

## W.V.O. Quine and Field-Being Philosophy

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**Abstract:** This paper will highlight several philosophical theses that are prominent in the work of W.V.O. Quine, and argue that the analysis of these positions provided by Quine is compatible with and helpful for Field Being approaches to philosophy. While Quine's scientific naturalism, logical reductivism and behaviorism with respect to experience are all positions that are incompatible with a Field Being approach to philosophy, several of his theses are not so foreign to the pragmatism and stress on relational and perspectival views of reality in Field-Being. In particular, I will argue that these three positions support a Field-Being view of reality:

- a) Quine's anti-essentialist position is a form of anti-substantialism that is compatible with the anti-substantialism in Field-Being philosophy.
- b) Quine's position on the inscrutability of reference and its corollary on the indeterminacy of translation provide an analysis of knower-known relations that is compatible with the field-being view of the relationship between language and the world it describes.
- c) Quine's position on ontological relativity, which adds to the points about language raised in (b), the observation that there may be no ultimate fact of the matter about which of several competing theories about the ontology of the world is true, or about which metaphysics is determined by a given theory.

W.V.O. Quine was a realist, and one of the originators of the position that he called naturalized epistemology. He rejected the idea that philosophy is independent of or prior to science, and advocated a form of logical reductivism according to which he claimed that "...to be is to be the value of a variable."<sup>1</sup> So, it might appear that Quine's analytical philosophy is completely antithetical to pragmatism, Asian philosophy, and kindred forms of philosophy that focus on seeing reality as a field of relations. But, in this paper, I will argue that several theses that are prominent in Quine's philosophy are quite compatible with a Field Being interpretation of reality. In particular, I will argue that his positions on anti-essentialism, the inscrutability of reference, and ontological relativity provide useful analyses of some positions that are central to Field Being philosophy.

### A. Anti-Essentialism

Quine objected to modal logic as a discipline on the grounds that there is no objective or logical way to determine identity relations across possible worlds. While he thought that objects are important, and are the things referred to by linguistic expressions, he did not think that identity conditions could be specified for tracking one object from one possible world to another, or even, for that matter, from one time to another in the actual world. His objection, here, is an objection to essentialism; to the Aristotelian notion that objects have both essential and accidental properties, and that objects can remain the same object while losing accidental properties, but must retain the essential properties to remain the same object. Quine argued that no legitimate distinction can be made between the essential and accidental properties, and so, identity relations are all-or-nothing affairs. The only notion of identity that Quine accepted was Leibniz' *Law of the Identity of Indiscernibles*, according to which, even the smallest difference in properties results in non-identity. Quine discusses the difficulty involved in distinguishing accidental from essential properties in his example of the mathematical cyclist.

Mathematicians may conceivably be said to be necessarily rational, but not necessarily two-legged; and cyclists necessarily two-legged, but not necessarily rational. But what of an individual who counts among his eccentricities both mathematics and cycling? Is this concrete individual necessarily rational and contingently two-legged or vice versa? Just insofar as we are talking referentially of the object with no special bias toward a background grouping of mathematicians as against cyclists, or vice versa, there is no semblance of sense in rating some of his attributes as necessary and others as contingent.<sup>2</sup>

In this example, and several others that he discusses in his works, such as the number of the Planets and Orcutt the spy, Quine highlights his general claim that reference makes no sense without the background presumption of a theoretical framework or perspective from which the reference is taking place. The essential quality of being two-legged is relative to the framework or perspectival specification of someone *qua* cyclist. Quine will insist that there is no general, context or perspective-free sense in which the individual is essentially anything, rather than anything else.

Although I think this Quinean position is incompatible with his realism in some important ways, it is highly compatible with a Field-Being view of reality. For example, David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames discuss the Daoist contrast, in the *Zhuangzi*, between the *wo* self and the *wu* self in terms that correlate to Quine's anti-essentialist arguments. The *wo* self objectifies itself, in contrast with other objects in the world, and views itself as a substantial construct of those interactions. It takes the discriminations that can be used to characterize itself as definitive, and constructive of an enduring object. The *wu* self, or Daoist enlightened self, in contrast, understands the relativity of the discriminations. Hall and Ames explain:

*Wo*, as the self unaware of the effect of its discriminations, may strive to achieve the status of *wu*, a self not only aware of the transitory relevance of any sort of discriminations, but capable at times of attaining that 'soft focus' that allows her to mirror the world as it is. This *real* world is an indefinite complex of overlapping orders, which may be entertained from an indefinite number of perspectives, each perspective characterized by a particular focus that calls for a deferential relation between the *wu* self and the things, events or processes constituting these foci.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, what is true of the self in Daoism is equally true of objects in a more general sense. The relationship between *Dao*, and *de*, can also be seen as paralleling Quine's claim that there are no referring terms or designated objects that exist free of the context of a theory or frame of reference. Hall and Ames explain the relationship between *Dao* and *de* as follows.

Each particular element in the totality has its own *de*. As we have said, *de* is best understood as a particular focus that orients an item in a field of significances such that it achieves its own intrinsic excellence. The *de* of an element provides the perspective from which it construes all other items in its environs. ... *Dao* and *de* are related as field and focus, respectively.<sup>4</sup>

So, for Daoism, individual items can only be said to be individuals by comparison with a whole from which they are differentiated, and the totality is just the field within which such foci are individuated. Quine contrasts the relative individuation of particles in physics, in a similar way, pointing out that the theory providing the focus determines what the individuals are, in this passage:

The elementary particles have been wavering alarmingly as physics progresses. Situations arise that curiously challenge the individuality of a particle, not only over time, but even at a single time. A field theory in which states are ascribed directly to place-times may well present a better picture, and some physicists think it does.

At this point a further transfer of ontology suggests itself: we can drop the space time regions in favor of the corresponding classes of quadruples of numbers according to an arbitrarily adopted system of co-ordinates. We are left with just the ontology of pure set theory, since the numbers and their quadruples can be modeled within it. There are no longer any physical objects to serve as individuals at the base of the hierarchy of classes.<sup>5</sup>

So, for Quine, as for the Daoists, a shift in theoretical perspective results in a different ontology of objects. The interconnection between things and the theories of which they are 'posits,' to use Quine's term, results in his thesis of *Ontological Relativity*.<sup>6</sup>

There is a difference in stress between Daoism and Quinean anti-essentialism on the issue of the role of individuals, however, in that *de* is primary in Daoism, whereas, theory is primary and completely determinative of the identity of individuals for Quine. But for both, the mutual dynamic establishment of the whole and its parts is basic to the ontology of reality. Things do not exist autonomously or by virtue of essential properties, and so they are not independently substantial.

### The Inscrutability of Reference

Quine's position on the inscrutability of reference is a part of his general attack on the notion of synonymy of meaning. Quine claims that from speaker to speaker, or even from one occasion to another, there is no sense in saying that expressions refer to or pick out the same object. Quine begins his argument for this position by imagining a translator who is trying to determine the meanings of the expressions used by a group of people who have had no previous contact with linguists. Quine asks what tools the translator can use to figure out the ontology of this language, and concludes only behavior, assent and dissent. Using his 'gavagai' vs. 'rabbit' example, he argues that the native culture might have a radically different conception of what a rabbit is than the translator's culture does, but the translator could not tell this. All the translator can tell is whether the natives always say 'gavagai' when he or she would say 'rabbit.' This gives the linguist equivalence of stimulus meaning for occasion sentences, only. The linguist does not know the ontology of objects possessed by the natives from the mere truth-value equivalence of the sentences. The natives might mean 'unattached rabbit parts' or 'uncooked rabbit stew' by 'gavagai', and might have no conception of autonomous animals, of the kind referred to by 'rabbit' in English.<sup>7</sup> Quine discusses this possibility in the following passage:

For, consider "gavagai." Who knows but what the objects to which this term apply are not rabbits after all, but mere stages or brief temporal segments of rabbits? In either event the stimulus situations that prompt assent to "Gavagai" would be the same as for "Rabbit". Or perhaps the objects to which "gavagai" applies are all and sundry undetached rabbit parts; again, the stimulus meaning would register no difference.<sup>8</sup>

Quine proceeds to consider other ontological construals of what "gavagai" might mean in the referential sense of meaning, such as "rabbithood instantiated here," and "a portion of fused universal spatio-temporal rabbitdom." He concludes from this exercise that stimulus meaning does not distinguish among the many ontological possibilities. He says,

Occasion sentences and stimulus meaning are general coin. Terms and reference are local to our conceptual scheme<sup>9</sup>.

But, Quine presses forward with this argument-the problem of inscrutability of reference is by no means limited to radical translation across differing cultures and languages. The problem is as real between one person and another in the same culture, and even between different temporal moments in the same person's life! I do not know my next-door neighbor's ontology from the fact that we both speak English, any more than I knew the native's from the stimulus synonymy of "rabbit" and "gavagai." Further, my own meanings from ten years ago or two years from now, are equally inscrutable to me.

Quine's conclusion from all of the above is that there is no sense to the reference of terms, at all. Since occasion sentences and stimulus assent or dissent are all we have to go on, we should not pretend that there is more significance to language than the behavioral acts of assent and dissent. Terms are posits of conceptual theories, for Quine. Without extensive knowledge of the ontological commitments of an entire intellectual scheme, even a speaker who uses the scheme has no idea of what his or her own posited objects are.

One of the most famous statements on language from Daoism, of course, is the first chapter of the *Dao de*

*Jing:*

Dao called Dao is not Dao  
 Names can name no lasting name.  
 Nameless: the origin of heaven and earth  
 Naming: the mother of ten thousand things  
 Empty of desire, perceive mystery.  
 Filled with desire, perceive manifestations.  
 These have the same source, but different names.  
 Call them both deep—  
 Deep and again deep:  
 The gateway to all mystery.<sup>10</sup>

Here we see a deliberate contrast between the “named *Dao*” as not lasting, the mother of individual things, a product of desire that is a perceived manifestation, and the “nameless *Dao*” that is lasting, the origin of heaven and earth, empty of desire, and mysterious.

The historical background often offered for the writing of the *Dao de Jing* connects the distrust of ordinary language expressed in this first chapter to the Daoist reaction against the Confucian stress on the “rectification of names.” For Confucius, the most important task of a ruler was to make the language precise, so that everyone in the kingdom knew exactly what was expected of him or her when the ruler made a proclamation. The Daoist response to the Confucian demand for rigorous language was to declare the Confucian rectification shallow, superficial, and misrepresentative of the nature of reality.

Historically, Quine was following Frege in pursuit of a scientifically rigorous notation that could, like the Confucian rectification of names, eliminate all ambiguity and make language usage very precise. But, along the way, Quine is making a huge concession to the Daoist view of the relationship between language and reality. Quine’s observations on the inscrutability of reference seem to admit that in a sense, reference is profoundly mysterious; that reality as it is, is not touched by social words and is immune to neat categorization within conceptual schemes. However, Quine ultimately sides with a Fregean-Confucian view of things, declaring the personal, the untranslatable, and the ineffable, irrelevant to science, and hence, dispensable.

Given Quine’s ultimate rejection of the significance of the distinction between ineffable ontology and theory-dependent object-positings, it seems strange that he even went to the effort to establish the inscrutability of reference. His goal in pursuing this argument seems to have been to head off alternative arguments that might claim that there is some relationship through reference that gives some definitive answer to a question about what some speaker means by a given expression, say, ‘rabbit’. It is this route, through individual intentions to intended objects that Quine is out to block. But Daoism would block that route to reference, as well. To get to the reality beyond or behind the manifestations of desire and language, is to lose the manifestations, particulars and desires. The Dao encountered there would be at once everything and nothing; in Buddhism it becomes *sunyata*, the no-thing that embraces all things. I’m not sure Quine would disagree.

### **Ontological Relativity**

Quine’s ontological relativity thesis extends his anti-essentialist position and his claims on the inscrutability of reference to the relationship among theories of reality, especially when questions arise about the truth of one theory or another. Since the relationship between objects and theories is a reciprocal one, as we saw in explaining his anti-essentialism, no appeal can be made to either objects or theories as the ultimate determinants of the nature of truth. For, if one were to give a correspondence view of truth, arguing that the nature of objects determines whether a theory is true or not, Quine would respond that the objects were posited by the theories, so they cannot verify the theories. And if one were to offer a simple coherence

view of truth, arguing that the coherence of the theories and the objects guarantees the truth of both, Quine would respond that the inscrutability of reference insures that alternate, incompatible theories could all be declared true in this way, so the coherence method must be mistaken.

What follows from the above considerations, according to Quine, is a relativity theory about the objects of theories. Comparing referential relativity to space and time relativity, Quine explains,

But what of position and velocity apart from practice? What of the regress [of frames of reference] then? The answer, of course, is the relational doctrine of space; there is no absolute position or velocity; there are just the relations of co-ordinate systems to one another; and, ultimately, of things to one another. And I think that a parallel question regarding denotation calls for a parallel answer; a relational theory of what the objects of theories are. What makes sense to say is not what the objects of a theory are, absolutely speaking, but how one theory of objects is interpretable or reinterpretable in another.<sup>11</sup>

But if things are this relative, for the relationships between objects and theories, one must wonder whether it makes sense to speak of truth at all. On that issue, Quine accepts Tarski's view of truth according to which truth is a relationship between a sentence in an "object language" and its paraphrase in a "metalanguage." The object language will have the resources to refer to objects, but not to discuss truth and falsehood, while the metalanguage will have the resources to discuss truth and falsehood, but its objects will all be sentences of the object language, not extra-linguistic things. The advantage of this 'semantic ascent' to a logically richer background language is that one can discuss truth and falsehood in a context in which one needs no longer to discuss inscrutable objects, and can, instead discuss only clear, logically specified relations. So, bifurcating the object-theory relationship into two stages, an object-sentence stage and a sentence-theory stage, enables Tarski and Quine to repudiate the object-sentence portion of the relationship as inscrutable and relative, while insisting that truth values can be established for the sentence-theory portion of the relationship between theories and objects.

For Quine, this solves the dilemma of the inscrutability of reference, for the context or framework that contains just one metalanguage and the sentences of one theory. But, beyond that limited context, inter-theoretic relativity returns, with a vengeance. For each background theory needs its own background theory to explain its truth, and so it would seem, we have a more round-about version of Plato's third man regress, here.<sup>12</sup>

Quine describes the situation as follows:

Within [a] background theory we can show how some subordinate theory whose universe is some portion of the background universe, can, by a reinterpretation be reduced to another subordinate theory whose universe is some lesser portion. Such talk of subordinate theories and their ontologies is meaningful, but only relative to the background theory, with its own primitively adopted and ultimately inscrutable ontology.<sup>13</sup>

Quine thinks this picture of theories reducing to sub-theories and expanding into meta-theories, can, nevertheless, be restrained by his realism about truth through his analysis of a proxy-function. I have argued elsewhere that this doesn't work, and won't repeat it in this paper.<sup>14</sup> My concern in this paper is to argue that Quine's picture of the relativity of theories to theories and ontology to theories is a useful analysis for Field Being philosophers.

Quine argues that the relativity relationship described above is a relativity of structures, what he calls "theory forms."<sup>15</sup> It is primarily the syntax of a theory that is so interpretable and reinterpretable, without limit. However, because of the relationship between theories and objects, and his opposition to the synthetic/analytic distinction, he doesn't believe that the traditional distinction between syntax and semantics has much content.

The picture presented by Quine of theories reflecting off theories is reminiscent of the Buddhist stories of Indra's net and the hall of mirrors, in both of which perspectives of reality bounce off one another without end, and there is no underlying 'solidity' or substantive 'end' for the images or perspectives to rest upon. Still, when Asian philosophers give parallel analyses of the relativity of one world view to another, or of one perspective to another, they are typically not speaking in terms of a propositional analysis of truth, or of syntactical systems or logical structures of theories, so the comparison is not as obviously relevant as it might seem. To focus the comparison more, we must shift from image and perspective relativity in Asian philosophy, to a more direct discussion of conditions for establishing truth or falsehood.

There has been a lengthy discussion between A.C. Graham and Hall and Ames on the subject of translating the English word 'true' into or out of Chinese that is informative on this issue. Along the way, this discussion becomes quite interestingly Quinean. I'll start with Graham's objections to Hall and Ames' argument, as characterized by Hall and Ames:

Graham holds it to be obvious that the Chinese have no concept of truth. His argument is this: In the West we have developed a concept of truth by extending the meaning of 'fact' from questions such as "Whether the money is, as I told you, in the bank" to such non-factual issues as the truth of tautologies, the truth of narratives, and so on.<sup>16</sup>

Graham considers the Western extension of applications of the word 'true' to non-factual contexts philosophically trivial, and considers the absence of this extension in Chinese definitive of an absence of the western concept in China.

Hall and Ames point out that propositional theories of truth in the west have traditionally fallen into two camps, correspondence views and coherence views, each with its own set of presuppositions. Hall and Ames discuss the presuppositions of correspondence theories of truth as follows. First, there must be a clear distinction between appearance and reality.

Theories defining truth in terms of conformation of appearance with reality, or in more contemporary terms, between "language" and "world" or "propositions" and "facts" ("states of affairs") presuppose a distinction between things as they are, and as they appear, or are asserted to be....<sup>17</sup>

Next, to compare the proposition with the reality for purposes of ascertaining correspondence, Hall and Ames point out that there must be univocity of meaning for the terms:

For a proposition to have a univocal sense, terms must be strictly delimitable. This is a familiar condition of a dualistic worldview. The Chinese polar sensibility, on the other hand, renders the defining vocabulary porous and interdependent, precluding such delimitation in any but the grossest terms.<sup>18</sup>

Hall and Ames conclude from the absence of a distinction between appearance and reality and univocity of meaning in Chinese;

Without such [univocal] propositions theories of truth which presume, however tacitly, a distinction between propositions and states of affairs are untenable.<sup>19</sup>

Quine, of course, rejects correspondence theories of truth for similar reasons. The inscrutability of reference, and indeterminacy of translation undermine correspondence, and the behavioristic exclusion of the sentence-object part of his object-sentence, sentence-theory bifurcation effectively cuts off the appearance-reality distinction. So Quine, like Chinese *langue*, rejects a correspondence view of truth.

Coherence theories of truth, according to Hall and Ames, require a single totality, or univocal master

worldview that can be the basis for coherence comparisons. This, too, is lacking in the Chinese world-view. Hall and Ames point out:

Theories of truth grounded in rational coherence depend upon concepts of system and structure analyzable in terms of systematic completeness. A coherence theory of truth depends upon the notion of a system, rather than a congeries, or a plurality of systems....Truth, as rational coherence requires a putatively complete context within which a single proposition may be found to be consistently housed.<sup>20</sup>

Hall and Ames point out that Chinese language and culture have always been more interested in a relativistic relation between focus and environment, like Quine's background theory-object theory relationship. Hall and Ames describe the truth relationship in Chinese this way.

While there is no concern for a bounded whole, attention is paid instead to the transactions taking place with respect to a given center or focus. This center is not the focus of a tightly enclosed circle, but of a field of interrelated elements that decrease in relevance, the further they get from the center.<sup>21</sup>

Quine's Ontological Relativity thesis, is, of course, a direct attack on the notion that there is any complete, coherent system within which truth could be evaluated. As a realist, Quine might seem disposed to believe in such a system, but Gödel's theorem, the truth paradoxes to which Tarski was responding, and related issues had disabused him of the realistic interpretation of what his scientific realism could produce for him. The result is his ontological relativity thesis, which presents a pluralistic congeries of theories as the place(s) of residence for truth, to use the Hall and Ames characterization. It is a peculiarity of Quine's work, that he, nevertheless, seems to think he still has a realistic, propositional interpretation of truth.

So, there are respects in which Quine's ontological relativity thesis is explicitly rejecting some of the presuppositions of coherence and correspondence theories of truth that Chinese *langue*, and Asian Philosophy more generally, never accepted.

## Conclusion

My conclusion from this paper is that there are surprising respects in which Quine, the western, analytical realist, is offering a world view that is highly compatible with Chinese contextualism, especially of a Daoist sort. I think, ultimately, that Quine is just inconsistent in his commitments to anti-essentialism, the inscrutability of reference and ontological relativity on the one hand and the unity of science and scientific realism on the other. But he was an honest philosopher in admitting, through his more relativistic theses, that the world does not stand still enough for Platonic realism to be ultimately true of it.

## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Quine, W.V.O., *Pursuit of Truth*, revised edition, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1992 , p. 26.
  - <sup>2</sup> Quine, W.V.O., *Word & Object*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1960, p. 199.
  - <sup>3</sup> Hall, David L. and Ames, Roger T., *Thinking from the Han*, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 1998, p. 57.
  - <sup>4</sup> *ibid.* p.61-62.
  - <sup>5</sup> Quine, W.V.O., *Theories and Things*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1981, p.17-18.
  - <sup>6</sup> Quine, W.V.O., *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, Columbia University Press, NY, 1969.
  - <sup>7</sup> Quine, *Word & Object*, *op. cit.* p. 26-50.
  - <sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p.51-52.
  - <sup>9</sup> *ibid.* p.53.

- <sup>10</sup> The *Dao de Jing* trans. by Stephen Addis and Stanley Lombardo, in *Asian Scriptures*, ed. .Robert E. Van Voorst, Wadsworth Press, Belmont CA., 2001, p. 203.
- <sup>11</sup> Quine, W.V.O., *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, op. cit. p.49-50.
- <sup>12</sup> I argue that Quine is, indeed, in an eternal regress in *The Structure of Thinking*, Academic Imprints, UK, 2002.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, op. cit. p. 50-51.
- <sup>14</sup> *The Structure of Thinking*, “The Proxy Function’s Dysfunction”, op. cit.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ontological Relativity*, op. cit. p. 53.
- <sup>16</sup> Hall and Ames, *Thinking from the Han*, op. cit. p.114-115.
- <sup>17</sup> *ibid.* p.126.
- <sup>18</sup> *ibid.* p.127.
- <sup>19</sup> *ibid.* p. 127.
- <sup>20</sup> *ibid.* p.124.
- <sup>21</sup> *ibid.* p.125.