Yet Another Dogma of Empiricism

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1. The *Other* Dogma of Empiricism[1]

Quine's well-known rejection of the "theory of meaning" – conceived of as a theory of intensional notions such as synonymy, analitycity, intension, and so on – and his acceptance of the "theory of reference" is well known. The discrepancy surely lies in the difference between the paradigms for these theories.

Already in *Mathematical Logic*, Quine emphasizes that "there is no denying that we know what it means to say that a given statement is true – absolutely True – just as clearly as we understand the given statement itself." He continues:

> The circumstances under which the statement:
>
> 1.   Jones smokes
>
> would be said to be true, e.g., are precisely the circumstances under which Jones himself would be said to smoke. Truth *of the statement* (1) is no more mysterious than the notions of Jones and smoking" (Quine 1940:4; emphasis in text; statement renumbered).

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* As it has become usual with my work, this paper has been delivered orally (without notes and without even Quine's papers and books) in countless opportunities. However, in this case, no recordings exist. In response to requests, I have, hesitantly, agreed to write it down. Even though the version given here was written, I believe the reader will profit considerably from imagining it spoken, with proper pauses and emphases.

[1] In this paper Quine's conventions on quotation are followed much of the time. However, quotation marks are sometimes omitted when the meaning is clear, especially when italics are used.

Similarly for predicates and 'is true of' – e.g., 'is spherical' is true precisely of those objects that are spherical; 'is prime' is true precisely of the prime numbers, and so on.

The same cannot be said for analyticity, synonymy, and so on. I will not rehearse the familiar arguments here, since I wish to show that similar arguments can be given for a view that I call "affirmativism" (I might have called it "positivism", but this term has already been preempted.) I call the view I criticize "negativism"; its advocates are "negativists".

According to the *negativists*, in addition to truth, the Tarskian disquotation paradigm allows us to make sense of a notion called "falsity". (Hence it is supposedly part of the 'theory of reference.') How is *falsity* to be explained? Well, one explanation invokes an operation they call "negation": to say that

2. 'Jones smokes' is false

is just to say

3. ~(Jones smokes)

Or, verbally, 'Jones does not smoke' – or, more literally, 'It is not the case that Jones smokes'.

But how does the negativist explain the operation '~' used in the explanation of falsity? Why, by a "truth table", thus:

4.   <u>p</u>   <u>~p</u>
        T   F
        F   T

But surely this invokes the notion of falsity we are supposed to be explaining. Is our argument flatly circular? Well, it has the form, figuratively speaking, of a closed curve in space.[2]

Similar remarks apply to attempts to provide a parallel explanation in the metalanguage. A statement is *false* when it is not true. Symbolically:

5. *A* is false.

means:

5. ~(A is true)

(Some negativists may doubt this explanation. Some sentences, they say, are "neither true nor false", or have "a truth-value gap" – whatever all this may mean. Let us leave these people aside. They only complicate matters.)

But the explanation of falsity in terms of negation in the metalanguage is obviously subject to the same problems we have found in the previous explanation with negation in the object language.

Enough of this. Consider a language with only affirmative connectives – for example, conjunction. To say $\ulcorner(A \wedge B)$ is true$\urcorner$ is to say that *A* and *B* are both true; in each particular case, the explanation is quite parallel with that of 'Jones smokes' as given above. The negativist complains that this explanation is "inadequate". The right explanation must consist in a truth table with three extra lines, traditionally given corresponding to when *A* or *B* might be "false". But it is clear that the affirmative explanation just given is, in fact, fully complete. Similarly, $\ulcorner(A \vee B)$ is true$\urcorner$ means *A* is true or *B* is true. $\ulcorner(x) A(x)$ is true$\urcorner$ says that $A(x)$ is true regardless of what value is assigned to *x*; $\ulcorner(\exists x) A(x)$ is true$\urcorner$ says that for *some* value of *x*, $A(x)$ is true.

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2 Cf. Quine (1951: 30).

Call a first-order language L "affirmative" if it has a finite list of primitive predicates, admits conjunction and disjunction as primitive connectives, and both universal and existential quantifiers. Can such a language be "adequate for science"?

Let's us assume, if only for the sake of argument, that the language would be adequate only if supplemented by negation. However, even the negativist admits, given his "De Morgan laws", that every sentence in the augmented language is logically equivalent to a sentence with negation applied only to the atomic formulae $P_i(\vec{x})$ (put arrow above x), i.e. to primitive predicates followed by variables. Let us extend the language by adding to each predicate P_i a predicate P_i* for its complement. Then everything expressible in the negativistic language remains expressible. True, my terminology – "De Morgan laws", "complements", and so on – is negativistic. But our argument is addressed to negativists; we affirmativists find it superfluous.[3]

I hardly need mention some even more blatant negativistic devices. Carnap, in his *Formalization of Logic* (1943:101), thinks that a proper formal system, in addition to "rules of theoremhood", should contain so-called "rules of rejection". Only if these are given, is the formal system completely clear. Comment on this view is superfluous. It simply takes the negativistic idea as primitive, without explanation.

2. Empiricism without the Dogma

What happens if we adopt the affirmativist view advocated here? First, one of the most difficult points of modern logic, the so-called "paradoxes", immediately vanishes. Each such "paradox" is easily seen to invoke a negativistic notion, and disappears from our point of view.

More important, the quality and civility of our discussion, in philosophy and elsewhere, will considerably improve. Instead of thinking that others hold views that are "false", rather one admits that there are views that we are more or less reluctant to accept. Instead of

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[3] See Quine (1960: 265) on mentalism and physicalism. The argument can also be compared with the negativistic argument form *reductio ad absurdum*. We show even on negativistic premises that negation is superfluous.

branding one's interlocutor's view with the dubious and abusive epithet 'false', one could say, 'I am rather reluctant to endorse your view.' The benefits to the civility and intelligibility of our discourse are indeed enormous.

One defense of negativism comes from our admittedly definite intuitions of falsity. Such sentences as '2 + 2 = 5', 'the moon is made of green cheese', and the like, have a feel that everyone appreciates. These intuitions are blameless in their way, but it would be a mistake to look to them for a sweeping dichotomy (whatever that means) between true and false sentences, "truth" and "falsity".[4]

But, the negativist will argue, 'Aren't you yourself condemning my views as false? What else can you mean?' Well, I am extremely reluctant to accept these views. Indeed, I am extremely reluctant to say that I understand them.

Not that I would completely foreswear the use of negativistic idioms, at least immediately, in our daily discourse. I have just used one myself.[5] And to give a "logical" or "canonical" representation of such notions, perhaps the usual negativistic logic, has a certain role. But in strictly scientific discourse, or serious discourse generally, limning the true and ultimate nature of reality, restriction to affirmitivist terminology is the way to go. The advantages for the civility of our discourse have been described above. And such civil discourse may lead, with greater probability than the usual negativistic talk, to world peace; for many conflicts have been preceded by negativistic condemnations of the assertions of the other side as 'false'. Am I being too hopeful? We shall see.[6]

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[4] See Quine (1960: 66-7).

[5] Cf. Quine (1960: 221)

Addendum

Various people seem to have taken this paper to be a genuine argument for "affirmativism" and have questioned whether the argument is really sound. Should I *deny* this, at the risk of lapsing into a negativistic idiom myself? In any event, the paper is meant as a *parody* of Quine's own arguments, as the footnotes and style should indicate. This is all that needs to be said.

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