

W. V. Quine Remembered

A Talk by Dagfinn Føllesdal

Willard Van Orman Quine died on December 25, 2000. This talk was delivered at a "celebration of the life of W. V. Quine" held in Emerson Hall at Harvard University on March 2, 2001.

I AM GRATEFUL FOR THE INVITATION TO BE HERE WITH YOU TODAY, JOINING YOU in marking the loss of our dear friend. Quine was a father figure for me. It was through him that I came to philosophy. I was studying and working in mathematics and physics in Norway, and although I always had a strong interest in philosophy, I could not imagine how one could have philosophy as a profession. One day I came across Quine's little book, *From a Logical Point of View*. Suddenly I understood that if I could do philosophy this way, I would want to have it as a profession. So I applied for a fellowship to Harvard and began studying with Quine in 1957. After I received my Ph.D. in 1961, I became his junior colleague for some years before I went back to Norway. For more than forty years I have therefore enjoyed having him as a teacher, colleague, and friend.



While I was here at Harvard, Quine read my manuscripts and always had very helpful proposals for improvements. Often they had to do with content; but even more often they were improvements of my mode of expression. Thus, for example, I remember writing a review of a logic text book. Since there are hundreds of such books, and a new one would need something to recommend it compared to the previous ones, I started my review: "This addition to the already large number of logic texts." Quine suggested: "This addition to the glut of logic texts." So typical of him, one word that expressed exactly what one wanted, instead of many that still did not get it all. His own writing was always like that. Whenever I write about philosophy,

I have him in mind as a reader. It is as if he is looking over my shoulder while I am trying to shape my thoughts. This is not a paralyzing feeling; he was always so kind

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and sympathetic. It is a feeling that makes me try to do my best, a feeling for which I am grateful.

Quine wrote in a brilliant style, lively, often playful, and always sparkingly clear. His style is concise, each word counts, but nevertheless the text flows easily. Bertrand Russell, who won a Nobel Prize in literature, was far more wordy. Many of Quine's short, apt phrases have become part of the philosophical vernacular, such as "recalcitrant experience," and "no entity without identity."

He published a lot, but he worked it all through as if it were poetry. He worked long hours, and also very efficiently. As for the long hours, I remember that one September, when we came back from our vacations, Quine told me that he was very satisfied with his summer. He had spent it at his summer place in the little town of Harvard, Massachusetts, at his desk or drifting around on the lake in the bow of his little row-boat, and had put in one hundred net working-hours per week on the manuscript for his book *Set Theory and Its Logic*.

As for the intensity of his work, another episode that comes to my mind is the grading of the exams for a logic course, the renowned Philosophy 140. Quine taught the course; I was one of his two teaching fellows (the other, Jim Baker is here with us today). Quine was always interested in feedback from the students and took his share of the grading to see what the students had understood and what they had misunderstood. He did more of the grading than we, the teaching fellows, did. He worked relentlessly, without stop, hour after hour. And he did it conscientiously.

Quine was engaged by teaching and put a lot of work into his

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courses. In the first course I took with him, a course in the philosophy of language, he required seven term papers in addition to a midterm and final. There were about twenty-five students in the course, and he read all the papers himself, giving them back with detailed and very helpful comments. After his retirement, he was recalled to active duty for another five years. He had requested this, primarily because he wanted to teach his usual introductory logic course in order to get feedback from his students that would enable him to further improve his book *Methods of Logic*, which went through five ever-improved editions.

Quine's lectures were always well-organized and exceptionally clear. However, he always read them from a set of notes on cards. In conversations he was always lively and engaging and never had difficulty finding the right expressions. I therefore suggested several times to him to put away the cards. However, he told me that when he spoke freely, he found that he did not use the precise, well-thought-out expressions that he used in his polished writing.

Quine was always striving to express his insights as clearly and simply as possible. This was for him an important part of intellectual honesty. It is easy to write clearly about the simple. But great philosophy usually arises where a passion for clarity is coupled with a concern for the deepest issues. This coupling may be paralyzing for some, but it was not so for Quine. In all the fields of philosophy where he was working he wrestled with the most profound issues. He had a special ability to spot obscurity and confusions. Sometimes he saw how to make old positions clearer, and he provided new arguments for them. Other times he saw that the

obscurity concealed deep problems and that it reflected a way of looking at the world that is fundamentally flawed. What was typical of Quine and what makes him a great philosopher, is that he not only pointed out obscurities but came up with new ways of looking at things. At first, these new ways of looking might be experienced as upsetting: they conflicted with too many cherished beliefs. Many critics of Quine seem not to be aware of how comprehensive his new way of looking at the world is. They do not note that their criticism often springs from assumptions that are part of the position that Quine has undercut.

Quine played a crucial role in shaping philosophy during the twentieth century. A concrete testimony to his worldwide influence is the following episode from Norway in 1972 (where, by the way, Van, Marjorie, Doug, and Margaret climbed one of the tallest mountains of Norway and stayed overnight in a small hut on the top). Quine there visited the Lapp town of Kautokeino, far north of the Polar Circle (where, during the three-month polar night, the temperature often goes down below forty). I had arranged, without Quine's knowledge, that a young Lapp, who had written his M.A. thesis in philosophy with me on Quine, should stand at the roadside when we arrived and offer to show us around. Quine was impressed by the Lapp's fluent English, and his respect for the level of culture among Lapps increased further when the conversation turned to philosophy. However, when the discussion started to focus on subtle issues in the philosophy of language, Quine understood that he had met the northernmost expert on his philosophy.

What, then, were the issues on which Quine worked?

Early encyclopedias classified Quine as a logician, but he soon came to be regarded as a general philosopher, to begin with a philosopher of logic and language, but eventually as a metaphysician, whose radical thoughts about ontology, epistemology, and communication have repercussions within all major areas of philosophy.

His early work, from his dissertation in 1932 to 1943, was mainly in logic, with his eleven-page article, "New Foundations for Mathematical Logic," in *American Mathematical Monthly* in 1937, his most important contribution. This little article has inspired a very large number of further contributions and even today is the subject of intensive research and discussion.

However, from the very beginning Quine's work in logic was philosophically motivated, and gradually he focused more and more on philosophical issues. Questions of ontology were the first to make their appearance, in "Ontological remarks on the propositional calculus" (*Mind* 1934), and ontology always remained one of Quine's key philosophical concerns. He sharpened the ontological issues ("To be is to be the value of a variable") and discussed ontological commitment. He always had a Spartan bent, and his book *Set Theory and Its Logic* (1963) is basically concerned with keeping the ontology as minimal as possible. Together with Nelson Goodman he explored the possibility of being a nominalist. Unlike Goodman, he settled for a platonic realism: there are not only physical things, but also numbers and other abstract objects. However, in his later work, this realism took an intriguing new turn, not yet fully explored in the secondary literature, towards indeterminacy of reference.

Another main theme, which came up early in Quine's work and grew to become his main contribution to philosophy, began as a scepticism towards meaning and other related notions, such as analyticity and modality. This scepticism grew

into a major revamping of previous philosophical views on communication and the relation of language to the world. The first glimmer of this appeared in "Truth by Convention" (1936). From 1943 it found expression in a number of articles directed against modal notions, such as necessity and possibility. In 1951 Quine sketched an alternative view of meaning in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism." This view was worked out in *Word and Object* (1960), where Quine also clinched his criticism of the modalities by arguing that quantification into modal contexts leads to a collapse of modal distinctions.

Quine's objections against quantifying into modal contexts can be resolved by giving up traditional semantics in favor of a semantics in which so-called "genuine" singular terms, or "rigid designators," refer to the same object in all possible worlds where that object exists. This basic idea in the so-called "new theory of reference" arose as a response to Quine's critical objections and owes much to his acute analysis of the underlying problems.

Quine's main concern, his criticism of the notions of logical necessity and possibility, analyticity, and traditional views on meaning remains vibrant. In a number of books and articles Quine has developed further the view on meaning that he set forth in *Word and Object*. The central idea, the public nature of language, is one that Quine shares with most other philosophers and linguists. Quine's major contribution is that he has taken this idea seriously and followed it out with great persistence to consequences that many philosophers find difficult to accept. One of these consequences, indeterminacy of translation, is the idea of Quine's that has been most widely discussed. However, it is only a consequence of more fundamental ideas concerning the public nature of language that Quine has refined and partly revised in his later writings.

In particular, Quine has from the very first pages of *Word*

and Object stressed that what we perceive and what we take others to perceive plays a crucial role in language learning and language use. This is a key point in Quine: semantics and epistemology are intimately intertwined. His epistemology is naturalistic: it is contained in natural science, as a chapter of empirical psychology. Yet it is epistemology that provides an account of the evidential bases of natural science, including empirical psychology itself. I shall not here talk more about Quine's naturalism. To save time, I refer you to the excellent books and articles on this topic by Roger Gibson (who is here).

I will, however, say something more on Quine's views on meaning and communication, which I consider the most important of Quine's many contribu-

There is no absolutely certain starting point that can be the foundation for our philosophical edifice. Nor is there any point of view from where we can see it all from outside: we are thrown into a kind of existence that we must seek to understand without stepping out of it. "There is no vantage point, no first philosophy," Quine said.

tions to philosophy. In the study of meaning and communication a key problem is to get insight into what others perceive without imputing to them our own view of the world and our own ontology. In *Word and Object* Quine endeavored to do this in terms of stimulus and response. However, although stimuli and responses are empirically accessible, they are not publicly accessible. The evidence we build on in language learning and language use must be accessible to the members of the community in their daily lives.

During the thirty-five years that separate *Word and Object* from Quine's last book *From Stimulus to Science* (1995), Quine again and again sought to find a way of dealing with what others perceive without begging the questions of meaning and translation. This enterprise involves the whole range of Quine's philosophical insights: his views on epistemology, ontology, causality, natural kinds, time, space, and individuation.

We are here moving in a circle: we have to make conjectures about what other persons perceive in order to understand what they mean, and we must make conjectures about what they mean in order to understand what they perceive.

That we have to move in a circle is a central insight of Quine's. There is no absolutely certain starting point that can be the foundation for our philosophical edifice. Nor is there any point of view from where we can see it all from outside: we are thrown into a kind of existence that we must seek to understand without stepping out of it. "There is no vantage point, no first philosophy," Quine said. He therefore picked as his motto for his main work *Word and Object* the following quotation from Otto Neurath: "We are like seafarers, who must rebuild their ship in open sea, without being able to take it apart in a dock and build it up of its best constituents from the bottom up."

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The ship Quine left us is radically different from the one he found when he started doing philosophy in the 1930s. Quine has created a new way of looking at these eternal questions of philosophy and their interconnections. He leaves a transformed philosophical landscape for new

generations of philosophers to explore.

The ship simile expresses much of Quine's personality. He was always concerned with improving the ship. *The Pursuit of Truth* was the title of one of his last books, and throughout his life he was striving for truth with great energy and seriousness. He was aware that even our most fundamental beliefs may be mistaken. He was therefore always interested in objections, always willing to listen, and always ready to change his views if the criticism was good. His students understood quickly that he did not want to form any philosophical school; he preferred well-argued objections to admiring emulation. For me, having worked both on Husserl and on Quine, one difference between the two philosophers is striking. Husserl wrote in such a difficult and long-winded manner that it is a great challenge to present his philosophy in a clear and simple form. Quine was such a masterly writer that there would be little point in trying to state his views more clearly. What remains, then, is only criticism. Almost all I have written on Quine has been critical, from my disser-

tation, which I wrote with him as my advisor, to my latest article. However, Quine was always open, willing to listen, ask questions, and, if he was convinced, revise. He never reacted negatively, but he was on the contrary encouraging and more interested in finding out what was right than in being right. He was always welcoming and positive, full of care for his students, friendly to his colleagues and warm towards his friends and his family.

We will all miss him. φ