CHAPTER TWO -- THE GIVEN

> There are three elements in knowledge: the given. . ., the concept, and the act which interprets the one by means of the other. (C. I. Lewis, 1926)

Quine's Account of Meaning

Quine's extensional attitude

As discussed in the last chapter, Quine has reacted strongly and negatively to accounts of experience that involve such non-extensional elements as "conceptual content" or "meaning". Quine did not think it made any sense to talk of "meanings" (though he was content to talk of meaningfulness) because he felt such talk was merely the result of an object-directedness of language and a mistaken felt need for meaning entities (1961, 9-12 and 22). Quine's writings on this issue were motivated by accounts given by Carnap, and other logical empiricists, whose theories required the existence of intensional elements -- worse, some accounts took "meaning" itself to be an entity -- which were not reducible to simpler elements of the vocabulary of a theory.

Although Quine reached the conclusion that there was no basis for postulating meaning entities or analytic truths, he claimed that the notion of meaningfulness was not objectionable itself (1960, 11). If it makes sense to talk of the "meaningfulness" of linguistic expressions, and it does, then it would seem that it would make sense to talk of expressions being meaningful in the same way or as being synonymous as long as one does not take the term "meaningful" literally (i.e., as suggesting that expressions are full of some substance(s) called "meaning(s)"). Quine has, however, made much of the difficulty of identifying what exactly is the same when two sentences are said to share the same meaning, i.e., are synonymous (see Quine, 1960, 61-7 and Quine, 1961, 11-12, 20-42, and 47-64). Despite his objections to the notion of synonymity, he did suggest one kind of analysis of meaning in which synonymity can be expressed: stimulus meaning. This notion was developed fairly systematically

in Quine's account of how one might gain the linguistic ability to refer to things in one's world.

Observation and language-learning

In his 1973 Paul Carus lectures, which were published in book form under the title of *The Roots of Reference* (1974), Quine constructed an empiricist, behavioristic theory of meaning. In brief, the notion of meaning is developed on the basis not of thoughts, propositions, properties, roles, or other intensional entities, but rather on the basis of observation (Quine, 1974, 37-8), socially shared patterns of assent and dissent (1974, 39-40), and separation of less general terms from more general terms (1974, 69). That last element is necessary to Quine's account because, otherwise, there would be no way, through ostension, to delineate the respect in which some particular is indicated ostensively. It is not particularly relevant to my discussion of other parts of Quine's theory, though, and so will not be mentioned again.

According to Quine, the learning of a language occurs in the following piecemeal way. Linguistic applications are associated with observations and these associations are, over time, affirmed or rejected. As our network of linguistic knowledge grows, encompassing more than observational applications, we may often have to evaluate parts of that knowledge to determine the meaning of some linguistic application or to articulate some complex observation (1974, 64). Observation can help at such times, but it may be that one dismisses some chunk of linguistic or empirical knowledge for reasons having to do with non-observational factors, such as the need to maintain the simplicity of a given conceptual scheme (see Quine, 1974, §§35-6). The consequence is that our knowledge grows piece-by-piece, block-by-block, some of it being cast off at times like melting fragments of icebergs.

On what is actually learned, Quine wrote, "[t]he meaning of a sentence lies in the observations that would support or refute it. To learn a language is to learn the meaning of its sentences, and hence to learn what observations to count as evidence for and against them" (1974, 38). By this, I take Quine to have meant that whatever content one might say any instance of a certain sentence-type has is reducible to what we perceive as possible facts in the world. Quine suggested that the type of sentences whose content is so determined, observation sentences, are learned first (1974, 35). As we learn to put strings

of words together with others, we learn to understand that the combined strings, the sentence, can be associated with facts in the world (1974, 35). The immediate awareness of some fact is the observation we make. The possible association a sentence has with all of the corresponding observations is the meaning of the sentence. It is merely "possible" because it may be that some corresponding observation would be contrary to the meaning of the sentence and, hence, would refute the sentence.

Quine explained why we should talk about observations when talking about those sentences he alleged we learn first:

> The reason for the basic role of observations. . . is their intersubjective immediacy. They are what witnesses will agree about, on the spot. . . Though we learn [language] largely by learning to relate strings of words to strings of words, somewhere they have to be nonverbal reference points, nonverbal circumstances that can be intersubjectively appreciated and associated with the appropriate utterance on the spot. Ostensive learning is fundamental, and requires observability. (Quine, 1974, 37)

Thus, Quine's "observations" were what are at least approximately the same for different individuals in similar circumstances. Because they offer an intersubjective grounding for his observation sentences and because we want to rule out the possibility that instances of language use are private episodes, observations make sense of language. That is, they make sense of language because we can take language to be relative to the kinds of experiences we all have.

However, precisely because Quine used experience to account for the meaning of our first applications of language, it would have been helpful if Quine had made sense of the observations that are so important to his theory. Unfortunately, he changed horses midstream.

> Let us now come more nearly to grips with these matters. What are observations?. . . They are sensory, evidently, and thus subjective. . . Yet it was crucial to the use of observations. . . that they be socially shared. Should we say that the observation is not the sensation after all, but the shared environmental circumstances? No, for there is no presumption of intersubjective agreement about the environing situation either; two [persons] will assess it differently, partly because of noticing different features and partly because of entertaining different theories. . . I propose that we drop the talk of observation and talk instead of observation sentences. . . No matter that sensations are private, and no matter that [people] may take radically different views of the environing situation; the observation sentence serves nicely to pick out what witnesses can agree on. (1974, 38-9)

On my interpretation of Quine's account, he left something out of his theory. Because Quine talked about linguistic applications, rather than mental entities, and then talked about our learning language by the groundedness of language in observation, one expects him to have developed the crucial notion of observation. Instead, he moved back into the linguistic realm. Presumably, this is because he recognized that the language he had been using -- involving the terms of sense reception, perception, and behavior -- would not have allowed him to have articulated the conceptual content of observations, which, whatever it is, must be that which is associated with the meanings of observation sentences. Nonetheless, I am, and perhaps others have been, left wondering how exactly it is that observation sentences "pick out what witnesses can agree on" and why they "serve[s] nicely" for that purpose.[1] Had Quine explained what in observation corresponds to meaning in observation sentences, no such questions would have arisen. Also, what might seem like appropriate answers to this challenge -- e.g., because of modes of training/learning -- run into trouble when we consider the basis Quine uses for the analysis of perception.

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[1] This is especially significant given Quine's thesis on the inscrutability of reference (1960). Since this thesis is not directly relevant to the concerns of this chapter, though it does have to do with the designation relation in semantics, I do not address it. Briefly put, the thesis is that, even when approximately the same perceptual field (e.g., the visual fields of two people looking at roughly the same scene) is used as a basis for reaching an understanding of a linguistic expression, difficulties arise in determining exactly what are the salient features of the allegedly common observation stimuli. Hence, knowing what is, for example, being pointed at, requires knowing not only such things as the specific part of the visual field, but also the category relevant to the linguistic expression. Such things are inscrutable from the standpoint of reference. Hence, observation cannot give the full cash-value of linguistic expressions. Quine seems to have assumed that interpretation (in some very basic sense) of behavior can provide a basis for recognition of categories.

Behavioral criteria for the analysis of perception by others

The theory that Quine developed emerged from the notion that "perception. . . for all its mentalistic overtones, is accessible to behavioral criteria" (Quine, 1974, 4). I take Quine to have meant by this that he was adverse to analyzing perception into mental entities or components of such entities. Instead, he proposed that inferences regarding instances of perception can be made relative to the following framework. On the basis of reinforcement and penalization of certain responses to certain stimuli, one can condition a subject to respond uniformly to certain stimuli. (This uniform behavior could result from general consent to behave accordingly, as well.) By using a gradual process of methodical modification of the arrangement of stimuli, some given stimulus, which is perceived to be highly similar to some other stimulus, ultimately will elicit the same response for which the subject has been conditioned to have to the latter stimulus. One can, Quine suggested, determine what is perceived on the basis of the response of the subject by manipulating the stimuli and eliminating possible interpretations of the stimuli other than the one that seems to fit the evidence best.

One who uses this empiricist, behavioristic strategy will not be disposed to speak of the stimuli in mixed stimulus-percept language. Quine claimed that "the old antagonism" between Gestaltist and empiricist epistemologist "was due to the epistemologist's straining toward reception while still requiring awareness, which belongs to perception", where reception is the process by which "flagrantly physical" sensory input is given, without any degree of the cognition characteristic of perception (1974, 4). Hence, while we might be tempted to talk of the image or idea of the stimulus which is represented in the mental domain of the subject and which presupposes some sense of consciousness, Quine relegated such talk to mentalistic theories of perception (1974, 34), keeping pure the behavioristic approach to perception.

Quine meant to avoid the previous "mistakes" of taking the items of perception to be mental entities independent of reception and behavior by looking to linguistic behavior in analyzing perception (1974, 35). That is, by interpreting the linguistic responses of others to our queries, he suggested, we can discover what they have perceived. Thus, while the first stage of Quine's theory is to look to behavior generally, rather than mental entities, in analyzing perception, the second step is to look to linguistic

behavior specifically.

Hence, another issue should be raised considering the fact that Quine made use of experience to make sense of the meaning of certain language applications. It seems to me that we could come to realize that there is an association between observation and language only by presupposing that personal observation is, *somehow*, and *in some respect*, publicly accessible. Moreover, since Quine proposed to analyze perception in terms of behavioral criteria, it would seem that he thought that it should be possible, at least in principle, to speak of certain respects of observation such that the evidence for arguing that some observation is of a particular sort (e.g., that it is a rabbit-stimulus that is being responded to) is, in some way, public. Presumably, the knowledge of personal experience could be something which others share (assuming that we decide to construe experience as publicly accessible in some respect) because it can be associated with the intersubjective language applications we use as a linguistic community.[2] Otherwise, without further explication of this kind of his notion of observation, it is not clear how the strategy of using behavioral criteria to access other's perception could get off the ground. But if that is the direction Quine meant to take, how is it that there are public "sorts" of observation which form a basis for interpreting behavior? We should expect Quine to have clarified that point.

Stimulus meaning

Elsewhere (1960, §§8-10), Quine called the kind of meaning which observation sentences have "stimulus meaning". He said that "stimulus meaning is a full cross-section of the subject's evolving dispositions to assent to or dissent from a sentence" (1960, 36). If an utterance, in the presence of a stimulus, would prompt the assent of a competent member of a language community *as a response to the association of the utterance and the stimulus*, that assent is one part of the stimulus meaning of the utterance (Quine, 1960, 37).

Quine classified observation sentences as those sentences "whose stimulus meaning varies none under

[2] Quine is obviously aware of the possibility of circularity here. Since Quine's "observations" do not make linguistic competence a requirement for one's being able to make observations, he can base the learning of language on experience without raising that specter.

the influence of collateral information" (1960, 42). By "collateral information", Quine meant whatever might supplement the stimulus with which the linguistic application is associated, to which association assent was given. Examples of collateral information are previous observations related to the stimulus (e.g., having seen rabbits in the same place in which a rabbit is the stimulus that is associated with the linguistic application "rabbit"), knowledge of other items which might be considered appropriately to be stimuli associated with the linguistic application, etc. (1960, 38). Thus, stimulus meaning of a linguistic application is that which can be derived from all of the observations themselves which will elicit assent to the association of that linguistic application with the stimulus, irrespective of other information directly bearing on the interpretation of the stimulus as an object of perception.

Quine's Intentions

Before concluding this chapter, it might be useful to indicate what part Quine's discussion of observations and stimulus meaning plays in his account of learning how to refer to objects. Quine's explanation of the purported semantic relation between words and objects[3] in the first and second chapters of *The Roots of Reference* served as an epistemological elucidation of existential interpretations of quantification (i.e., of material modes of speech). That is, Quine's purpose, in explaining how he thought observation sentences could be used to make reference to things in one's world, was to explain how we move from imitation of elders by mouthing sentences to associating sentences with our own observations. That explanation served as the first step in a larger explanation of reference -- i.e., an explanation of how we move from imitation and association, to knowing that within sentences there are positions for ostensibly referring terms and, more importantly, to using

[3] For this relation to be formulated, the formulation of the relation must be mediated through the view that use of existential generalizations commits one to the existence of the values of the bound variables of such generalizations. That is because, according to Quine's ontological relativism, no semantic relation to an object obtains in any objective sense. Quine's ontological relativism, taken in isolation, would imply that any complementary theory in which the semantic relation plays a role and in which designational success is possible, i.e., that there be objects of the kind described (i.e., that there be objects which have, for example, the property "F" in the expression, E_xF_x), is unjustified. In light of that concern, which Quine did not ignore, the relation between words and objects obtains inasmuch as when we make an existential generalization, we really do *mean* to speak about some object, whether as a result of those particular sense impingements we experience, or otherwise. That is, that purported designational success implies that the ostensive tie is important to Quine's account of language-learning, even if his pragmatic attitude, in the spirit of Carnap, moves him to argue that there is no absolute (i.e., non-linguistic) position from which to adjudicate various opinions on reference, for example, whether "rabbits" refers to rabbits, since we cannot judge except in virtue of a background language (Quine, 1969, 48-51). But I do not want (and do not need) to get into these matters.

expressions such that the linguistic constituent in the referential position of sentences refers to something.

Quine speculated "on the mechanisms of language learning" (1974, 81) because, without the step from imitation of some other person's use of sentences to the association of sentences with our own experience, his explanation of reference would not be an explanation. Without the account he gave in the first two chapters of the book, Quine would still have been left with the question with which he began (see Quine 1974, *ix*): how does one move beyond dispositional behavior to a use of language constructions (especially quantificational idioms) which is cognitively significant?

Quine explained (in a part of the book which I did not discuss) the learning of quantificational idioms, after learning to use relative clauses, as the learning to interchange parts of sentences used (and not merely imitated) by the child for other parts of sentences (1974, 94-7). The result is the ability to apply different linguistic expressions to different experiences. Had he not given an account of the transition from one to the other, had he dealt only with the latter, Quine would have been merely presenting textbook conventions on logic. However, he did more than that. The result was an account in which children learned to make intralinguistic substitutions (i.e., to exchange different words) and referential substitutions (i.e., to use words to stand for, to substitute for, things). Before giving that account, he had to explain how we associate sentences with experiences for two reasons: first, so that it would be clear how we can use sentences at all (rather than merely imitating the use of sentences) prior to using them to refer to things specifically; and second, so that it would be clear there was a connection between sentences and experience which is what makes our sentences ours (even if these associations are dispositional).

The problem which Quine appears to have solved is that of what the meaning of "reference" is.[4] For Quine, "reference" seems to have meant the association of those constituents of a sentence which are in referential position with certain objects of one's ontology (see footnote 3). There are many ways in which objects can be admitted into one's ontology, but the first method we use, according to Quine, is

[4] In referring to that problem, I mean to exclude technical concerns one might have regarding reference. Inasmuch as they deal with the construction of sentences, rather than a putative relation between words and objects, I am not concerned with them. I do not think that my narrow concerns detract from the project on which Quine meant to be working; that is, unless I am wrong in thinking that the first two chapters of *The Roots of Reference* developed a necessary base on which the third was developed.

that of sensory experience in stable observable situations. For that reason, Quine's purpose, in explaining how we learn to respond to sensory experience with linguistic expressions or to respond to a linguistic expression with the expectation of a kind of sensory experience, was to establish a behavioristic connection between linguistic and sensory experience.

The fact that we do have cognitive capacities implies that we can take advantage of that connection and thereby observe higher-order patterns, for example, the fact that words are used *for* things. Nevertheless, it would appear that the cognitive use of language, while different from "use" which is really a stable disposition to respond to stimuli, requires a behavioristic basis. The first two chapters provided an account of the latter. Thus, Quine's arguments in the first and second chapters of *The Roots of Reference* were to establish the possibility of a connection of a linguistic expression to some part of one's ontology, whether that part be theoretical or experiential. That is what I meant when I said that Quine provided an "epistemological elucidation" of quantification which carries ontological commitments.

It should be said, however, that Quine did not, in fact, explain how it is that reference does involve theoretical entities in the first two chapters. Quine did argue in the third chapter that once the model for reference was established, language users would be able to substitute theoretical entities for words just as they do perceptible public objects. With respect to the actual connection, however, rather than the learned use of quantificational idioms, he only explained reference insofar as he gave an account to the effect that sentences are associated with experience. We might more accurately sum up those first two chapters, then, as an attempt to establish that reference first occurs as the connection of a linguistic expression to one's experience of the presumably intersubjectively accessible world.

Criticisms

The content and interpretation of stimulus meanings

It is clear that the rubric of stimulus meaning was intended to serve to isolate a philosophically interesting concept. That is, if the notion of stimulus meanings is not conceptually flawed, the content of stimulus meaning would seem to link certain kinds of sentences with observations. In other words, some content is common to both sentences and observations and it is that content which the notion of stimulus meaning is about. As Quine put it, "we now have before us the makings of a crude concept of empirical meaning. For meaning, supposedly, is what a sentence shares with its translation; and translation at the present stage turns solely on correlations with non-verbal stimulation" (1960, 32).

Quine would have made an important contribution to *both* linguistics and epistemology if he had spelled out what that something is that is shared. Unfortunately, he moved on, too quickly, it seems, to talk of observation sentences, rather than of observations themselves and of what is observed in observations. When Quine wrote, for example, of "ocular irradiation patterns" as being the basis for one kind of stimulus meaning (i.e., that kind of stimulus meaning for which the corresponding stimulus is, simply, visual) (Quine, 1960, 31-5), he did not explain why those patterns are significant. In developing the rubric of stimulus meaning, Quine did not explain in virtue of what the primary experiential patterns are to make sense themselves. That is, stimulus meaning rests on there being a stimulus and yet Quine did not explain how we are to treat the interpretation of stimuli.

In the passages discussed above, it had seemed as if Quine were to offer an analysis of meaning that does not take meaning to be a mentalistic entity, and to some extent he did, though not to the extent he seems to have thought he had. In other words, his analysis is not one that makes it any clearer what "meaning" consists in, whether that meaning is linguistic or empirical. In effect, if one takes sentential meaning to be a kind of pattern, one could argue that Quine merely shifted the problem of making sense of patterns from language to experience. There is a certain sense in which, however different stimulus patterns might be from those patterns which constitute linguistic complexes, we can still talk of both as patterns. Patterns are patterns in virtue of their being interpreted or in virtue of a belief that

they can be interpreted. Talk of their having meaning and talk of our being able to interpret them seem to go together; at least, I take it as given that "meaning" should be defined as involving interpretation. Hence, we should talk about instances of both kinds of patterns as being meaningful; if we cannot talk about meaningfulness, it can only be that no instance of a pattern has been given. As a result, the stimulus approach to meaning is question-begging. What sense can we make of this notion of a pattern of sensory experience if there is no hope of making sense of a linguistic pattern?[5]

One cannot avoid the problem by appealing to the common ability of people to interpret sensory patterns. If those are the standards our analysis is to be held to, there would have been no need to attempt to make "meaning" more perspicuous by appealing to stimulus meaning; we could have understood linguistic meaning as what is understood by "linguistic meaning" according to ordinary intuitions. Likewise, one cannot meet the objection by an argument grounded on the plausibility that the same patterns are accessible to different people and that that identity gives stimulus patterns their meaningfulness. Such a plausibility would do nothing to answer the question of how the patterns are resolved meaningfully or what it might mean for patterns to be resolved meaningfully.

Also, since Quine discussed empirical meaning in terms of observation, or perception, without distinctly articulating that notion, his account is open to another criticism: observations appear to be non-inferential and yet constitute empirical facts. That issue and the issue of why it might be problematic will be taken up in the next chapter.

On science

Another objection also arises. As was mentioned in the preceding chapter, Quine suggested that the elements of the manifest world which figure in natural languages should be eliminated from, i.e., should not be present or even introduced into, a scientific language unless such elements effect greater explanatory power, convenience, and simplicity (1960). Above, it was mentioned that Quine specifically wanted to eliminate notions of meaning not reducible to empiricist, behavioral terms. This

[5] Obviously, I am not talking about grammatical patterns, at least in the ordinary sense of "grammatical".

is, similarly, done in a "scientific" spirit according to which the manifest world is subordinate to the scientific world. That is, Quine's naturalized epistemology takes the approach of using what scientific theory is already available in developing a more systematic scientific theory on how that prior scientific knowledge is possible.

One might ask, in response to Quine's general epistemological approach, why science, whatever we determine "science" to be, is given such broad control of the field. Such a reaction could take two forms; (a) one could take issue with the premise that there is no absolute starting point for epistemological inquiry and/or (b) one could argue that there are possible non-absolute starting points outside of scientific theory. The first form of response -- though not taken as long as this project is a pragmatistic one -- will be discussed over the course of the next chapter, which deals with the flawed foundationalist strategy of traditional empiricists. The second form of response will be taken up in the fourth and fifth chapters.

Summary

Given the number of complaints I have made, a summary of the more significant criticisms would be helpful. During the discussion of Quine's discussion of reference in the last section, I raised the following questions regarding Quine's use of the notion of observation.

1) How exactly is it that observation sentences "pick out what witnesses can agree on" and why do they "serve[s] nicely" for that purpose, i.e., what in some observational event or state corresponds to meaning in observation sentences?

2) How is it that the knowledge of personal experience, which can be associated with the intersubjective language applications we use as a linguistic community, can be something which others share?

3) How does one, since Quine shifted the problem of making sense of patterns from language to experience, account for how patterns within our experience -- whether some pattern is the word "flower" or, some other pattern, a long lost friend -- are resolved meaningfully and what might it mean for patterns to be resolved meaningfully?

I suggested that providing answers to those questions is important for completing Quine's account. However, apart from incompleteness, there are problems with the strategy Quine used that would make even a complete account non-viable. The purpose of the next chapter is to indicate why, and to demonstrate that Quine's project was ill-conceived because it leaves out intentionality. The fourth and fifth chapters of this thesis will address what appear to be neglected alternatives to Quine's project. There, I will begin to present an account of intentional representations, which offers some possibilities not contained in Sellars' anti-phenomenalist paper (i.e., "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind", 1963, 127-196) -- which gives us the reasons why Quine's project was ill-conceived. For it to be viable, the account I will give in the fourth and fifth chapters will need to offer some kind of an answer to each of the three questions above.