Meaning as Hypothesis: Quine's Indeterminacy Thesis Revisited

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ABSTRACT: Despite offering many formulations of his controversial indeterminacy of translation thesis, Quine has never explored in detail the connection between indeterminacy and the conception of meaning that he had supposedly derived from the work of Peirce and Duhem. The outline of such a conception of meaning, as well as its relationship to the indeterminacy thesis, is worked out in this paper; and its merits and implications are assessed both in the context of Quine's own philosophical agenda, and also with a view to a very different approach to meaning and understanding exemplified by the work of Gadamer.

RÉSUMÉ : Même s'il formule à diverses reprises sa thèse controversée de l'indétermination de la traduction, Quine n'a jamais examiné de près le lien entre l'indétermination et la conception de la signification qu'il aurait développée à partir des travaux de Peirce et de Duhem. Cet article esquisse le plan d'une telle conception de la signification dans sa relation à la thèse de l'indétermination et évalue les avantages et les implications de cette conception dans le contexte du programme philosophique de Quine lui-même, ainsi que selon l'approche très différente de la signification et de la compréhension élaborée dans l'œuvre de Gadamer.

1.

Quine's indeterminacy of translation is widely regarded as a controversial thesis that challenges most ordinary intuitions about meaning. The traditional conception of meaning, which essentially equates meaning with the proposition expressed by the sentence, simultaneously supplies an answer to two

***Dialogue* 49 (2010), 395–411.**
© Canadian Philosophical Association/Association canadienne de philosophie 2010
doi:10.1017/S0012217310000454

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0012217310000454 Published online by Cambridge University Press

important questions: "What is involved in understanding a sentence?" and "What is involved in correctly translating a sentence?" The answer to both is "meaning": to understand a sentence is to grasp its meaning, and to translate a sentence is to find another sentence with the same meaning. Meaning, on this view, is understood as something substantial, something that is actually there, independent of the interpreter's whim. Quine's indeterminacy thesis implies that we should jettison this picture, for the "notion of propositions as sentence meanings is untenable" (1990b, 102) and "the notion of sameness of meaning is an objectively indefinable matter of intuition" (2000a, 418). Talk of meaning as something that sentences objectively possess, then, is misleading, although Quine has no quarrel with the ordinary ("lexicographer's") conception of meaning, whereby the meaning is thought to be given by something like a dictionary definition (1990b, 57). Such definitions are philosophically innocuous, being mere rules of thumb intended to instruct a speaker in the common uses of words: they tell us more about our social communicative practices than about the intrinsic nature of language and (by extension) of the human mind.

The indeterminacy thesis itself amounts to a claim that, for any empirically derived interpretive theory, "there can be no doubt that rival systems of analytical hypotheses can fit the totality of speech behavior to perfection, and can fit the totality of dispositions to speech behavior as well, and still specify mutually incompatible translations of countless sentences insusceptible of independent controls" (1960, 72). Alternating between such incompatible sets of hypotheses would produce disruptions in the logical structure of the resulting translation, causing incomprehension and bewilderment in a casual listener (1990b, 48; 1990c, 5; 2000a, 417). One can have a preference for one of these sets/theories based on pragmatic considerations; however, there are no objective criteria for choosing one theory over the others, and each theory has different implications for what we take the speaker's meaning to be.

Moreover, no additional evidence can help us resolve the impasse: the competing theories "cover the ground to perfection. … They have missed nothing; the indeterminacy is objective" (2000, 418). It is not the case, Quine explains, that meanings are "elusive or inscrutable" — there is simply "nothing to them" aside from what can be gleaned from the translator's hypothetical guesswork (1990b, 47). There is no pre-existing criterion against which the translation can be measured. Thus, we can distinguish, following Friedman (1975) and some others, between the epistemological and the ontological components of the indeterminacy thesis. On the side of epistemology the claim is that — given the translator's resources — we cannot decide which of the rival theories is the right one; on the side of ontology, it is asserted that there is no one right theory for translators to discover, that the meaning we are after does not exist apart from the translator's "fumbling procedures" (Quine 1990b, 47). Importantly, this does not merely apply to the inter-linguistic case; heeding the analogy between using different languages and different uses of the "same" language,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0012217310000454 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Quine concludes that indeterminacy also applies at home (1990b, 48). Our utterances generally do not have an objective meaning.

If true, the thesis has at least one very important consequence: namely, semantic interpretation of the speaker's utterances cannot serve as an unequivocal guide to his mental states; the link between the meaning of one's sentences and the physical states of one's brain is severed a priori. Not surprisingly, then, some of Quine's most prominent critics — Chomsky (1969), Rorty (1972), and Friedman (1975) — considered his thesis to be a direct attack on the scientific status of linguistics, motivated primarily by Quine's commitment to behaviourism and physicalism. The accusation is somewhat difficult to evaluate primarily because Quine's own interpretation of the significance of the thesis continued to evolve throughout his career. Thus, in his earlier writings the problem of indeterminacy was clearly linked to establishing the limits of the natural science proper and, consequently, to Quine's own physicalistic conception of what constituted a matter of fact. In his late work, such as *Pursuit of Truth*, the emphasis shifts to the problem of the public nature of communicative practices and the inevitability of the interpreter's contribution in co-determining the speaker's meaning.

Quine himself insisted that behaviourism is crucial and physicalism is not. Indeterminacy thesis, according to him, can survive "the rankest mentalistic ontology" (1990; 1990a). Thus, Quine does not exclude meanings simply on the account of their being non-physical entities; it appears, in fact, that he would be prepared to countenance them — at least as a verbal shortcut for a little-understood underlying mechanism — had someone been able to show that a difference in meaning invariably corresponds to some independently verifiable difference elsewhere. Quine's view is that it does not. Mutually incompatible manuals of translation, on his view, "can conform to all the same distributions of speech dispositions. But the only facts of nature that bear on the correctness of translation are speech dispositions (1986, 429). Hence, when it comes to interpreting meaning there is no matter of fact. The transition from the statement that there is no natural or physical fact that corresponds to a difference in meaning to the statement that, when it comes to meaning, there is generally no matter of fact is underwritten by a physicalist bias: even if we admit that there is no change without a corresponding physical change, it does not follow that there are no facts other than those that can be stated in the language of physics. One could, for example, argue along with Rorty that (even in physics) there is not much to being a matter of fact besides having a "rational procedure for reaching agreement about what to assert" (Rorty 1972, 453). But this is of a secondary importance. If we accept that meaning makes no difference on a physical level then the link between traditional semantics and the physiological study of the brain is already severed: since there can be no difference in mental state without some difference in the underlying physical state, the indifference of physical substratum to different ascriptions of meaning indicates that nothing definitely corresponds to meaning inside the head.

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It is tempting to see this conclusion as an unfortunate outcome of Quine's behaviouristic methodology. If maintaining that all we can learn about meaning must be gleaned from the speaker's overt verbal behaviour leads us to indeterminacy then a natural way to escape the conundrum is to say that, contrary to our assumptions, meaning must transcend all possible behavioural evidence. Two considerations can be adduced in response. First of all, restricting evidence to verbal behaviour is not as arbitrary as it may seem: if we assume, with Quine, that the meaning of sentences in language is a function of what individual speakers actually mean by them, then it is not clear what other kind of evidence would have a *direct* bearing on what a given individual speaker has in mind. Additional sources of evidence, such as a testimony of a bi-lingual, can be of heuristic use but, strictly speaking, another person's testimony cannot be admitted as a reliable determinant of what a speaker has in mind when she utters a sentence. There are many such prudential considerations that can help us carry on a conversation or coordinate a joint sequence of actions; but when our concern is exclusively with fixing the meaning of the speaker's sentences, the speaker's verbal behaviour seems to be the only unquestionable evidential source. Secondly, insufficiency of evidence to determine a choice between two theories — the underdetermination of theory by evidence — is an epistemological matter, which by itself does not warrant any ontological commitments even if we have exhausted all the evidence that is potentially available to creatures like ourselves. There may be things that we can never know. Quine's behaviourism, then, underwrites the epistemological component of his thesis, but cannot by itself reach all the way to securing the ontological one. To show that there are no meanings takes more than showing that in many cases we cannot quite make them out.

The intention of this paper is to suggest that most of Quine's negative conclusions with respect to meaning are already implied in the Peirce-Duhem conception of meaning, which Quine has sometimes cited as his starting point. "If we recognize with Peirce that the meaning of a sentence turns purely on what would count as evidence for its truth, and if we recognize with Duhem that theoretical sentences have their evidence not as single sentences but only as larger blocks of theory, then" says Quine, "the indeterminacy of translation of theoretical sentences is the natural conclusion" (1969, 80-81). It is also my intention to explain why this particular conception of meaning is important and worth retaining. The line of argument laid out here is not explicitly worked out in Quine's own writings and may, on some points, depart from his own intentions; however, it is strongly suggested by some of Quine' signature conceptual moves and results in a plausible (if somewhat unexpected) view of meaning. Quine, for his part, considered the defense of the indeterminacy thesis which starts with the Peirce-Duhem view to be an attractive option, in spite of its troubling affinity with the much-criticized verificationist approaches to meaning (1990b, 135).

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2.

Although, to the best of my knowledge, Quine never explicitly stated precisely why he felt drawn to Peirce's pragmatist theory of meaning, some possible reasons are not hard to fathom. Quine was never a devout Peircean,[1] nor a pragmatist in any relevant sense. Instead, it appears that he was interested in a general conception of meaning that would be adequate to the needs of a broad naturalism and "empirical spirit," which he believed himself to share with pragmatists like Dewey (1969, 26). In fact, it is from Dewey that Quine claims to have learned that meaning is not a psychic entity but rather a property of one's public behavior.[2] The shared insistence on the primacy of the public aspects of meaning must have been one of the things that attracted Quine to the pragmatist theory.

The peculiar nature of this predilection for the public is, to my mind, best captured by using Ricoeur's distinction between "language" and "discourse" — formulated coincidentally without any reference to the positions at stake. "Language," says Ricoeur, can be thought of as a system "constituted of finite sets of discrete entities," none of which possess a meaning outside the system. Its chief virtue lies "in the combinatory capacity and the quasi-algebraic possibilities pertaining to such sets" (Ricoeur 1976, 5). This is a conception of language congenial to Chomsky's (comp. Chomsky 1980, 51-2). Language, in this sense, does not depend on its public employment; it can be fully understood in terms of competence, without any reference to use. Determination of meaning, accordingly, would be completely internal to the system and, in the final analysis, dictated by the physiology of the brain. A minimal unit of "discourse," on the other hand, is a pair: subject-predicate. Unlike the abstract system of language, discourse is essentially concerned with truth, with making assertions about the world (Ricoeur 1976, 20). Because of this, discourse essentially incorporates a referential function. However, language has reference only when used. Hence, meaning in discourse is determined by what transpires in the public exchange, by the way words are used in specific situations, and is only indirectly affected by the relations that obtain between linguistic entities in one's head. Both Quine and the pragmatists would find this second approach to meaning to be more congenial to their aims.

Even more to the point, Peirce's notion of meaning is modelled on the procedure for determining the empirical content of a statement in natural science. Thus, he insists that the pragmatist method of ascertaining the meaning of an utterance "is no other than that experimental method by which all the successful sciences … have reached the degrees of certainty that are severally proper to them today" (Peirce 1998a, 400-401); in other words, the meaning of a sentence is ultimately secured by the sum total of the empirical predictions which can be derived from it. Just like Quine, then, Peirce projects his analysis of understanding in science to the analysis of meaning in general; and just like Quine, he prudently restricts his analysis to the concepts concerned with the

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statement of objective fact, i.e., those which, in Quine's idiom, could be said to possess some cognitive import.[3]

The attraction of the Peircean view, especially for someone like Quine, consists in its ability to accommodate the complexity of the empirically based meaning-relationships. Peirce's upper-level theoretical conceptions are not reducible to a series of observations; they are more than just summaries of our empirical encounters. Their ties with the immediate experience are much more complicated: namely, when taken in the context of the speaker's other beliefs, they entail (or must entail) what Quine would call categorical conditionals; i.e., sentences that declare the speaker's expectations with regard to the events that must transpire should certain empirical conditions be fulfilled. More often than not, the connection between the theoretical and the empirical is not transparent, and can be fully exposed only by means of an involved conceptual analysis, tracing the various implications of a conception within the grander structure of our beliefs.

The question that naturally arises is how applicable this model of meaning-fixation, derived from natural science, is to the analysis of meaning in ordinary conversation. Is it not simply too far removed from our ordinary intuitions about meaning to serve as a plausible candidate theory thereof? In a way, it is not. Thus, the Socratic philosophical tradition distinguishes between successfully using a word or a sentence (thinking that one knows what it means) and *really* knowing what one means by it. The real meaning, on this model, is clarified and brought forth in the process of a dialectical investigation, wherein the implications of the speaker's initial statement are examined in the light of his or her other beliefs. The idea that the speaker's meaning in uttering a sentence is identical with what he thinks the sentence implies is as intuitively plausible as any other; all the more so because this conception of meaning enables us to explain what grasping a speaker's meaning amounts to: namely, knowing what to expect from the speaker under some specifiable set of circumstances related to the content of his utterance. What Peirce (and Quine) add to this sketch is the insistence that, in clarifying the meaning of our sentences, we should privilege those series of implications which terminate in empirical checkpoints, which serve as the touchstones of public accountability in the discourse about objective reality.

3.

So far, there is little in the Peircean account of meaning we have discussed that would suggest either indeterminacy or elimination of meaning. The indeterminacy arises only once this account is complemented by Quine's version of Duhem's holism. According to Duhem, within a physical theory, the empirical content of most sentences within the theory cannot be specified without invoking the entire theory; i.e., separate sentences do not possess well-defined empirical interpretations. Quine extends Duhem's holism to natural language, treating the speaker's language as containing an implicitly held theory of

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reality, inviting thereby reactions like Putnam's, who simply says that Quine treats speakers like "walking theories."[4] When this picture of meaning is combined with the sense of informality that reigns ordinarily in the natural-language discourse, what results is a fairly straightforward argument against retaining the notion of a determinate meaning residing in speaker's mind.[5]

By Peirce's criterion, a basic unit of meaning would be a sentence the warranted assertion of which is tied directly to a well-defined range of intersubjectively appreciated empirical circumstances. Quine calls such sentences "observation sentences." But thinking and talking about the world requires something more than stating that which meets the eye. We are in the habit of looking for relationships between the different portions of our experience and finding better ways of grasping these relationships in language. The sentences that we use to designate the relationships we perceive in the world around us are called by Quine "theoretical sentences." Theoriticity, here, is not (yet) understood in terms of belonging to a theory; instead, it is conceived of as the opposite of observation — as something that transcends specific circumstances and incorporates an element of conjectural generality. "Summers here are rainy" would qualify as a theoretical sentence because it goes beyond indicating particular instances; in fact, most of our ordinary speech is "theoretical" in this sense.

The problem with theoretical sentences is that, insofar as their function is to designate conceptual products of our internal activity, their meanings are not, so to speak, on public display in the way that the meanings of observational sentences are. Moreover, there are no rules according to which theoretical sentences must be derived from the collections of their observational counterparts. Our theoretical vocabulary, as Quine puts it, "is acquired by a series of irreducible, short leaps of analogy, which are taken on only fragmentary evidence" (Gibson 1982, 94). There are good reasons for tolerating this informality, since the looseness of formulation is frequently accompanied by a real increase in explanatory and predictive power.[6] After all, the purpose of our theoretical conjectures is to take us beyond the immediately apparent. However, these palpable gains come at a price: thus, a sweeping generalization usually enlarges its explanatory scope by sacrificing the clarity of the intended meaning — thereby compromising our ability to form a judgment regarding its truth by putting it to a test.

The amount of informality allowed in the transition from observational to theoretical sentences, the "empirical slack" in Quine's idiom, is carefully negotiated within scientific communities. The obverse side of tolerance, here, is the problem of the underdetermination of theory by data whereby "physical theories can be at odds with each other and yet compatible with all possible data even in the broadest sense" (Quine 1970, 179). In ordinary conversation, on the other hand, the setting of the proper balance between informality and precision (or clarity) is left at the mercy of the individual speakers. Increasing tolerance for the empirical slack, here, results, just as it does in science, in the proliferation

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of coherent non-equivalent interpretive possibilities. A speaker who makes a point of "sticking to the facts" leaves little to imagination, but there is little doubt as to what he means; a speaker more inclined to speculation often commands attention with more grace, although we are bound to wonder if we are really getting his meaning right. Science, for the purposes of this discussion, may be best thought of as a limiting case of a highly regimented social discourse.

Returning to the plight of theoretical sentences, we are forced to acknowledge that their connection to observational statements may, by itself, be so tenuous as to virtually preclude the possibility of deciding whether a particular observation has any bearing on the truth of a theoretical statement, and if so then what kind. In fact, on Quine's view, "single theoretical sentences do not always or usually have a (separable) meaning to call their own; they have their meanings only when connected to larger blocks of theory" (Gibson 1982, 81). What this means is that, in deciding on the relationship between an observation and a theoretical sentence, we usually consult other theoretical sentences related to the sentence of interest. Thus, to decide if rain on seven days out of thirty confirms or disconfirms the statement that "summers here are rainy," we usually ask questions related to defining "raininess" in our special case — for instance, by inquiring about the average amounts of rainfall throughout the year. What Quine claims, then, is that seeing sentences as a part of a larger cluster of beliefs, or a "theory," is more often than not required for a tolerably clear grasp of their empirical meanings. This, in an outline, is Quine's version of Duhem's holism.

To recapitulate, a sentence can be said to possess an articulate discursive meaning only in two cases: if it is an observational sentence or as a part of a larger theory. Therefore, insofar as the speech of others includes sentences other than observational, we have no choice but to interpret their sentences as parts of theories, or clusters of beliefs. To interpret Baron Collingwood's actions at Trafalgar we need to assume that his actions were informed by an understanding (or "theory") of the battle unfolding in front of him. Similarly, to interpret the chatter of two girls at a perfume counter we need to assume that their sentences are informed by a certain idea (or "theory") of how things are in certain quarters of the world. What is meant by "theory," in the weakest sense, is simply any cluster of beliefs capable of specifying (however informally) its own conditions of verification. Understood thus, theories may range in sophistication from tracking the motion of celestial bodies to tracking the moves of Pedro the mouse around the kitchen; they may employ formalized vocabulary and sophisticated calculi or informal lexicon and plain common sense.

It appears that, in order to meaningfully extend the application of Duhem's thesis beyond science so as to include ordinary speech, we need to suspend our habit of talking about theories exclusively in terms of (natural) science and to recognize, instead, the more mundane aspects of theorizing — aspects

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concerned with routine challenges posed by our living environment. Accordingly, we should stop thinking of theories as being always well-defined monolithic structures, with key postulates and assumptions explicitly laid out. If we take Quine at his word, even a scientist "does not tabulate in advance the whole fund of theoretical tenets and technical assumptions …that are needed in addition to his currently targeted hypothesis in order to imply the observation categorical of his experiment. It would be a Herculean labor," he adds, "not to say Augean" (1990c, 12). Informal theories that most speakers can be said to hold about portions of their everyday worlds are, of course, much more likely to resemble the legendary stables, in point of orderliness, than they do a scientific theory. Moreover, as Quine recognizes, it makes sense to talk about people employing different theories or conceptual schemes on different occasions (1981, 41). So the caricature of "walking theories" should really read "walking assemblies of theories," with theories, for the most part, understood to be disorderly and loosely defined.

4.

What reasons do we have for thinking that the speech of our casual interlocutors is informed by anything like an articulate theory? Quine's writings would seem to suggest that the answer is "virtually none." Development of a regimented theoretical vocabulary requires an extraordinary effort of sustained formalizing reflection. In Quine's words, theoretical languages emerge only through distinct acts of "conceptualization" (1960, 10), wedding a determinate experiential content to a determinate linguistic form. Emergence of a theory, then, is usually a result of solving a problem: of successfully articulating the manifold of concrete experience in a compact and organized idiom. It would be odd to expect such demanding intellectual feats from an ordinary speaker under the normal run of things; especially since, according to Quine, our mastery as speakers of language is evaluated simply by the ability to consistently generate socially appropriate responses that form a loosely-defined grouping around something called a social norm (1960, 85). Such a simple performative criterion, of course, can be easily met by using means much less extravagant than explicit theorizing.

In fact, Quine recognizes this and, while his radical translator may be engaged in reconstructing the speaker's "theory," she does proceed for the most part informally, exploiting simple heuristic mechanisms that people resort to in their daily interactions. "Practical psychology," says Quine (1990b, 46), "is what sustains our radical translator along the way, and the method of his psychology is empathy." Nonetheless, theoretical reconstruction is unavoidable, for what we seek is not merely a passing agreement with the speaker but a sense of how his use of language may systematically differ from our own. We can always acquiesce in our own conceptual scheme, regarding it as natural, and project it empathetically onto another speaker — and this much will almost always suffice for practical purposes. But when meaning itself is on trial,

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we cannot simply impute to a speaker the theories and ways of classifying things that we ourselves take for granted (1990b, 42).

This line of thought suggests a critical take on indeterminacy advocated at one point by Alston. On his view, indeterminacy reduces to a "methodological issue between inside and outside, between a participant stance and a spectator stance" (Alston 1986, 67). If this were so, there would be no indeterminacy in our own case — we would really know what we mean; and indeterminacy in the case of others would be an artifact of the interpreter's "spectator" stance. This, in my opinion, is an uncharitable reading of indeterminacy: the real issue is not the purported asymmetry between the interpreter's stance vis-à-vis his own thoughts and those of the speaker, but the demand for a *systematic* reconstruction of meaning which prompts us to impose upon the speaker's beliefs a degree of theoretical coherence which they are almost certain not to possess.

Quine's conception of meaning, as mentioned before, can be read as an extrapolation of some intuitions about meaning that have been with us for a long time. The tradition which he ends up following associates meaning with a sense of intellectual responsibility; it treats speakers' utterances as products of deliberate thought; it requires that in order to mean something one must be able to explain what one means. What Quine and Peirce add to this is an empiricist demand for explanations that terminate in publicly testable predictions.

One feature of their theory that is easy to overlook is its normative character, and the criteria that it imposes on knowing what one means are rather stringent. The normative aspect is actually explicit in Peirce, who proffers the definition which Quine picks up as the one that should help us attain the greatest grade of clarity of meaning vis-à-vis the more mundane and common approaches (Peirce 1998). It is, in fact, supposed to be the grade of clarity of meaning that would be appropriate in science. It is not surprising that meaning as encountered in ordinary speech would turn out to be hopelessly indeterminate by such a standard. This, however, does not imply that the standard itself should be dismissed. To portray the speakers as *systematically* interpretable requires adopting *some* standard of consistency and rationality, which empirical speakers are not likely to live up to. We cannot systematically reconstruct a theory as being whimsically loose at random points or interpret a speaker as erratically inconsistent. The very idea of a system implies a strong organizing principle and, in this role, Quine's conception of meaning is no worse off than the commonly invoked ideal of rationality is in explaining human action.

And what are the implications of adopting this standard? First of all, in compiling our theories of meaning we would be obliged to treat any given utterance as an expression of a belief which itself belongs to some thought-out theory, while fully realizing that the speaker is probably not aware of holding any such theory. The imposition, however, would be only partial since, in the next move, the translator would attempt to test his ascriptive hypothesis by soliciting the speaker's response to another sentence that the hypothesis implies. Yet, in the end, indeterminacy still obtains in the end because, in Quine's

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words, "the radical translator is bound to impose as much as she discovers" (1990b, 49). Fixing meaning then becomes a collaborative effort in which one can reach more or less satisfactory results; however, what one cannot reach is the speaker's original meaning, because it usually does not exist in the articulated form in which the interpretive theory tends to recover meanings. Meaning articulated in the form of sentences is always a conjecture, a guess at meaning, which itself exists only as an ideal limit of what one would have said had his meaning been articulate enough to satisfy the norms of our theory of meaning.

The suggestion that meaning (in the sense that interests Quine) exists only in the hypothetical modality, as a conjecture, is by no means supposed to imply that conjectures — and, consequently, meanings — are entities of some sort. We can guess something right without it being there in any ordinary sense. Imagine a film director who commissions a composer to write a score for a scene and explains to him what he has in mind as far as the music goes. The composer tries a couple of things, only to hear "No, that's not it"; until finally he comes back with something and the director exclaims "That's precisely it. Now you have really got it right!" The manner of speech used here is misleading precisely in the same way as the talk about getting somebody's meaning right: for the "it" which we "get" has never existed — except as a hypothetical projection — up to the very moment when we agreed that we have got it "right." There was no melody in the director's mind; only a kind of disposition to react favourably (or not) to different specific interpretations of his intentions. After all, one readily imagines that the composer could have gotten it right by playing a somewhat different tune. Thus, one can express what they mean and be understood without there being such a thing as their actual meaning.

Insofar as sentences pretend to a cognitive value they are to be treated not as assertions but as guesses as to what would do justice to the situation in hand. Meaning, in this sense, begins only when one starts guessing at what she is trying to say, and it terminates in understanding whenever — alone or in collaboration with others — she arrives at a formulation that sounds right enough, that seems to do justice to the matter at hand. There is no meaning there before we start, no proposition to be encoded in words; there is a psychological state, to be sure, a disposition — but it does not have a ready-made verbal equivalent. This may be the reason why Quine resisted the suggestion (Friedman 1975) that neurological evidence can help resolve the problem of indeterminacy:[7] the speaker's brain does not contain the formulations that the interpreter is after.

"Reflection should make clear," writes Hookway, "that Quine denies that even what *I* say has any determinate meaning for me" (1988, 142). With a minor qualification this is true. Ordinarily we feel that we know what we mean, and ordinarily we do not scrutinize our conceptual schemes and our ontological commitments in the way that a radical interpreter would. So we do know what we mean but not in the full-fledged sense that Quine's theory intends. When it comes to measuring our own mental life by the public standard of meaning that Quine defends, it is almost inevitable that we shall feel uncertain

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about what it is that we truly mean by our sentences. As Quine puts it, "[R] reflective persons unswayed by wishful thinking can themselves now and again have cause to wonder what, if anything, they are talking about." (1960, 242) The procedure that these reflective persons would have to go through to arrive at some provisional appraisal of their own meaning, serves as the template for the interpretive procedure in general and involves imputing to the speaker something like a consistent theory concerning the matter at hand.

Consequently, one becomes a speaker capable of meaning something approaching determinacy only to the degree that one is already a competent interpreter of the speech of others, and can follow an analogous procedure in her own case. She herself can be said to really *mean* something only to the degree that she is prepared (at least in principle) to go on interpreting (or explaining) her own meaning. The success of the interpreter, then, is measured by his ability not to "match" the speaker's mental state at the moment of utterance, but to anticipate how a speaker would interpret her own utterance given the opportunity to do so.

Indeterminacy is certainly troublesome on the abstract epistemological level; yet, it rarely impedes our interpretive efforts in practice. Moreover, it is usually possible to impose stricter limits on the space within which indeterminacy can arise. The degree of practical indeterminacy depends, first of all, on how much structure the speaker's theory possesses; and second, on how much semblance obtains between the speaker's and the interpreter's ways of reconstructing a theory. Therefore, indeterminacy could be considerably reduced by asking the speaker to work her theories out in an explicit form and by suggesting a method for doing so. In a way, we really could have reasons to ask our speakers to read *Word and Object* before entering into a conversation.[8] As Quine points out, the paraphrase by the speaker of her own meaning can be taken as paradigmatic for regimenting translations of this kind (1960, 160).

Paraphrasing is simply a species of interpreting under a set of specified rules. Like any interpretation it increases our chances at understanding each other but, in the process, it also changes what we intended to say. As Quine points out, the product of an internal translation (paraphrase) is likely to be non-synonymous with the originally intended utterance (1960, 159). Instead of an utterance we get an interpretation of an utterance by the speaker. Essentially, this is a version of Plato's problem of indeterminacy of meaning whereby the language used by the speaker to represent his thought precludes the recovery of the originally intended meaning (Gadamer 1980, 112). Quine solves this problem by assuring us that, when it comes to empirical meaning, we could never get anything more than an interpretation. Interpretation or paraphrase by the speaker herself would, actually, seem to be in an epistemologically privileged position. When it comes to ordinary understanding, then, we have no serious reasons for worry; instead, we are free to experiment with different strategies for reducing indeterminacy and rendering our discourse more transparent to our interlocutors.

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Meaning can never be uniquely determined, but it does admit of consecutive approximations. In fact, indeterminacy may have a productive aspect. Gadamer, for example, argues that indeterminacy of meaning grounds the possibility of a dialectic exchange (ibid., 111).[9] The "un-saturatedness" of meaning suggested by indeterminacy, on such a view, is precisely what makes conversations possible by allowing for a dialectical elucidation of the terms under discussion. Meaning becomes co-determined in the exchange, for it is only in the context of conversation that (empirical) meaning, understood in terms of commitments about the shared world, comes to the fore. The interpreter begins by trying to locate the outlines of the speaker's theory within the set of her own theoretical options, but her responses, intended to confirm the correctness of her guesses, prompt the speaker to begin to articulate his theory in certain ways suggested by the interpreter's reaction. Thus, the way that our interlocutor responds to us may prompt us to draw a distinction where before we did not see a need for one, to spell out something that we have grasped intuitively, to abandon an untenable commitment, or even to see the whole matter in a new light. In other words, we learn from each other while fixing meaning.

5.

The comparison between Gadamer and Quine is, in some ways, ironic. After all, Quine is a notorious champion of scientism, whereas Gadamer is known for his staunch opposition to humanities' modelling themselves on the methods of natural science. Yet, their views on the problem of meaning appear to be somewhat compatible. On a closer examination, this similarity is not as surprising as it may seem. Gadamer, of course, is reacting against the Romantic tradition in hermeneutics wherein the interpreter is supposed to almost literally divine the author's meaning; meanwhile, Quine is reacting to the philosophical tradition which is prone to seeing sentences as mere stand-ins for its perennial favourites like ideas and propositions. Both are concerned, in their own different ways, with the demystification of mind and communicative practices.

From Gadamer's point of view, Quine would fit within the tradition of scientists wary of philosophy's encroachment on their territory. As he puts it, "[T]he more honestly and rigorously science understands itself, the more mistrustful it has become towards all promises of unity" (Gadamer 1983, 7). The indeterminacy thesis, of course, re-establishes a firm boundary between philosophy and science when it comes to the study of language. Since meaning, in the traditional philosopher's sense, is not really something that is present in the speaker's mind, conceptual analysis of meaning cannot be of much use in advancing the scientific study of language; conversely, physics can be considered complete without accounting for meaning's functioning in interpretation. Meaning has to do with norms of rationality which have no echo in physical theory. Hermeneutics and the physical sciences, then, should belong in two separate compartments, although there is no secret as to which compartment Quine thinks is worth taking more seriously.

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To think that this "separate and unequal" arrangement could appeal to Gadamer would be a mistake, for he thinks that the relationship to language — mediated by the philosophical dialectic — is primary, and one that we cannot step out of (Gadamer 1983, 164). Indeed, while Quine shows us that physics does not underwrite understanding and meaning, he never explicitly considers the other side of the issue: the way in which indeterminacy thesis affects the fortunes of science which, after all, is a form of discourse. If science were just a mathematical formalism we employed to keep track of and predict the external impingements on our sensory surfaces the problem would not arise; but, as Quine points out, the primary goal of modern science is not this, but rather explanation and understanding (1990b, 20). So we do run into the problem of indeterminacy of meaning head-on.

There is a long trail of discussion in professional literature about the difference between underdetermination of theory by data, which admittedly occurs in science, and indeterminacy, from which science is supposed to be immune. Why does indeterminacy affect the relationship between a translator and a speaker but fail to disturb the relationship between a geologist and his rock? The answer seems to be: because geologists do not think that rocks are capable of meaning or interpreting anything. Indeterminacy arises when, in the process of interpreting an utterance, we impute to the speaker a theory which it is possible for him to hold. Interpretation is a theory at a second remove: it is a theory of another's theory. Rocks cannot have theories, although we can have theories about rocks. As Feleppa points out, the advantage of physical sciences is that they "can impose a scheme on physical reality, without concern that its preexisting scheme is distorted" (1988, 123). This is why a physicist is always justified in choosing the simplest theory that accounts for the observed phenomena, while the interpreter is not. As Follesdal explains, if we could always opt for the simplest interpretive theory, Quine's translation would be on par with an empirical theory (Follesdal 1973, 295).[10] However, there is no reason to believe that, in interpreting a speaker, we should always choose the simplest theory or, for that matter, that the speaker has the same criteria of simplicity as we do.

The more interesting question is whether the way that scientists understand each other is affected by indeterminacy. Since Quine, to the best of my knowledge, does not offer any argument to the contrary, it is tempting to say that it is and to start treating dialogue between scientists as a limiting case of an ordinary exchange wherein the sources of indeterminacy are reduced to a minimum. As Quine explains, indeterminacy results when the "empirical slack" responsible for underdetermination recurs in "second intension" (1970, 179). In the first, it creates the possibility of incompatible empirically equivalent theories; in the second, then, it has to do with the insufficiency of empirical criteria for choosing one of the alternatives. Indeterminacy, then, is proportional to the amount of the "empirical slack" that we are willing to acknowledge in the first place (ibid., 181). The more tolerant we decide to be, the more

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empirically equivalent theories we can form and the harder it is going to be to exclude candidate theories on the basis of the forthcoming evidence. Conversely, reducing the empirical slack must result in reduction of indeterminacy. More informal discourses, with less formal structure, would be prey to higher levels of indeterminacy. The more regimented discourses, such as the discourse of physics, could probably ignore it on most occasions: physics, then, is not an exception but merely a limiting case.

This interpretation would accord with Quine's own conclusion that one should "recognize the indeterminacy of translation of such portions of natural science which he is willing to regard as underdetermined by all possible observations (ibid., 183). Science, then, is not automatically immune to indeterminacy. Yet, at other times Quine speaks as if the meaning of sentences in science were virtually transparent; as if there were no place for misunderstanding or dialectical elucidation; as if the pronouncements of science, when carried on properly, were somehow univocal. For example, when Quine rejects first philosophy and advises us instead to take as a starting point the science of our day, one is left with the impression that contemporary science presents us with a monolithic logically structured picture. After Kuhn, however, this image of science is difficult to maintain. It appears more reasonable to concede that science is more like an ongoing conversation, which gives rise to problems of interpretations it itself cannot ultimately provide a solution to. Hence, we can yield to Gadamer in admitting that hermeneutical dimension is in some ways more encompassing than natural science but without, however, giving up on Quine's conviction that science is ultimately our best guide to what there is. Accounting for the success of natural science in this regard is a complicated matter, but it is tempting to suggest that the grade of articulateness required by the Peirce-Duhem criterion of meaning may be, in part, responsible for this success.

Notes

1 Quine's attitude towards Peirce is perhaps best captured by a phrase from his review of Peirce's *Collected Works*: "[W]hile there is considerable dross, there is much gold" (1933, 229); and this should be further qualified by saying that the gold Quine found in Peirce, in this series of reviews as well as in his memorial address, inevitably had to do with innovations in formal logic (i.e., invention of quantification) rather than with the more unorthodox pragmatist views.

2 See Gibson 1982, 64.

3 There are, of course, major differences as well. For example, for Peirce all cognition is necessarily referred to the notion of rational conduct, whereas for Quine this connection does not seem to play any role worth mentioning.

4 See Solomon 1989, 127–9.

5 This is not Quine's own explicit argument for indeterminacy. The relationship between the two will be discussed in the last section of this paper.

6 In technical language, the "looseness" of theoretical formulations is warranted (a) by the "ill-assortedness" of observation conditionals that are "in fact true in the world,"

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meaning that one's data does not spontaneously organize itself into a regular pattern (b) by the recognition that a "loose" formulation is usually capable of "encompassing" more of the true observation conditionals than is a "tight" one (Gibson 1982, 88-9).

7 Quine, of course, never denied the usefulness of neurological investigations to the study of language in general. He strongly believed that, in linguistics, physiology of the brain constitutes the ultimate level of explanation. His reticence on the subject is specific to indeterminacy.

8 This was originally introduced as a humorous suggestion by Glock 2003, 179.

9 Gadamer is referring, of course, to Plato's conception of indeterminacy which, nonetheless, coincides with the epistemological component of Quine's thesis.

10 This is not a line that Quine himself would take.

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