

Quine's observation sentence

[Philosophy](#)



W. V. O. Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" essentially attacks two core parts of the philosophy of logical positivists: the difference between synthetic and analytic truths, and the idea of reductionism (Lepore, p. 470). Quine argues that analytic truths are truths that are founded merely on meanings and do not depend on facts for them to be true. On the other hand, Quine maintains that synthetic truths are truths based on facts. Lastly, Quine observes reductionism as the theory that stipulates the meaning of meaningful statements as derived from terms that are logically construed that point exclusively to our immediate experiences.

More importantly, Quine argues that observation sentences serve as empirical foundations primarily because observation sentences imply observations of the world itself. That is, the sentences that we construct out of our observations of the world reflect the world that is 'there' so to speak. That also implies that observation sentences are not necessarily subjective in nature because the observations from where the sentences are based are actually dependent on the world itself. Thus, all observation sentences, assuming they are observations of the world, are not necessarily subject; they reflect the world in 'sentence' or 'verbal' form.

More importantly, Quine believes that observation sentences are utterances which are conditioned responses to a given stimulus (O'Grady, p. 1021). It should be noted that Quine provides the idea that the main concern of epistemology is to clear what appears to be the murky task of deriving knowledge from the data that our senses get from the world. The ability to gain access to that field of natural knowledge is a privilege which exemplifies

the link between the natural world and the observation of that natural world by conscious agents.

Quine's idea of the core and periphery and the connection of language with observation appear to reinforce his view of 'naturalizing' epistemology through observation sentences. Since it is through observation sentences that epistemology can be naturalized—in the sense that observation sentences are not entirely subjective observations and, therefore, provide us a glimpse of the world itself—language, either verbal or written, is inevitable in having observation sentences.

It can also be observed that Quine is primarily espousing the coherence view of meaning yet it also appears that Quine does not immediately accept the coherence view of knowledge. His coherence view of meaning can be observed in his argument that meaning should be coherent with our representations or assertions. This disparity in his position can be ascribed to the fact that Quine argues that the meaning of observation sentence depends on two perspectives: from the perspective of the learner or the speaker and the perspective of the observer.

In essence, it is argued that the meaning of observation sentences depend on the learner or speaker and those individuals who observe the utterance. However, Quine maintains that both the speaker and the learner should share and understand the same language, much like Wittgenstein's concept of a "language game" (Curry, p. 215). Thus, Quine's assertion of the dependency of the meaning of observation sentences on the speaker and the observer or observers reflect the idea of a coherence view of meaning.

However, it does not automatically argue for or against the coherence view of knowledge.

This seeming difference can best be understood in the light of the absence of a prior knowledge of the world's physical objects in order to be able to have observation sentences. It is important to remember that the mere utterance of the observation sentence does not necessitate a separate understanding of the subject and predicate of the sentence or of the utterance. Thus, for the individual speaker upon the acquisition of the observation sentence, the observation sentence is 'theory-free' while on the other hand the same sentence is 'theory-laden' for individuals who are fluent observers of such utterances.

While the meanings of these observation sentences are coherent with respect to the observers and the speaker, it does not entail a coherent view of knowledge precisely because observation sentences do not entail prior knowledge. The concept of functionalism for David Lewis is considered to be analytic functionalism which is primarily concerned with theoretical terms' meanings from a general perspective (Richardson, p. 535). It is the type of functionalism which maintains that theoretical terms are implicitly defined by theories wherein the theoretical terms occur during the formulation of these theories.

The meanings of these theoretical terms are not defined by the intrinsic properties of their comprised phonemes. For example, terms such as "hunger", "desire", or "belief" are ordinary language terms whose meanings are derived from the common-sense theories about these terms and not from their cognitive abstractions or categorizations. On the other hand, the <https://assignbuster.com/quines-observation-sentence/>

ways in which the meanings of these terms are formed will hardly withstand certain conceptual analyses such as in the form of "the mental state of hunger, as preconceived by X, causes Y".

As for Quine, 'naturalizing' epistemology can be contrasted with analytic functionalism in the sense that the former espouses the notions of speaker and observer while the latter espouses the notion of the purpose of theories in arriving at the meaning of the theoretical terms in them. With regard to 'meaning', it can be said that both Quine's epistemology and analytic functionalism share the same characteristic of giving acknowledgment to the causal relationships of mental states to external stimulations.

For Quine, there is the causal relationship between the speaker and the stimulus from the world itself, which then paves the way for the utterances of observation sentences. As for the tradition of analytic functionalism, there is the causal relationship between mental states and stimulations or behaviors such that, for example, "John wants some milk" can be rendered as "John is disposed to purchase milk when it is offered, if John has no stronger desire to steer clear of milk".

Quine's idea of observation sentences fit in with functionalism in the sense that observation sentences depend on some causal relationship between the speaker and the world—the same type of causal relationship that functionalism, the one proposed by David Lewis, is espousing. Without the causal relationship between the speaker and the world itself where the observation is directed, there can hardly be any observation sentences in the first place.

Without either the world or the speaker, there can not be any observation sentence as well. Thus, it is relevant to note that Quine's concept of observation sentences also revolves around the concept of causal relationship being espoused by analytic functionalism. The hardcore physicalism of Andy Clark proposes the idea that we need very little or very limited knowledge about the world before we can be able to act on the world effectively.

That is, common psychology cannot precisely be free from problems by pointing to the idea that our mind merely serve the purpose of recreating inner representations of what we 'see' or experience. Clark believes that, given the huge proportions of information that are placed before our mind, it appears that there is too much information that needs processing before we can even begin to act on these representations or mental images.

He also believes that our cognition is characterized by some series of 'dynamic feedback loops'. These loops, on the other hand, span body, world, and the brain (Sturgeon, p. 420). Recall that Quine is proposing the idea that there is no need for a prior knowledge about the world in order to make observation sentences and that these sentences are utterances which are conditioned responses to a given stimulus. Given these ideas, it can be said that Quine's position does not necessarily refute the ideas of Clark.

On the contrary, their ideas meet on certain points, such as the idea that we need not to have a prior knowledge of the world in our daily experiences so as to be able to 'act' on these things. For Quine, acting on these things comes in the form of being able to utter and form observation sentences like conditioned responses to a given external stimulus from the world. Since

these utterances may come in the form of conditioned responses, there is indeed no more need either for that prior knowledge or for that very little knowledge in order to be able to effectively act on the world.

Quine's philosophy in his "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" focuses on the distinction between the analytic and the synthetic by attacking that distinction through an exposition of analyticity and reductionism. It can be observed that Quine is positing the importance for positivist in defining theoretical sentences in terms of his concept of observation sentences. This manner of defining theoretical sentences is also equally important for positivists in their defense of foundationalism and reductionism.