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Reviewed by James Andrew Smith, Jr.

**Review: *Quine and His Place in History*,
edited by Frederique Janssen-Lauret and
Gary Kemp**

James Andrew Smith, Jr.

This volume consists of previously unpublished lectures and correspondence from W. V. Quine and scholarly interpretations of his work. After an introduction by the editors, the volume consists of four parts. Part II consists solely in Ann Lodge, Rolfe A. Leary, and Douglas B. Quine's "Observations on the Contribution of W. V. Quine to Unified Science Theory", a paper about Quine's best friend and college roommate Ed Haskell's Unified Science Theory and Quine and Haskell's personal and scholarly interactions over the years. My review focuses on the introduction and the other three parts: Part I, "Previously Unpublished Papers by Quine", Part III, "Quine's Connection with Pragmatism", and Part IV, "Understanding Quine".

I start with Quine's "Levels of Abstraction", a lecture delivered in 1972 at the First International Conference on Unified Science in New York City. Despite some shortcuts made for the sake of his non-philosophical audience, it is vintage Quine, both stylistically and philosophically. As in many of his lectures and essays, his task in the lecture is to motivate a scientific explication—in this case, an explication of a level of abstraction. One he suggests is this: to be at the n th level of abstraction is to be an entity of type n of the simple theory of types. So, at the zero level of abstraction are individuals such as rodents and mice; at the first level of abstraction are classes of individuals such as classes of rodents and mice, and so on up. After motivating this explication, he takes time to consider a nominalist proposal of reducing such classes to general terms we apply to the members of the classes

proposed for elimination—reducing the class of mice to 'mouse', for example. He says:

The nominalist urge to reduce abstract objects to mere abstract words is both amiable and understandable. For how, one may ask, can people learn to talk about abstract objects—classes, properties—when only concrete objects are present to the senses? This is a good question and I think it admits of a good answer, though not a brief one. We can reconstruct plausible steps whereby people can have learned to talk not only of observable concrete objects but also of abstract ones. Some of the steps proceed by conspicuous analogy and unconscious extrapolation. Some of them depend on confusions. Confusion of sign and object. Confusion, also, of concrete general term with abstract singular. *A priori* the steps are not justifiable. *A posteriori* they gain pragmatic justification: our scientific conceptual scheme is a going concern, and no rigorous way is known of ridding it of sets and numbers and functions and other abstract objects, in form of mere words. The flat-footed way, simply saying that the sets and numbers and functions *are* mere words, runs into technical snags—I repeat—that are not to be analyzed here. (16–17)

While this lecture offers a glimpse into his views on mathematical ontology at the time, it also retraces his views on these matters throughout his career. Early on in his career, Quine found nominalism "amiable and understandable". In [Quine \(1937\)](#)—an unpublished lecture—Quine investigates the possibility discussed in this lecture of reducing classes to general terms (portions quoted in [Mancosu 2008](#) and [Smith forthcoming](#)). Ten years later in [Goodman and Quine \(1947\)](#), Quine with Nelson Goodman attempts a more sophisticated nominalism involving replacement of theories of platonistic mathematics with mention of those theories' concrete proofs—an attempt he came to believe "runs into technical snags". Largely due to these technical snags, he makes a judgment as a scientific philosopher, taking the "scientific conceptual scheme" as "a going concern", that we are justified in maintaining a commitment abstract objects even given the "confusions" that he speculates wrought our commitment to

them—“confusions” he details in Quine (1974). (For discussion of Quine’s work on and attitudes toward nominalism early and late in his career, see Mancosu 2008, Frost-Arnold 2013, Parsons 2014, and Smith forthcoming).

We see here the unity in Quine’s thinking not only by seeing how he retraces the main paths of his thought, but also by seeing how he brings these retracings in contact with his naturalism—his “abandonment of a first philosophy” (1981, 72) in favor of the view that we can only make judgments of truth within a “scientific conceptual scheme”, guided only by scientific method. It is on this basis that we can judge, as he asserts in 1972, that our scientific conceptual scheme is “pragmatically justified” as a going concern. As he says elsewhere, “the naturalistic philosopher begins his reasoning within the inherited world theory as a going concern” (1981, 72), not in first philosophical alienation from it. He therefore concludes that we philosophers must “improve, clarify, and understand the system from within” (*ibid.*), thus using that scheme describe how he “can have learned” the scheme he aims to improve and clarify. I will use the passage from the 1972 lecture, and the naturalism exemplified within it, to situate the rest of the contributions to the volume.

Implicitly presupposed in the passage above is Quine’s meta-ontological view that our ontological commitments to abstract objects stem from the existential consequences of our best current scientific theory. Frederique Janssen-Lauret’s paper clarifies the extent to which Quine takes this meta-ontological position not to imply that ontology is a trivial, anti-realist task as some recent interpreters have. She also puts Quine’s meta-ontology in dialogue with Ruth Barcan Marcus’ meta-ontology, and explains the differences between Quine and Barcan Marcus’ views on and predilections for naturalism and nominalism.

One can see two different kinds of claims about the language of ontology in the passage above and in my description of naturalism. On the one hand, Quine *uses* the “scientific conceptual scheme” in a way which incurs commitments to abstract objects.

But he also *mentions* that conceptual scheme in describing how we “can have learned it”. Peter Hylton’s paper brings out this contrast, arguing that Quine is fruitfully understood as having two *philosophies* of language. He argues that, unlike the Bertrand Russell of the 1910’s, Quine’s account of how we use language and regiment it for the purposes of expressing our ontological commitments is largely independent of his account of how we understand—or in more Quinean terms, learn or “can have learned”—that language.

Quine’s talk of a “pragmatic justification” for belief in abstract objects raises the question: what does Quine mean by “pragmatic”? The two essays in Part III help us answer this question by comparing Quine’s work to the pragmatist tradition. In her comparison of Quine and William James “The Web and the Tree”, Yemima Ben-Menahem argues that Quine and James had closer affinities than Quine himself believed. Robert Sinclair’s paper discusses the influence of C. I. Lewis’s pragmatic conception of the *a priori* on Quine’s early thinking, quoting passages from Quine’s papers for Lewis’ classes when a graduate student at Harvard. He argues that Quine’s later revolt against the analytic-synthetic in “Two Dogmas” (Quine 1951) is, to a significant degree, the result of thinking through problems with Lewis’ strict cleavage between analytic statements which are justified pragmatically and empirical statements which are not. (See Morris 2018 for a recent paper in this vein).

In “Reading Quine’s Claim That No Statement Is Immune to Revision”, Gary Ebbs examines some important fine details of Quine’s aforementioned revolt against the analytic-synthetic in (1951). Many read Quine’s famous claim in Section 6 of (1951) that “no statement is immune to revision” as the claim that “for every statement *S* that we now accept there is a possible rational change in beliefs that would lead one to reject *S*” (123)—that is, that would lead one to judge *S* to be false. Ebbs argues Quine in Section 6 accepts (P):

(P) “No statement we now accept is guaranteed to be part of every scientific theory that we will later come to accept.”

(*ibid.*)

He argues Quine uses his naturalism and modifies Carnap’s observations about theory choice to endorse a “minimalist explication of confirmation”, on which a statement is “confirmed” just when “one accepts it as a part of one’s best current theory” (132). Ebbs argues Quine’s claim that no statement is immune to revision is a rejection of an effort to save analyticity by explicating ‘analytic’ as ‘confirmed come what may’ in this minimal sense of confirmation—as ‘guaranteed to be a part of every scientific theory that we will later come to accept’. To say there are analytic sentences in this sense is to deny (P)—a principle Ebbs claims “all parties to the dispute about analyticity should accept” (133).

What does Quine mean by the “scientific conceptual scheme” he mentions in his lecture? The answer in part depends on how we are to understand ‘scientific’. We gain some insights to Quine’s views on what science is—and possible changes in his career of those views—from the unpublished papers “Preestablished Harmony” and “Response to Gary Ebbs”, along with correspondence between Ebbs and Quine that Ebbs quotes in his framing of these papers in his contribution “Introduction to ‘Preestablished Harmony’ and ‘Response to Gary Ebbs’”. These responses were sent to Ebbs in 1995 in response to Ebbs (1994), a review of Quine’s *Pursuit of Truth* (Quine 1992). (The contents were not published, although details were incorporated into Quine 1996). Ebbs takes Quine’s *Pursuit of Truth* revision of his views from *Word and Object* (Quine 1960) on observation sentences and stimulus meaning to commit Quine to an expansion of what counts as science, given that Quine in (1992) affirms explicitly that judgments of sameness of stimulus meaning between different speakers are made on the basis of empathy and so seemingly not on the basis of the methods of the natural

sciences. Quine disagrees: he claims he always used ‘science’ with the “breadth” of the German ‘*Wissenschaft*’ (34), and always thought of empathy as an “indispensable” part of “thinking up hypotheses” about translation (28).

The last two essays of the volume examine the relationship between Quine’s naturalistic view that reality is to be identified and described in science and traditional philosophical views about how to identify and describe reality. In his Gary Kemp’s essay “Underdetermination, Realism, and the Transcendental”, Kemp examines how Quine can respond to the objection that underdetermination undermines Quine’s claim to realism. The key to Quine’s response is Quine’s naturalistic insistence that we can only make judgments of reality within our ongoing theory, despite underdetermination—despite the possibility that another overall theory is equally supported by all possible evidence. According to Kemp, Quine is within his rights to treat versions of this objection that lead one down the path of traditional metaphysics as obscure, given the large extent to which the metaphysical notions of ‘the world’ or ‘reality’ at play in them cannot be given sharp, naturalistic explications within science. Andrew Lugg in “Quine, Wittgenstein, and ‘The Abyss of the Transcendental’” compares in detail Quine and Wittgenstein’s eschewal of traditional metaphysics. Lugg argues that their work responds to the perceived failure of traditional metaphysics differently. While Wittgenstein aims to exhibit the failures and dangers traditional philosophy, Quine aims to pursue constructive scientific theorizing as an alternative. Nevertheless, Lugg argues that Wittgenstein and Quine present us with compatible projects—they “differ in interest and attitude, not doctrine and belief” (195).

Let me close with how Janssen-Lauren and Kemp introduce the volume. They say:

Despite Quine’s being a seminal figure in analytic philosophy, much of his work stands opposed to the framework—possibly merely tacit—in which the analytic philosopher is trained and works.

There is a real danger of the student's thinking of herself as a follower of Quine without understanding what it means to say so.

(2)

What I have hoped to show is how these papers together help us to understand what it would mean to be a follower of Quine. To be a follower of Quine is not to accept his criterion of ontological commitment, or his rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction, or the existence of abstract objects, or the underdetermination of scientific theory, or what have you. It is to come to terms with his view that we are to treat our best current scientific conceptual scheme as a going concern, and to see how all of these views I mentioned hang together with that naturalism as essential background.

Janssen-Lauret and Kemp say the contributions "serve the . . . aim of our seeing more clearly our historical position, of furthering our intellectual self-consciousness" (2). How might they do so? Some members of our discipline may not be happy with the self-consciousness that the contributions of this volume bring. Quine's naturalism, and the trenchant rejection of much metaphysics Kemp and Lugg show us to come with it, makes him alien to many contemporary philosophers. But even if the reader is not sympathetic to the unity in Quine's thought given by his naturalism, this unity serves as a refreshing reminder that doing philosophy neither requires one grand yet obscure system of first philosophy from which all is supposed to derive, nor requires relinquishing unity for the sake of devising one analysis, counterexample, or formalism after another. This volume reminds us that Quine showed us we can practice rigorous analytic philosophy while also keeping in view the deep methodological commitments which ought to guide our philosophical practice and give it purpose.

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