

Postscript to ‘Quine’s Naturalism and Behaviorisms’

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Quine began to urge his naturalism and versions of behaviorism about a half century ago. Though he was deeply influenced by psychology and other sciences at that time, his thoughts transcend the limits of his era. We do not, for example, believe in behaviorism in psychology anymore, but still there are many philosophers who defend Quinean philosophy of language and mind, or more concretely, Quinean indeterminacy and naturalized epistemology. Quine’s naturalism and behaviorisms enjoy their longevity until today.

In ‘Quine’s Naturalism and Behaviorisms’ (hereafter QNB), I attempted to evaluate a line of argument from Quinean naturalism cum behaviorisms to anti-mentalism, a view I will briefly introduce presently. Since the piece has been issued I have received miscellaneous comments from many philosophers. Many of the reactions are negative. There are lessons I learned from those criticisms, but none of them is unanswerable, or so I will argue in this postscript.

I received some objections from conferences, and some from private correspondence, so I cannot state explicitly the authorships of those opinions. In what follows I will briefly rehearse the themes and arguments in QNB, and then reconstruct my arguments in it. In due course, some of the objections will be accommodated by my revisions and reformulations; others will be listed and answered as anonymous objections.¹

My focus here is Quine’s naturalism *about meaning*. In ‘Ontological Relativity,’ Quine declares:

With Dewey I hold that knowledge, mind, and *meaning* are *part of the same world* that they have to do with, and that they are to be studied in the same empirical spirit that animates natural science. Meanings, therefore, those very models of *mental* entities, end up as grist for the *behaviorist’s mill*. Dewey was explicit on the point: ‘Meaning...is not a psychic existence; it is primarily a property of behavior...Uncritical semantics is the myth of a museum in which the exhibits are meanings and the words are labels.’ (Quine 1969, 26-27, my italics)

¹ The objections I will consider in this paper are raised by José Luis Bermúdez, Chi-Chun Chiu, Dagfinn Føllesdal, Roger Gibson, Heikki Koskinen, Ruey-Yuan Wu, and Jeu-Jenq Yuann. I am very grateful to their patient replies. None of them is responsible for any remark on this paper, of course.

The inference is this: Given naturalism, we should adopt behaviorism and thereby reject mentalism in the study of meaning. Generally speaking, mentalism is the thesis that mental items, whatever their natures, are the primary locus of meaning. Paul Grice, John Searle, Jerry Fodor, and some traditional empiricists fall in this category². Raffaella Rosa and Ernest Lepore spell out this line of thought as follows:

Quine is well known for his *naturalism*...For meaning to be investigated empirically, it must be made *public*. Meaning becomes a property of *behavior*...On Quine's view, the requirement that meaning is essentially public and social in nature relates to *the identification of meaning with evidence*, that is, to some sort of *verificationism*, which in Quine's case *explicitly take the form of behaviorism*. (Rosa and Lepore, 2004, 68, my italics)

From naturalism one has the publicity of meaning, and this, the thought goes, leads to Quine's behaviorism cum verificationism. Against this, I urge that naturalism only entails a minimal version of behaviorism, and, *pace* Quine, this behaviorism is by no means verificationism of any sort. As a result, the bridge connecting naturalism and anti-mentalism collapses.

Readers may notice that in my quotation of Quine, he is not very explicit about his points. Particularly, he does not spell out his naturalism, behaviorism, and anti-mentalism. That's why in QNB I tried hard to reconstruct his theses and arguments. In this postscript, I won't give a detailed reprise of them; rather, I shall shortly re-describe them and concentrate on the objections I suffered and my replies to them.

. *Quine's Naturalism*

My main line of thought is this: there are three kinds of *behaviorism* that ought to be distinguished, and the only version supported by *naturalism* is too weak to reject *mentalism*. The other two versions are indeed inconsistent with mentalism, but they gain no support from naturalism, at least Quine's version of it.

Someone told me that she is puzzled by the theme of QNB: why should we concentrate on this line of reasoning of Quine? Or, what is the significance of my counterarguments? My answer is this: most of Quine's scholars, as far as I know, do not challenge this line of reasoning. For example, Roger Gibson writes with agreement that '[o]nce language is understood in this naturalistic way, as a social art to be studied empirically, it is *immediately obvious* that there cannot be any useful

² John Haugeland baptized this category 'neo-Cartesianism' in his 'The Intentionality All-Stars.'

sense to the claims that language is private or that meaning is private' (*The Philosophy of W. V. Quine*, 64, italics mine). In a relatively new introductory book on Quine, Alex Orenstein remarks: '[Quine's] argument is in part that of a behaviourist, that private ideas are "pointless and pernicious" in the scientific study of language and that we should dispense with them in favour of publicly observable linguistic behaviour' (*W. V. Quine*, 122). Rosa's and Lepore's article, as I just quoted above, is another instance³.

So much for the preliminary remarks. Now I shall begin to characterize Quine's naturalism. In QNB, I took issue with Gibson's formulations of Quine's naturalism in order to make explicit what Quine has in mind when he talks about naturalism. Indeed, there is no real discrepancy between Gibson's interpretation and mine. I am only discontent about his misleading wordings. Therefore, here I will not expatiate on this verbal issue. I only recapitulate the outcomes of it:

- (1) There is no *a priori* first philosophy (as the foundation of natural science).
Philosophy is continuous with natural science. They both contribute to ontology.
- (2) Everything exists is natural in character.

The first tenet of Quine's naturalism is familiar enough. It is an encapsulation of his *naturalized epistemology*. What is controversial is the second tenet I attribute to Quine. More than one person point out to me that Quine also accepts 'set' – a collection of distinct elements having specific common properties – in his ontology. And they submit that if we understand 'natural' as 'spatial-temporal,' the second tenet is obviously not Quinean. I concede that this is indeed a problem in my formulation. Though I know Quine's thought on set well before I wrote QNB, I understood 'natural' in a negative way at that time. That is, I contrast it with 'supernatural,' a category Quine definitely repudiates. Now I am convinced that I should take the case of set more seriously: it is not supernatural, but this does not render it 'natural,' as understood in terms of 'spatial-temporal.' It should belong to the realm of 'non-natural,' for it is both not mythical and not spatial-temporal. As a result, the second tenet of Quine's naturalism ought to be formulated as:

- (2) Everything exists is *not supernatural* in character.

³ Some complementary remarks: By 'claims that language is private' Gibson means mentalistic semantics, for after these remarks he immediately refers to the museum myth criticized by Quine. Some problems may arise with this identification by Gibson, because a mentalist does not necessarily allow a private language. Fortunately, this complication bears no significance with the present context. Similarly, by 'private ideas' Orenstein refers to mentalism; he chooses this narrow locution presumably because he is aiming at old empiricists. It should be clear that a mentalist need not commit private ideas or images in his picture; Searle and Fodor are good examples.

The phrase ‘not supernatural’ is supposed to accommodate both ‘natural’ and ‘non-natural.’ This situation is parallel to the distinction between ‘amoral’ and ‘immoral’ in moral philosophy: the former refers to things irrelevant to morality; the latter denotes things violate morality. With these theses in hand, we are in a position to see the relations between naturalism, behaviorisms, and mentalism. The third section will focus on versions of behaviorism and their relations with mentalism, verificationism, and Quine’s naturalism.

. *Quine’s Behaviorisms*

Behaviorism has plenty of versions. In what follows I only sketch three relevant versions and try to locate Quine’s view(s) appropriately. Notice that all versions of behaviorism I formulate below are about *semantics*. They are:

- (a) *Evidential* behaviorism: We can only *use* observable behaviors *as evidence*.
- (b) *Methodological* behaviorism: We can only *make reference to* observable behaviors.
- (c) *Ontological* behaviorism: We can only *make reference to* observable behaviors, *because there is no* unobservable (mental) entity to be referred.

Version (a) is weaker than (b), and (b) is weaker than (c). The distinction between (b) and (c) is well established in relevant literatures: they are identical except that (c) adds an ontological reason why one should not make reference to those entities. By contrast, the distinction between (a) and (b) is not well taken by most discussions concerning behaviorism. The source of (b) is psychology in mid-20th; the source of (a) is Quine’s theory of evidence. The distinction between them plays a central role in the rest of the postscript.

One thing should be noticed before entering the main discussion. Quine himself does not care about ‘isms.’ He does not formulate those isms and claim that he subscribes which of them. The categories I offer are from the viewpoint of contemporary discussions in philosophy of mind and language. This is the best way I find to articulate Quine’s thoughts.

Quine is often equivocal when talking about his behaviorism. As a result, he seems to accept all three versions I formulated above. Quine adopts (a) when he asserts that ‘Empiricism as a theory of truth thereupon goes by the board, and good riddance. As a theory of evidence, however, empiricism remains with us’ (Quine 1981, 39). Quine’s behaviorism here, as a tenet of his empiricism, is also a theory of evidence. As Dagfinn Føllesdal writes: ‘[E]vidential behaviorism, and which I regard as that of

Quine, is a position concerning *evidence*: the only evidence we can build on in our study of man...is empirical evidence, in particular the observation of behavior' (Føllesdal 1990, 98). However, Quine's objection to intention-based semantics shows that he is a methodological behaviorist, for he urges that it is not legitimate to make reference to intention or any other unobservable items in theory of meaning. This is where verificationism comes in, as Rosa and Lepore rightly point out. The spirit of verificationism is that the target's ontology is exhausted by *our epistemology* of it. Intention is not observable *for us*, so it cannot *appear in* our theory of meaning. Compare evidential behaviorism's attitude toward intention: Intention is not observable *for us*, so it cannot *be evidence* for or against our theory of meaning. Notice that 'evidence' is an epistemological concept: evidence available to A is bound with A's epistemological power. That's why evidential behaviorism is an uncontroversial claim. But the same does not hold in methodological behaviorism. To say this is not to say that methodological behaviorism is false. The only thing I want to stress is that the methodological version is not as uncontroversial as the evidential one. All the worse, in his later writings Quine sometimes talks as if he does not admit the existence of mental phenomena. To this extent he is an ontological behaviorist. For present purpose we need not go into the details here. Notice that Quine is not inconsistent in adopting all these versions, for they are not mutually exclusive.

The above paragraph is copied from QNB. I duplicate it because it encapsulates my interpretation of Quine's behaviorisms. Now we are in a position to see where Quine's argument goes wrong.

. Where Quine Goes Wrong

Let's begin the discussion by examining the relation between naturalism and methodological behaviorism. The first tenet of naturalism is that there is no *a priori* first philosophy; philosophy is continuous with natural science. But how can it be the ground of methodological behaviorism? The negation of it is that we can *also* make reference to *unobservable phenomena* when it comes to meaning. Now, there is no inconsistency between this statement and Neurath's boat. This kind of holism simply does not prevent us from mentioning unobservable phenomena. Then what about the 'anti-supernatural' tenet? It is also consistent with the negation of methodological behaviorism, for this negation does not state further that unobservable phenomena here *are supernatural ones*. And since ontological behaviorism is even stronger than methodological one, it goes without saying that it also gains no support from Quine's naturalism. But only these two versions are incompatible with mentalism, which attempts to invoke mental states to account for linguistic meaning: these behaviorisms exactly prevent this way of theorizing. The upshot is that Quine's naturalism does not,

as many philosophers mistakenly thought, provide an argument against mentalism about meaning.

But how about evidential behaviorism? One might ask. In QNB I distinguish two senses of ‘evidence.’ The wide one contains the concept of ‘reason,’ ‘explanation,’ and the like; the narrow one only denotes ‘sensory’ evidence. And I offer an example to rebut the wide one: suppose we have a semantic hypothesis. Suppose further that we find this hypothesis inconsistent with certain well-established theory in another field. The trouble is that one may reasonably reject the semantic hypothesis on the ground that it is inconsistent with some well-founded theory. One may be wrong to do so for some reasons; for example, there is no genuine inconsistency between them, or we have better reasons to renounce the well-established theory. However, it is undeniable that at least in some cases one’s rejection of the semantic hypothesis on the ground of its inconsistency with other theories is a right move. In this kind of cases, the reason we give up our theory of meaning is *not* anything observable, given that in the present context ‘observable’ means ‘perceivable by sense organs.’⁴ With principle of charity, I suggest not to attribute wide evidential behaviorism to Quine. It seems that the only option for Quine is narrow evidential behaviorism. But does it follow from his naturalism, and can it repel mentalism?

The narrow version has it that when it comes to meaning, we can only use observable behaviors as (narrowly construed) evidence. This version is true, but unfortunately, it is *trivially* true: ‘Observable by sense organs’ is built into the narrow sense of ‘evidence,’ so to say that we can only use observable behaviors as evidence is just stating a tautology, or something near enough. It is by no means incompatible with mentalism. Evidential behaviorism is an unfortunate thesis: widely construed, it is false; narrowly construed, it is true but trivially true. Quineans often give much weight on this thesis, as I discuss this at lengths in QNB. I shall not repeat it in this postscript.

Narrow evidential behaviorism is indeed derivable from naturalism. The first tenet of it insists on the *a posteriori* nature of inquiry, and this fits well with narrow evidential behaviorism. However, we have seen that it carries no weight with regard to mentalism. Quine’s argument from naturalism to anti-mentalism is therefore fallacious.

. One Remaining Objection

I have epitomized, maybe a little bit too long, my arguments in QNB. Also, I have accommodated some criticisms in the course of reconstruction. However, there is one remaining objection that I have yet said anything about it. I postpone it until now

⁴ Here I am indebted to Timothy Lane.

because it is about Quine's later writings, and I find some people do not take them very seriously. I want to isolate this objection in order to rectify this prejudice.

Objection: The issue of naturalism aside, it is a mistake to assert that Quine is a methodological behaviorist, for he *does* have many remarks on mental states. Here are some examples: 'Facts of the Matter' (1979), 'States of Mind' (1985), chapter 4 (Intension) of *Pursuit of Truth* (1990), and chapter 8 (Things of the Mind) of *From Stimulus to Science* (1995). How can I assert that Quine embraces the view that we cannot talk anything about mental states?

Besides, it is an almost incorrigible consensus in sciences that we can make reference to unobservable items or phenomena. Quarks and strings are good examples. And Quine of course buys this. Therefore, he does not advocate methodological behaviorism, a view prevents us to make reference to unobservable items.

Reply: This is a standard misunderstanding of Quine's view on meaning. Granted, he has a position on the mind-body problem, so it is unavoidable for him to talk about mental states. But this does not preclude my attribution of methodological behaviorism to him. The reason is simple: Quine's methodological behaviorism is not a naïve acceptance of psychology in his era. If it were the case, we can simply reject his methodological behaviorism with the cognitive turn in psychology. The truth is that his version is the result of his critical reflections on meaning. He writes:

In psychology one may or may not be a behaviorist, but in linguistics one has no choice. Each of us learns his language by observing other people's verbal behavior and having his own faltering verbal behavior observed and reinforced or corrected by others...There is nothing in linguistic meaning beyond what is to be gleaned from overt behavior in observable circumstances. (Quine, 1992, 37-8)

Here Quine offers a positive case for methodological behaviorism *concerning meaning*. His methodological behaviorism is a restricted one, and the reason for this version is his view of language learning. That's precisely why his view of meaning is still an important alternative after psychology's wholesale banishment of methodological behaviorism. The example of quarks and strings can also be appeased in this way: they are irrelevant to meaning, so to advocate methodological behaviorism in meaning does not commit Quine a preposterous view that we cannot make reference to unobservable items and phenomena in other realms of investigation. Ironically, this objection to me is not Quinean at all, and I respond to it by Quine's own light.

. Concluding Remarks

It is indeed a formidable task to clarify and evaluate Quine philosophy. The reason is not that he writes obscurely; he is well known as an elegant writer. The reason should be that he himself does not care about ‘isms,’ i.e., philosophical labels. One patent example is that when he tackles the mind-body problem in his later years, he slips from eliminativism to reductionism and to anomalous monism. And he explicitly rejects to analyze these labels and opt one among them. In QNB and this postscript, I attempt to articulate his positions into contemporary categories so that we can understand them more precisely. I understand this approach sometimes incurs the reaction that to do this is to distort individual philosopher’s idiosyncratic views. I think this accusation can be damped by the reply that I have textual evidence for these attributions of isms. I do not pretend that in these pieces I have accomplished perfectly neutral analyses, but at least I am aware of this potential problem and try to parry it as possible as I can.

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