quantifying over those objects. The final part of Hilton’s essay attempts to explain how we can learn and understand Quine’s regimented language.

In “Reading Quine’s Claim that no Statement is Immune to Revision”, Gary Ebbs tries to understand the claim made in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”, through a discussion of Grice and Strawson’s criticism, Putnam’s defense, as well as some of Quine’s texts, such as *Methods of Logic*. The conclusion is given at the outset of the essay: namely to understand Quine’s claim as follows: “For every sentence S that a subject A accepts at a time t_1 , there is a possible rational revision of the beliefs A holds at t_1 that (i) leads A, or another subject B, rationally to judge, at some later time t_2 , that S is false, and (ii) allows for a homophonic translation of S, as A uses it at t_1 , by S, as A or B uses it at t_2 ” (123). In this passage, the key point is that the changes are diachronic and yielded in a homophonic translation, that is, the changes are invisible on the surface of language.

In “Meta-Ontology, Naturalism, and the Quine-Barcan Marcus Debate”, Frederique Janssen-Lauret compares Quine’s objectual-quantification, no-names view, with Barcan Marcus’ substitutional quantification and names-grounded view. The confluence between the two views comes in the form of direct reference to objects, while the substantial difference is that Quine holds

that “A theory cannot be committed to an individual qua individual, independently of how it is described. But this is precisely the kind of ontological commitment” that “Ruth Barcan Marcus advocates”. It is the same commitment that Keith Donnellan and Saul Kripke picked up and significantly revised, before backing up with a rich series of arguments.

Gary Kemp, in “Underdetermination, Realism, and Transcendental Metaphysics in Quine”, plays down the idea that there are possible fully alternative theories of nature. The failure to reduce theories of the external world to sensory experience plus logic convinced Quine that philosophy begins, and continues, *in medias res*, assuming the truth of the natural sciences (177). In such a frame, all objects are (theoretical) posits. Having said this, Quine does not “concede that his position is one of realism but only in his limited sense” (178). Yet he acknowledges that we have limited senses – something that Kemp explores by imagining a creature with a *sensus optimus* and by hinting at “how the language-learning child”, according to Quine, “comes gradually to acquire a mastery of referential language” (183).

As should be clear by now, the last series of papers, as I have summarized, contain some further resources for evaluating Quine in relation to what came before – particularly with regard to Russell, Carnap or Barcan Marcus and Quine. However, none speaks of Quine’s impact on philosophy, which can only be evaluated by looking at what has happened in the meantime. The book’s theoretical papers are all about indeterminacy, *lato sensu*: indeterminacy *stricto sensu*, no direct access to objects and hence no names, and underdetermination. No one wonders, with the possible exception of Janssen-Lauret, whether indeterminacy is tenable, as, for instance, do Loux and Solomon 1974 (see also Leonardi 2003). In his hyper-empiricism, Quine, as Wittgenstein before him, never accepted that we start taking for granted some matters of fact, about which we can investigate and change our ideas, but only taking for granted some other matters of fact. One aspect missing from this collection, but one which remains crucial in measuring Quine’s as yet unrealized impact on the philosophy that has come after him, concerns his attitude towards modality. This is clearly set out in terms of its philosophical value in Ballarin 2004.

Quine endeavored to be a critical hyper-empiricist, never adjusting to there being a set of a posteriori truths which, on reflection, we have to accept. Such a path was instead pursued by George E. Moore, culminating in his 1925 and 1939 papers.

Paolo Leonardi
paolo.leonardi@unibo.it
Università di Bologna

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