Modern Philosophy, Contemporary Philosophy & Islamic Philosophy: Thematic Engagements

I. W. V. Quine's Naturalism and Ontological Relativism: Summary and Relevance to Debates in Classical and Post-Classical Islamic Philosophy

Prelude:

This short study succinctly presents Quine's naturalism and its relevance to the philosophical study of Islamic philosophy and philosophical theology.

The first part of the study traces the foundation of Quine's naturalism in his claims about ontological relativity and the limitations of metaphysical claims based on the irreducible indeterminacy of language on the semantical and denotational levels. The study will undertake this examination focusing on two of Quine's seminal essays 'Speaking of Object' (1957) and 'Ontological Relativity' (1968).

The second part of the study briefly discusses the relevance of Quine's naturalism and claims about ontological relativity to the critical reception of Aristotelians naturalism and onto-theology in classical and post-classical Islamic philosophy and philosophical theology.

Part I: Understanding Quine's Naturalism & Ontological Relativism
I.1 Speaking of Objects (1957)
The actual conclusion of this essay comes later in 'Ontological Relativity':

> When on the other hand we recognize with Dewey that "meaning…is primarily a property of behavior" we recognize that there is no meaning, nor likeness nor distinctions of meaning beyond what are implicit in people's disposition to overt behavior. For naturalism the question whether two expressions are alike or unlike in meaning has no determinate answer known or unknown, except in so far as the answer is settled in principle by people's speech dispositions, known or unknown. If by these standards there are indeterminate cases, so much the worse for the terminology of meaning and likeness of meaning.[1]

This is a general statement of Quine's project and how it constitutes a form of pragmatic empiricism. 'Speaking of Objects' develops this thesis engaging with the question of individuation of objects and the question of the possibility of translation. Quine will ultimately argue for the equal validity of translations due to their essential indeterminacy. While this will become clearer in 'Ontological Relativity,' he puts forward a fair account of the argument in this essay in terms of the problem of individuation and objectification.

We are always prone to think in terms of individual objects—especially physical objects. However, Quine argues that this is not due to the fact that the objectification pattern is an invariable trait of human nature but "…because are bound to adapt any alien pattern to our own in the very process of understanding or translating the alien

---

[1] Willard V. Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), p. 29.

sentences."[2] Quine then gives the example of a linguist trying to translate a sentence in a heathen language by the English set of sentences: "there we have a rabbit"; "there is a rabbit"; "Lo! A rabbit"; or "Lo! Rabbithood."[3] Quine argues that "it is easy to show that such an appeal to an object category is unwarranted even though we cannot easily, in English, herald rabbits without objectification."[4] He argues that "Given that a native sentence says that so and so is present given that the sentence is true when and only when a rabbit is present, it by no means follows that the so and so are rabbits. In order to decide among these alternatives, we need to be able to ask more than whether so and so is present. We need to be able to ask whether this is the same so and so as that, and whether one so and so is present."[5] Thus, what the linguist needs to give us is a "a manual of instructions for custom-building a native sentence to roughly the purpose of any newly composed English sentence, within reason and vice versa."[6] As a linguist tries to achieve this it becomes clear that "English general and singular terms, identity, quantification and the whole bag of ontological tricks may be correlated with elements of the native language in any of various mutually incompatible ways, each compatible with all possible linguistic data and none preferable to another, save as favored by a rationalization of the native language that is simple and natural to us."[7]

To further illustrate the problem, Quine moves to an analysis of how of we start to develop a pattern of individuation and objectification by considering children's language acquisition in an English-speaking country. The crux of Quine's argument is as follows: children first learn things as bulk, there is no sense of individuation for them, "mama" is like "water," it does not refer to a particular female. Only when he starts dealing with individual objects like, say, apples, he starts to have an objectification scheme of thinking "…for it is on achieving this step, and only then, that there can be any general talk of objects as such. Only at this stage does it make sense to wonder whether the apple is in one's hand or is the apple noticed yesterday."[8]

Quine finally starts giving the reason why he was trying to show the problems built in the objectification scheme of our thought. The following passage illustrates this reason:

> translation of our remote past or future discourse into the terms we now know could be about as tenuous and arbitrary projections as translation of the heathen language was seen to be…For the obstacle of correlating a conceptual scheme is not that there is any thing ineffable about language or culture, near or remote. The whole truth about the most outlandish linguistic behavior is just as accessible to us in our current Western conceptual scheme as are other chapters of zoology. The obstacle is only that any one intercultural correlation of words and phrases and hence of theories will be just one among various empirically admissible correlations, whether it is suggested by historical gradations or by unaided analogy; there is nothing for such a correlation to be uniquely right or wrong

[2] Ibid., p. 1.
[3] Ibid., p. 2.
[4] Ibid., p. 2.
[5] Ibid., p. 2.
[6] Ibid., p. 3.
[7] Ibid., p. 4-5.
[8] Ibid., p. 10.

about. In saying this, I philosophize from the vantage point only of our own provincial conceptual scheme and scientific epoch, true; but I know no better.[9]

I.2 Ontological Relativity (1968)

I. Dewey's Naturalism, Behaviorist Theory of Meanings and the Under-determination of Language

The essay commences with Quine's identification with Dewey's empirical naturalism and his behaviorist theory of meaning:

> With Dewey I hold that knowledge, mind and meaning are part of the same world that they have to do with, and that they are to be studied in the same empirical spirit that animates natural science. There is no place for prior philosophy." Quine then continues his discussion by saying that when a naturalistic philosopher addresses himself to the philosophy of mind "he is apt to talk of language…Meanings are first and foremost, meaning of language. Language is a social art which we all acquire on the evidence solely of other people's overt behavior under publicly recognizably circumstances. Meanings therefore…end up as grist for the behaviorist mill. Dewey was explicit on the point: Meaning…is not a psychic existence; it is primarily a property of behavior.[10] "

> Quine then tries to show the advantages gained by Dewey's theory of language vis-à-vis Wittgenstein's, which he describes as a 'copy theory of language'—of course he means the earlier Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*:

> The copy theory of language in its various forms stands closer to the main philosophical tradition…Uncritical semantics is the myth of a museum in which the exhibits are meanings and the words are labels. To switch language is to change the labels…the naturalist's primary objection to this view is not an objection to meanings on account of their being mental entities, though that could be objection enough. The primary objection persists even if we take the labeled exhibits not as mental ideas but as Platonic ideas or even as the denoted concrete objects. Semantics is vitiated by a pernicious mentalism as long as we regard a man's semantics as somehow determinate in his mind beyond what might be implicit in his dispositions to overt behavior. It is the very facts about meaning, not the entities meant, that must be construed in terms of behavior.[11]

> Quine articulates the problem he identifies with the copy theory and the museum-galley theory of meanings according to which words get label objects, like labels of artifacts in a museum (this is the traditional interpretation of the principles of the Lockean theory of meaning defined in terms of ideas derived from sensations to which words get attached in language). Subsequently, Quine moves to a preliminary outlining of his

---

[9] Ibid., p. 25.
[10] Ibid., p. 26-7.
[11] Ibid., p. 27.

behaviorist approach to meaning. According to him, "there are two parts to knowing a word. One part is being familiar with the sound of it and being able to reproduce it. This part, the phonetic part, is achieved by observing and imitating other people's behavior, and there are no important illusions about the process. The other part, the semantic part, is knowing how to use the word. This part, even in the paradigm case, is more complex than the phonetic part… The learner has now not only to learn the word phonetically, by hearing it from another speaker…he also has to see the object and in addition to this…he has to see that the speaker also sees the object. Dewey thus summed up the point as follows: "The characteristic theory about B's understanding of A's sound is that he responds to the thing from the standpoint of A.""[12]

Based on the foreging insights into the nature of language and contextual constitution of meaning and its unfolding in overt everyday behavior and associations, Quine concludes:

> When with Dewey we turn towards a naturalistic view of language and behavioral view of meaning, what we give up is not just the museum figure of speech. We give up an assurance of **determinacy**. Seen according to the museum myth, the words and sentences of language have their determinate meanings. To discover the meanings of the native's words we may have to observe his behavior, but still the meaning of the words is supposed to be determinate in the native's mind, his mental museum, even in the cases where behavioral criteria are powerless to discover them for us.[13]

This builds up to the thesis quoted in the prelude to my analytic summary of 'Speaking of objects':

> When on the other hand we recognize with Dewey that "meaning…is primarily a property of behavior," we recognize that there are no meanings, nor likeness nor distinctions of meaning beyond what are implicit in people's disposition to overt behavior. For naturalism, the question whether two expressions are alike or unlike in meaning has no determinate answer known or unknown, except in so far as the answer is settled in principle by people's speech dispositions, known or unknown. If by these standards there are indeterminate cases, so much the worse for the terminology of meaning and likeness of meaning.[14]

The indeterminacy of translation and meaning is due to under-determination of language. In its own turn, this is the result of the contextual constitution of meaning that is often overlooked by the picture-gallery theory of language of Locke and even the early Wittgenstein and Russell.

Quine then turns to the problem of translating an indigenous language by a linguist without any prior exposure—this will lead him to the tackling of the problem of ostension. Suppose a native utters a word 'gavagai' in the presence of a rabbit, how are we to translate it into English? How could we choose between 'rabbit' or 'undetached rabbit part' or 'rabbit stage.' Even if the context involves ostension, it is still difficult.

---

[12] Ibid., p. 28.
[13] Ibid., p. 28-9.
[14] Ibid., p. 29.

Quine here invokes the famous Wittgenstenian example of the problem of ostension in the case the color word 'sepia.'[15] Here he writes that:

> …the big difference between rabbit and sepia is that whereas 'sepia' is a mass term like 'water,' 'rabbit' is a term of divided reference. As such, it cannot be mastered without mastering its principle of individuation: where one rabbit leaves off, another begins. And this cannot be mastered by pure ostension, however persistent… If you take the total scattered portion of the spatiotemporal world that is made up of rabbit, and that which is made up of rabbit parts and that which is made up of rabbit stages, you come out with the same scattered portion of the world each of the three times. The only difference is in how you slice it. And how to slice it is what ostension or simple conditioning, however persistently repeated, cannot teach.[16]

Thus, even though "An actual field linguist would of course be sensible enough to equate 'gavagai' with rabbit…this sensible choice should answer to the English apparatus of individuation, and thus everything would come out all right. The implicit maxim guiding his choices for other native words is that an enduring and relatively homogenous moving as a whole against a contrasting background is a likely reference for a short expression."[17] Yet, this universalizable maxim would be wrong since it is "his—the linguist—own imposition toward settling what is objectively indeterminate. It is a very sensible imposition, and I would recommend no other."[18] Quine concludes that "the inscrutability of reference"[19] cannot be resolved through ostension because the same ostension used in teaching green as a general term is the same as the one employed in teaching the concrete green object.

But Quine poses the question as to whether or not this would render reference nonsensical. And the answer is yes. He argues: "Fair enough, reference is nonsense except relative to a coordinate system. In this principle of relativity lies the resolution of the inquiry."[20] Our analysis of the indeterminacy of meaning leads us then to an infinite regress unless we find a background language like a coordinate system with a well-defined origin point and grid lines to refer to. We need a background for language; yet, this might also lead us to an infinite regress. Quine contends: "If questions of reference of the sort that we are considering make only relative to a background language, then evidently questions of reference for the background language make sense in turn only relative to a further background language. In these terms, the situation seems desperate."[21] Thus, Quine tries to find a way out through the relativistic thesis which is stated as follows:

> …it makes no sense to say what the objects of a theory are beyond saying how to interpret or reinterpret that theory in another. Suppose we are working within a theory and thus treating its objects. We do so by pursuing the variables of the theory whose values those objects are, though there will be no ultimate sense in which that universe could have been specified. Within this background theory, we

---

[15] Ibid., p. 30-1.
[16] Ibid., p. 31-2.
[17] Ibid., p. 34.
[18] Ibid., p. 37.
[19] Ibid., p. 38.
[20] Ibid., p. 48.
[21] Ibid., p. 49.

can show how some subordinate theory whose universe is some portion of the background universe can, by a reinterpretation, be reduced to another subordinate theory whose universe is some lesser portion.[22]

Finally, Quine concludes that "Ontology is internally indifferent." All ontologies are reducible to one another as long as a proper universal set is chosen.

Part II: The Relevance of Quine to Debates in Classical and Post-Classical Reactions to Naturalism

Critiques of Aristotle's essentialist naturalism permeate the Islamic philosophical and philosophical-theological traditions. Considering philosophical-theology, in *Mujarrad Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, Ibn Furrak clearly indicates that al-Ash'arī was critical of the theory of real definitions at the heart of Aristotle's conception of the logical structure of the world. According to Ibn Furrak, al-Ash'arī took the theory of real definitions as proximate definitions of concepts. This critical reception continued through early post-classical Islamic philosophy in al-Ghazālī's epistemic critique of metaphysics in the *Incoherence of the Philosophers.* In his four refutations of Aristotle's theory of the eternity of the world, al-Ghazālī systematically criticizes any essentialist claims about nature. From a logical perspective, al-Ghazālī strictly maintains in the third and fourth refutations of the eternity of the world that possibility should not be associated with matter. *Possibilia* are mind-dependent categories that constitute our understanding of the world and do not imply any reference to the external, mind-independent world. The same holds for the denial of essentialist causality in 'Discussion Seventeen' of the *Incoherence.* While al-Ghazālī and most Ahs'arī—and in general Sunni thinkers after him—are committed to demonstrative (*burhānī*) epistemology, this does not mean, as is sometimes wrongly implied by Naturalistic interpretations of the Islamic tradition, that they are committed to Aristotelian essentialism, semantics and theories of entailment. An argument could be made that they share Quine's skepticism about the possibility of reducing nature to language and logic properly (the assumption made by thinkers like Aristotle and later Russell). However, Sunni philosophical theologians were not entirely nominalist. They were committed to maintain a basic level of fundamentality. I have argued that this basic fundamentality is an epistemic one. In my article 'Al-Kindī's Theory of the Finitude of Time and His Critique of Aristotle's Theory of the Eternity of the World in the Treatise on First Philosophy: The Role of the Perceiving Soul and the Relationship between Sensation and Intellection,'[23] I argued that al-Kindī clearly distinguished between claims made theoretically in mathematics and metaphysics, on the one hand, and claims made about in physics about phenomena in space and time. Physical objects in time are actual objects perceived and understood according to the finite conditions of perception and knowledge. Hence, imposing metaphysically constitutive claims based on logical deduction or mathematical analysis on nature and

---

[22] Ibid., p. 67.
[23] Ahmed Abdel Meguid, 'Al-Kindi's Theory of the Finitude of Time and His Critique of Aristotle's Theory of the Eternity of the World in the Treatise on First Philosophy: The Role of the Perceiving Soul and the Relationship between Sensation and Intellection,' *Oxford Journal of Islamic Studies,* 29:3 (2018), pp. 323-356 (10.1093/jis/ety022).

natural phenomena is unwarranted. Post-classical philosophy debates about the metaphysical versus mind-dependent and/or nominal import of logical and linguistic categories in the context of the principles of Islamic law (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) and semantics *(dilāla/waḍʿ)* and mystical philosophy all offer perspectives about the language, translation and reference to objects.

   Based on the above discussion, we can investigate the relevance of Quine's critique of fundamental claims in metaphysics. While the interest of many Muslim thinkers in criticizing essentialism may intersect with Quine's critique of foundationalism and logical positivism, the solution these thinkers suggested is entirely different and may support thinkers like Kant against Quine's famous attack on him in 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism.'[24] Instead of accepting of ontological relativity, Muslim philosophers took recourse in modal logic and metaphysics to search for a new ground for fundamentality just like some contemporary thinkers such as David Lewis tried to do in *Possible Worlds*.

---

[24] Willard V. Quine, 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism,' *The Philosophical Review*, 60 (1951): 20-43.