

Word and Object, new edition

Willard Van Orman Quine

foreword by Patricia Smith Churchland; preface to
the new edition by Dagfinn Føllesdal



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Foreword

Patricia Smith Churchland

In the winter of 1966 the Philosophy Department at the University of Pittsburgh ran a graduate seminar on a controversial book, *Word and Object*, by W. V. O. Quine. Already contentious for having melted down the profession's favorite tool—the analytic–synthetic distinction—in his much-ballyhooed paper “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” (*Philosophical Review* 60, no. 1 [Jan. 1951]), Quine now went further.

The Pittsburgh seminar divided along these lines: those who adhered to idea that conceptual analysis revealed necessary truths about the way things are and the way the mind works, and those who, siding with Quine, did not. The weekly meetings were scenes of fiercely fought battles, led mainly by the more senior graduate students who well understood the stakes in the debate and who could draw deeply on the history of science and philosophy. Wilfrid Sellars was a powerful figure at Pittsburgh, and though he was dubious about many claims of necessary truth, some still seemed defensible, and Sellars's students mounted a spirited defense.

It was a melee, a rhubarb, a brawl where no holds were barred. And the discussion was not confined to the seminar, but raged all week, over coffee, over beer, and in the common room. Are there any a priori truths, or just highly probable, very strongly held beliefs? Is language essentially just a communicative tool, not a repository of conceptual truths? If concepts change as empirical discoveries are made by the developing sciences, does that hold also for deeply personal concepts like *knowledge*, *free will*, and *consciousness*? Is metaphysics just a batch of questions not yet answered by science? And likewise, for epistemology and philosophy of mind?

For all of us in that memorable seminar, these were questions at the heart of philosophy as practiced in the twentieth century. Quine, it was clear from *Word and Object*, fully realized the implications. As he said, “And philosophy in turn, as an effort to get clearer on things, is not to be distinguished in its essential points of purpose and method from good and

bad science" (*Word and Object*, 1st ed., pp. 3–4; this vol., p. 3). Notice: *purpose and method*. He meant what he said.

Quine taught us that a "conceptual scheme" is a loose and dynamical organization of interconnected beliefs and meanings. He realized that separating beliefs from meanings was mainly a pragmatic, not a principled, business, yielding nothing interesting by way of necessary truths. When important beliefs about the world change, it is evident that meanings change too.¹ In the brain, there would be no principled difference. Consequently, as fast as Sellarsians in the seminar contrived thought experiments to bolster claims about conceptual truths, the Quinean faction dissected them as parochial, circular, or uninformed. They saw no respectable way to test a thought experiment except by an exercise of the imagination, a method sorely in need of a more reliable foundation if it is to tell us anything about how things actually are, as opposed to how someone happens to suppose they are.

The standing strategy among the seminar's Quineans was to challenge in all contexts any claim to necessary truth—to conceptual truth. After all, the obvious necessary "truth" that space was Euclidean had been exposed by science as a falsehood. Other "necessary truths"—such as that knowledge of one's own mental states is incorrigible—suffered comparable indignities. One earnest response was to complain that if the counterexamples were allowed, meaning would change and one's conceptual scheme might fall apart (I am not making this up). Yes, meanings do change, was the reply, and that was precisely Quine's point. Meanings are not essences in Plato's heaven. And so it went.

It took a long time for the monumental significance of Quine's work, including his later essays on naturalizing epistemology, to sink in. Surprisingly, many philosophers went on doing conceptual analysis and pushing alleged necessary truths as though Quine were irrelevant. His main arguments were not so much countered as sidestepped. Conceptual necessities remained fashionable, though as often as not they were merely convictions marketed as necessary truths. In the meanwhile, barely noticed by the profession, the sciences of brain and behavior moved on.

Neuroscience made progress in understanding how brains construct perceptual images from retinal stimulation, how brains learn and remember things, and how brains make decisions, just as Quine had believed it probably would. The idea that the bedrock meanings must correspond to

1. See also Roger Gibson's excellent book, *The Philosophy of W. V. Quine: An Expository Essay* (Tampa: University Press of Florida, 1982).

sense data, rather than objects like dogs and dads, fell apart when it was discovered that early visual processing—in the retina, in the thalamus, and in cortical visual area V1—is not conscious.

Clinical neurology produced striking patient profiles that implied the need for conceptual revision; for example, from split brain subjects in whom conscious awareness was not unified, from cortically blind patients who were nevertheless utterly convinced they could see (Anton's syndrome), and from amnesiac patients who maintained a sense of self despite having lost virtually all autobiographical memory. The logic seemed stark: either you deny the data or you see your conceptual necessities related to "self" or "consciousness" reduced to merely empirical claims whose truth was on the skids.

Psychologists began to study conceptual structure empirically, finding that workaday concepts were not defined in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. Rather, they had a radial structure, with prototypes marking general agreement on what counts as an instance, and strong similarity to the prototype falling off with distance from the center. The boundaries are fuzzy, not sharp, meaning that sometimes there is no right answer to whether an instance falls under a category or not. This holds not only for categories like *vegetable* and *friend*, but also for *knows* and *believes*. Field linguists began to find that linguistic categories tended to reflect local ecology, the groups' history, and the way members of the group made their living. Linguistic universals, long the darlings of theorists, took a drubbing as one by one they fell to the disconfirming data of field linguists.²

Developmental psychologists began to discover what cognitive organization the newborn brings to its world and how cognitive capacities develop and change over time. These discoveries yielded not necessary truths but rather empirical truths about how brains navigate their physical and social worlds.

Of course, a priori truths with no epistemological heft could always be cooked up. As Quine pointedly acknowledged, sure, you could dig in your heels and refuse to acknowledge a change in meaning consequent upon a discovery of fact. If you are stubborn enough, you could insist that fire is an *element* because by *element* we mean *earth, air, fire, and water*. Nonetheless, such intransigence is unlikely to be rewarding. The method, alas, is ad hoc and problematic; it is more similar to bad than to good science.

2. See Daniel Everett, *Language: The Cultural Tool* (New York: Random House/Pantheon, 2011).

And anyhow, the project no longer looks like analysis of concepts actually in use, but a futile exercise in conceptual hygiene aimed at rescuing a discredited idea.

To many whose copy of *Word and Object* had become dog-eared and held together by rubber bands, a wide range of scientific achievements in the brain and behavioral sciences seemed to fit the idea of empirical progress in epistemology that Quine had broadly advocated. Thus at some point in the early 1970s, Paul Churchland and I looked at each other and agreed: it is pretty clear by now that the arguments concerning naturalizing epistemology favor Quine. So let us just get on with it. Neuroscience had become irresistible, and there was no reason to want to resist it. Ditto for psychology, evolutionary biology, and computer science. Others who had initially viewed philosophy as a method for augmenting our understanding of the mind-brain also saw the fertility in the brain and behavioral sciences, and many left philosophy to pursue those sciences. The stalwart conceptual analysts waved us off, cheerfully predicting that nothing of philosophical significance would come from the advancing brain and behavioral sciences. Quine, by contrast, had rightly suspected where this was leading.

I have no doubt that Quine had to muster a great deal of courage in order to publish *Word and Object*, for he was bucking an overwhelmingly powerful tradition of conceptual analysis as a method of advancing knowledge. He was not just biting at its heels; he was rooting out the core. As he calmly noted, he wanted to view language as a physical phenomenon. There are mechanisms underlying language use; there are productive ways to study those mechanisms. Conceptual analysis is not a productive method to address those mechanisms. Suitable clarification is always welcome as a starting point, of course, but forced or phony precision where none exists is counterproductive.

So what is a philosopher to do, if not troll his mind for conceptual truths? The Quinean answer is this: *many* things, including synthesizing across various subfields and theorizing while immersed in and constrained by available facts. Despite much hand-wringing by overwrought philosophers, Quine did not aim to put an end to philosophy, but to remind us of what the older philosophical tradition had always been: broad, encompassing, knowledgeable of everything relevant, and imaginative.