

Quine and the End of Positivism

Lecture 28

Quine was a person who had absolutely no feeling whatsoever for existential or religious questions; for him, philosophy had no business going where rational methods could not decide the issue.

Willard Van Orman Quine studied with the positivists but undermined their view. Most famously, he denied Kant's analytic/synthetic distinction, meaning that we cannot separate, except in trivial cases, statements made true by their meanings and those made true by experience: Our theories confront the world as whole systems. Quine agreed with Ludwig Wittgenstein that meaning is public and behavioral. Consequently, translation of terms is holistic. Therefore the meanings of particular pieces of our theories, like terms, are indeterminate; the meanings of the individual terms cannot be reduced to one. This also means that experience cannot determine which metaphysics is the right one; Quine endorses ontological relativity. Like Rudolf Carnap, he accepts that our choice of metaphysics is pragmatic. ■

Name to Know

Quine, Willard Van Orman (1908–2000): Perhaps the most prominent American philosopher of the 20th century, he began as a student of the positivists but went on to undermine many of their doctrines and endorse ontological relativity.

Important Terms

physicalism: The view that reality is physical; this is sometimes used identically with materialism, but properly the physical is a broader category (e.g., vacuums and electromagnetic fields are physical but not material).

reduction, reductionism: In philosophy of science, reduction refers either to explanation of a system's properties as the product of the properties of its components or lower-level entities (explanatory or theoretical reduction) or to the claim that the system is the collection of its parts or lower-level entities (ontological reduction). If reductive explanations are held to be transitive, then this would mean all phenomena are explainable by physics. Some thinkers deny this but maintain ontological reductionism.

Suggested Reading

Floyd and Shieh, *Future Pasts*.

Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*.

———, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism."

———, *Word and Object*, chap. 2.

Questions to Consider

1. What is wrong with the analytic/synthetic distinction as traditionally conceived?
2. How is it that we can recognize gavagai yet have different, indeterministic ontologies of it?