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Quine, W. V.



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Abstract

This entry introduces the life and work of the philosopher-logician W. V. Quine (1908–2000), focusing on his contributions to theoretical and philosophical psychology. It outlines (1) his views about the relation between psychology and philosophy, (2) his rejection of mentalism in theories of meaning and language acquisition; and (3) his modestly behaviorist perspective on mind and its place in nature.

Keywords

W. V. Quine · Naturalism · Epistemology ·
Psychologism · Meaning · Mentalism ·
Language acquisition · Philosophy of mind ·
B. F. Skinner · Behaviorism

Introduction

W. V. Quine (1908–2000) was an American philosopher-logician and one of the most prominent analytic philosophers of the twentieth century. A naturalist, he developed and advocated a novel perspective on the relation between science

and philosophy. Instead of viewing philosophy as a foundational discipline that provides “an *a priori* propaedeutic or groundwork for science,” Quine argued that philosophy is “continuous with science” (1969b, p. 126) and sought to naturalize notions such as truth, reality, meaning, justification, and existence. His major works include *Word and Object* (1960a) and *Pursuit of Truth* (1992), but he is perhaps best known for “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” (1951a), which contributed to the declining influence of logical empiricism in post-war American philosophy.

This entry introduces Quine’s academic biography and contributions to theoretical and philosophical psychology. It outlines (1) his views about the relation between psychology and philosophy; (2) his rejection of mentalism in theories of meaning and language acquisition; and (3) his modestly behaviorist perspective on mind and its place in nature. Finally, this entry examines Quine’s impact on philosophy and psychology.

Academic Biography

Quine was born in Akron, Ohio, on June 25, 1908. He studied at Oberlin College, where he majored in mathematics, and continued his education at Harvard University, where he completed a PhD in philosophy. In 1933, Quine was appointed Harvard Junior Fellow, a research position he shared with B. F. Skinner. Later he became instructor (1936), assistant- (1939), associate- (1941), and

full professor (1948) at Harvard's Department of Philosophy, remaining faithful to his *alma mater* until the end of his career.

At first, Quine was best known as a logician. He wrote a dissertation about the *Principia Mathematica* and published multiple logic textbooks, including *Mathematical Logic* (1940), *Elementary Logic* (1941), and *Methods of Logic* (1950). In 1937, he developed a new system of axiomatic set theory—"New Foundations" or NF—that is still studied by mathematicians today (Morris, 2018; Forster, 2025; Quine, 1940). Only after the Second World War, a period when the analytic tradition began to dominate American philosophy, epistemology and the philosophy of language became his primary focus.

Philosophically, Quine was most influenced by C. I. Lewis and Rudolf Carnap. His anti-foundationalist philosophy can be traced to Lewis, one of his teachers and later colleagues at Harvard (Sinclair, 2022). Yet he primarily viewed himself as a "disciple" of Carnap after he spent a year in Europe in the early 1930s (Quine, 1970, p. 41). Quine was particularly influenced by Carnap's *Der logische Aufbau der Welt* (1928) and *Logische Syntax der Sprache* (1934), which he believed were crucial steps in the development of a new, scientific approach to philosophy (Verhaegh, 2023).

Though Carnap and Quine were both committed scientific empiricists who approached philosophical questions "from a logical point of view" (Quine, 1953), they disagreed about the details. Their discussions about meaning, ontology, and the logic of scientific inquiry (e.g., Carnap, 1952a, b; Quine, 1951a, b; Schilpp, 1963) shaped post-war philosophy and still have a central place in the canon of the analytic tradition. Most importantly, the exchanges helped Quine to develop a comprehensive philosophy of his own, first systematically set out in *Word and Object* (1960a).

Quine retired in 1978 but remained active until shortly before his death at age 92, sharpening and refining his position in dozens of books and articles (Yeghiayan 2009). He received honorary degrees from 18 universities, including Oxford (1953), Chicago (1967), Cambridge (1978), Harvard (1979), and Uppsala (1980) and was awarded

the Rolf Schock Prize and the Kyoto Prize in Creative Arts and Moral Sciences. He had four children, including two with his second wife Marjorie Boynton, whom he met during the war when the two worked as "codebreakers" in the US Navy (Mundy, 2018).

Contributions to Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology

Philosophy and psychology: At the turn of the twentieth-century, most analytic philosophers were committed to some form of anti-psychologism, the view that the laws of logic do not depend on the laws of psychology (Frege, 1893; Kusch, 1995). Although philosophers disagreed about the *source* of logical truth, they generally agreed that they are unlike empirical truths in that they are necessary and a priori. Logical laws describe how we *should* reason, not how we *do* reason.

Carnap and other logical empiricists developed a specific form of antipsychologism, drawing on a strict distinction between analytic and synthetic statements. Whereas the truth of a synthetic statement like "It is raining" depends on whether it is *in fact* raining, analytic statements like "It is raining or it not raining" are true in virtue of *meaning*: We recognize that they are true if we understand the meaning of the logical particles involved (e.g., "or" and "not"). Logical truths are not true because they express some fundamental facts about our psychology or the world we live in; they are true in virtue of the medium we use to describe reality.

Early in his career, Quine was convinced that the logical empiricists had found a satisfying solution to two age-old problems for empiricists. In addition to the problem of the source of logical (and mathematical) truth, the analytic-synthetic distinction could be used to characterize the relation between science and philosophy. Since philosophy does not seem to be an empirical discipline, Quine argued, it had always been mysterious how empiricists justified their own philosophical claims: "Every ... philosophy I know," Quine wrote in an early letter, "has the following

difficulty. One reads the arguments of a given system ... but at the end one remains with the problem of the status ... [of] the philosophy arrived at” (cited in Verhaegh, 2023, p. 26). Carnap solved this problem by arguing that philosophy is analytic, too. Whereas scientists describe the world, philosophers study the *logic* of scientific inquiry. Philosophy, Carnap argued, “is syntax; [t]his claim itself is syntax and there is no circularity” (cited in Verhaegh, 2023, p. 26).

Quine later came to doubt Carnap’s solution. In the 1940s and 1950s, he developed a holistic variant of empiricism in which individual statements are neither analytic nor synthetic. In “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” Quine argued that our theory of reality depends on both language and sensory evidence but cannot be divided into statements that are individually true in virtue of meaning or the way the world is. Rather, our theory should be viewed as an intricate network of statements that confronts experience “as a whole” (Quine, 1951a, pp. 42–43). The empirical meaning of an individual belief or hypothesis depends on its role in the entire network, which becomes particularly visible when we are confronted with an unexpected observation. A scientist who encounters a surprising experimental result in testing a hypothesis can decide to reject this hypothesis to account for the observation. But she can also question her experimental design, the reliability of her instruments, the scope of her theory, or her background assumptions to repair the inconsistency between her theory and total body of evidence.

Quine’s “holistic empiricism” (1951c, p. 182) led him to alternative solutions to the aforementioned problems. First, he argued that empiricists do not need an analytic-synthetic distinction to account for logical and mathematical truth. Logic and mathematics, too, play an important role in mediating between theory and reality, such that if they would structurally lead us to conclusions that conflict with experience, we would eventually modify or replace them. Logical and mathematical truths only *appear* a priori and necessary because they are so firmly entrenched in our theory of the world. In practice, Quine maintained, “we are disinclined to tamper with

logic and mathematics” and “prefer to seek an adequate revision of some more secluded corner of science, where the change would not reverberate so widely through the system” (1986, pp. 399–400).

Second, Quine’s rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction led him to blur the boundary between science and philosophy. Neither philosophy nor science is purely analytic or synthetic and so we cannot draw a sharp distinction between empirical and philosophical inquiry. In “Epistemology Naturalized,” Quine applied his conclusion to the study of scientific justification. Whereas logical empiricists often focused on the *logical* relation between theory and evidence, ignoring empirical data on how “science is in fact developed and learned,” Quine believed there to be no ground to separate the two (1969a, p. 78). Science is a natural phenomenon, and if we want to understand it, we have to “embrace psychologism” and combine logical analysis with findings from developmental psychology, neuroscience, and linguistics (Quine, 1960b, p. 271). Even empiricism itself, Quine argued, ultimately relies on empirical data as it is a scientific finding “that our information about the world comes only through impacts on our sensory receptors” (1992, p. 12).

Meaning and mentalism: Quine did not just blur the distinction between questions of fact and questions of meaning. He also sought to alter our concept of meaning itself. Philosophers and psychologists often appeal to “meaning” to explain our understanding of language: We apprehend a linguistic expression because we grasp its meaning and we translate “Es regnet” as “It is raining” because they mean the same thing. Quine, however, dismissed any such “meaning” talk. Much as the working of opium is not illuminated by arguing that it has a *virtus dormitiva* (Molière, 1673), we do nothing to explain our understanding of a sentence by saying that we grasp its “meaning.” Worse, it promotes a misguided view about the relation between mind and language:

There is an age-old and persistent tendency to try to explain and analyse the physical phenomenon of speech ... by appealing to thoughts, ideas, meanings. Language, we are told, serves to convey

ideas.... I believe in the affinity of mind and language, but I want to keep the relation right sight up... A theory of mind can gain clarity and substance, I think, from a better understanding of the workings of language, whereas little understanding of the working of language is to be hoped for in mentalistic terms. (Quine, 1975, pp. 83–84)

A proper understanding of language, Quine argued, recognizes that it is “a social art,” grounded in behavior (1960a, p. ix). Children learn their first language by observing and imitating their parents, and anthropologists master alien languages by observing when and how native speakers use particular terms and expressions. Whereas “ideas” and “meanings” are abstract and subjective, behavior is concrete and public. Even if “meanings” were real, children and anthropologists would not have access to them in learning a language. All they have to go on is linguistic behavior.

Quine’s empirical theory of meaning may sound innocent, perhaps even trivial, but has far-reaching consequences. It implies, for example, that translation is “indeterminate.” If two anthropologists develop two functioning yet mutually incompatible translation manuals for a previously unknown language—one which attributes to the speakers a familiar, object-based ontology of trees and squirrels; and one which attributes to them a more exotic ontology of “temporal tree-stages” and “squirreling environments”—there is no fact of the matter about which of the translations is correct. Since Quine held that there is nothing to linguistic meaning beyond what can be learned from observing verbal behavior in publicly observable circumstances (1992, p. 38), there is no standard for correctness beyond smooth communication. The problem, Quine argued, is not that anthropologists have no way to *find out* which translation is correct. The problem is that that there is “nothing ... to be right or wrong about” (1953, p. 63; see Friedman, 1975). If two translation manuals are compatible with all possible behavior, they are both correct.

The indeterminacy of translation is an effect of Quine’s holistic empiricism. Since we cannot separate between “a linguistic component and a factual component” on the sentence level (Quine,

1951a, p. 42), we also cannot sharply distinguish between language and content when we try to understand alien expressions. We cannot assume, that is, that speakers of alien languages differ “only in *how* they say things and not in *what* they say”:

Basic differences in language are bound up, as likely as not, with differences in the way in which the speakers articulate the world itself into things and properties, time and space, elements, forces, spirits, and so on. It is not clear even in principle that it makes sense to think of words and syntax as varying from language to language while the content stays fixed; yet precisely this fiction is involved in speaking of synonymy, at least as between expressions of radically different languages. (Quine, 1953, p. 61)

Quine’s conclusion is not that we should accept the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that language is the creator, not the mirror, of things (Verhaegh, [forthcoming](#)). His thesis is that it is altogether impossible to separate between the contribution made by language and the contribution made by the world on the sentence level.

Mind and behavior: Quine’s perspective on language was thoroughly behaviorist, Noam Chomsky’s poverty-of-the-stimulus argument notwithstanding. He believed that a “behaviorist approach is mandatory ... in linguistics” (Quine, 1992, pp. 37–38) while simultaneously accepting that language acquisition requires innate mechanisms, since the great variety of linguistic behavior across species would be almost impossible to explain if there were no differences in “innate endowments for language learning” (Quine, 1970, pp. 5–6). Even if we recognize, with Chomsky, that language learning depends on innate mechanisms, language remains a social art, as “there is nothing in linguistic meaning ... beyond what is to be gleaned from overt behavior in observable circumstances” (Quine, 1992, p. 38). Psycholinguistics is an important field of study, but it is ultimately irrelevant to questions of semantics (see Kemp, 2023, pp. 60–61).

Still, Quine was not a committed behaviorist across the board. Although he was a committed behaviorist in linguistics, he believed that explanations of mental phenomena like thoughts and

pains should ultimately be sought at the neurological instead of the behavioral level:

The importance of behaviorism is its insistence on shoring up mentalistic terms, where possible, by forging substantial links with observation. For a deep *causal* explanation of mental states and events, on the other hand, we must look not just to behavior but to neurology. (Quine, 1980, p. 26, emphasis added)

Quine clarified his “moderate behaviorism” (1980, p. 26) by comparing mental states with diseases. Both are *identified* on the basis of publicly observable symptoms: I suspect that my brother is anxious on the basis of his behavior; and I suspect my niece has chickenpox on the basis of her rash and itching. Yet we ultimately do not understand these phenomena in terms of their behavioral symptoms. Rather, we appeal to something that is going on inside their bodies, such as neural states and viruses: “Mental states and events are neural states and events ... and behavioral description is just a means of specifying and spotting them” (1989, p. 347; Verhaegh, 2019b). Even though we can detect laws and regularities at the functional level, as behavioral psychologists have shown, it is at the physiological, or better, the neurological level that mental phenomena are ultimately explained and understood.

Impact and Relevance

Quine’s work had a major impact on postwar analytic philosophy. His perspective on the relation between science and philosophy helped bring about a “naturalistic turn” (Leiter, 2004, p. 3; Verhaegh, 2018, p. 3) and has been described as the “philosophical ideology” of contemporary philosophy (Kim, 2003, p. 83). In addition, many of Quine’s ideas and arguments—e.g., on meaning, analyticity, ontology, epistemology, and translation—dominated the Anglophone literature in the second half of the twentieth century, making him one of the most-discussed philosophers of the period (Schwitzgebel et al., 2018, p. 31; Petrovich, 2024, p. 78).

Quine’s impact on psychology has been much more modest. He is occasionally cited in journals of psychology, but less so than philosophical contemporaries like Thomas Kuhn, Karl Popper, and Jerry Fodor. Still, his work has had some influence on specific subfields, in particular language acquisition research. Katherine Nelson has signaled the “frequent” references to Quine’s “problem of radical translation” in a literature review on the acquisition of the meaning of words (1988, p. 226), and Anne Salazar Orvig ([forthcoming](#)) characterizes *Word and Object* as one of “the most important philosophical text[s] in language acquisition studies.” Finally, Quine indirectly influenced postwar psychology through his contacts with prominent psychologists and linguists. He was a friend of Skinner, who was equally interested in meaning and language learning, even if he aimed to answer different questions about the genesis of verbal behavior (Skinner, 1957; Verhaegh, 2019a); and he regularly debated the philosophical foundations of (psycho)linguistics with his former student Chomsky, who challenged his behaviorist perspective (e.g., Chomsky, 1968; Quine, 1968, 1970). While Quine’s ideas are sometimes considered outdated by those who, like Chomsky, oppose his behaviorist approach (Salazar Orvig, [forthcoming](#)), his views about meaning and translation helped shape the contemporary study of language acquisition and will likely continue to provoke philosophers and psychologist in the decades to come (Putnam, 2004, p. 274).

Cross-References

- [Analytic Philosophy](#)
- [B. F. Skinner](#)
- [Behaviorism](#)
- [Epistemology](#)
- [Hilary Putnam](#)
- [Logical Positivism](#)
- [Ludwig Wittgenstein](#)
- [Meaning](#)
- [Mentalism](#)
- [Naturalism](#)
- [Noam Chomsky](#)
- [Philosophy of Mind](#)

- **Physicalism**
- **Psychologism**
- **Rudolf Carnap**

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