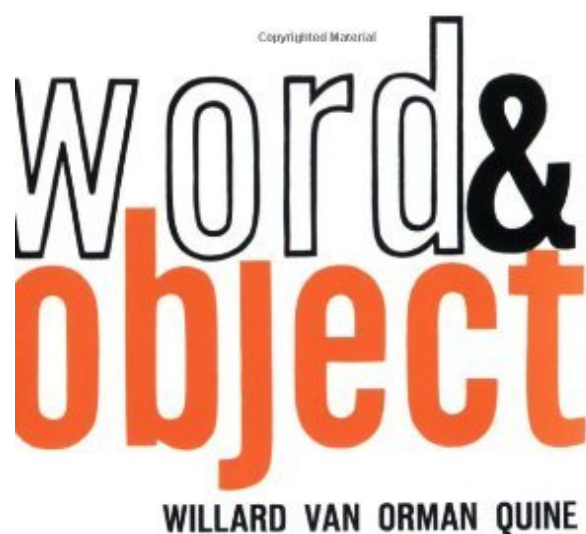


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## ONE OF QUINE'S MOST INFLUENTIAL BOOKS

By Steven H Propp

Willard Van Orman Quine (1908-2000) was an American philosopher and logician who taught at Harvard University, and wrote many books such as *From a Logical Point of View: Logici-Philosophical Essays*, *The Web of Belief*, etc.

He wrote in the Preface to this 1960 book, "Language is a social art. In acquiring it we have to depend entirely on intersubjectively available cues as to what to say and when. Hence there is no justification for collating linguistic meanings, unless in terms of men's dispositions to respond overtly to socially observable stimulations. An effect or recognizing this limitation is that the enterprise of translation is found to be involved in a certain systematic indeterminacy... The indeterminacy of translation invests even the question what objects to construe a term as true of. Studies of the semantics of reference consequently turn out to make sense only when directed upon substantially our language, from within. But we do remain free to reflect, thus parochially, on the development and structure of our own referential apparatus..." (Pg. ix)

He points out, "We cannot strip away the conceptual trappings sentence by sentence and leave a description of the conceptual world, and man as a part of it, and thus find out what cues he would have of what goes on around him. Subtracting his cues from his world view, we get man's net contribution to the difference. This difference marks the extent of man's conceptual sovereignty---the domain within which he can revise theory while saving the data." (Pg. 5)

He explains, "The philosophical doctrine of the infallibility of observation sentences is sustained under our version. For there is scope for error and dispute only insofar as the connections with experience whereby sentences are appraised are multifarious and indirect, mediated through time by theory in conflicting ways; there is none insofar as verdicts to a sentence are directly keyed to present stimulation... Our version of observation sentences departs from a philosophical tradition in allowing the sentences to be about ordinary things instead of requiring them to report sense data..." (Pg. 44)

He argues, "There are philosophers who stoutly maintain that 'exists' said of numbers, classes, and the like and 'exists' said of material objects are two usages of an ambiguous term 'exists.' What mainly baffles me is the stoutness of their maintenance. What can they possibly count as evidence? Why not view 'true' as unambiguous but very general, and recognize the difference true logical laws and true confessions as a

difference merely between logical laws and confessions? And correspondingly for existence?" (Pg. 131)

He suggests, "The primary distinction of eternal sentences is that they are the repository of truth itself, so and of all science. Insofar as a sentence can be said simply to be true, and not just true now or in this month, it is an eternal sentence. When our objective is an austere canonical form for the system of the world, we are not to rest with the renunciation of propositional attitudes and the subjunctive conditional; we must renounce also the indicator words and other sources of truth-value fluctuation." (Pg. 227-228)

He states, "This construction is paradigmatic of what we are most typically up to when in a philosophical spirit we offer an 'analysis' or 'explication' of some hitherto inadequately formulated 'idea' or expression. We do not claim synonymy. We do not claim to make clear and explicit what the users of the unclear expression had unconsciously in mind all along. We do not expose hidden meanings, as the words 'analysis' and 'explication' would suggest; we supply lacks. We fix on the particular functions of the unclear expression that make it worth troubling about, and then devise a substitute, clear and couched in terms of our liking, that fills those functions. Beyond those conditions of partial agreement, dictated by our interests and purposes, any traits of the explicans come under the head of 'don't cares.'" (Pg. 258-259)

This is one of Quine's most widely-discussed works, and will be of keen interest to students of analytical philosophy.

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