



## Sander Verhaegh: *Working from Within: The Nature and Development of Quine's Naturalism*

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Over the last few years Sander Verhaegh has breathed a wave of fresh air into the study of Quine's philosophy. *Working from Within* draws on a number of his papers already published in leading journals and pushes on. It reads fluently, is easy to understand, and is refreshingly reasonable in its assessment and reconstruction of Quine's views. What mostly sets it apart from other books on this subject is its extensive use of the Quine archive at Harvard University's Houghton Library, where a wealth of unpublished documents is stored. Verhaegh spent several terms visiting the library and has put the material to excellent use, shedding new light on a number of issues. I highlight three below.

The book focuses on Quine's version of naturalism, i.e. 'the recognition that it is within science itself, and not in some prior philosophy, that reality is to be identified and described' (Quine, *Theories and Things*, p. 21). This is not just the claim that philosophy must consider the outcomes of science, something with which hardly anyone disagrees. Instead, it is the claim that there is no distinctly philosophical standpoint. Philosophy and science are just two aspects of a single enterprise, which differ only in degrees of abstraction and generality but not in nature or kind. This is the most fundamental of Quine's theses, the core of his philosophy. Other commentators had already pointed out that it is so basic in his philosophy that his arguments for it are inevitably circular (see, e.g., Peter Hylton's 2007 book on Quine, p. 83). There is no other more fundamental doctrine in his philosophy from which naturalism can be justified. Any argument for it already presupposes it in some way. Quine accepts this circularity because he finds the alternative (namely, 'cosmic exile') untenable. Verhaegh shows how Quine came to formulate that view gradually, slowly distancing himself from Carnap, his mentor in the 1930s. The label 'naturalism,' for example, first appears only in the late 1960s (e.g., in 'Epistemology Naturalized'), although its central tenets were already brewing since the very outset.

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Verhaegh does a nice job of digging up unpublished material in the archives and laying out the meanders of Quine's views. The first three chapters tackle the issues more systematically (epistemology naturalized, metaphysics naturalized, and how philosophy and science relate), whereas the latter three chapters are more historically oriented (Quine's earlier drafts of *Word and Object*, his evolving thoughts on analyticity, and his views on science and philosophy).

One of the book's contributions (chapter 2) is its argument that Quine did not settle for *epistemological* naturalism out of despair for the lack of better alternatives. Epistemological naturalism is the view that we cannot ground scientific knowledge on something like a first philosophy—the Cartesian dream. Instead, the best justification we can have for science is to be sought in science itself. Parts of science correct and revise other parts of science, as in Neurath's boat metaphor quoted at the beginning of *Word and Object*. Verhaegh shows that Quine's main reason for naturalizing epistemology was not so much that he found the traditional empiricist alternatives lacking, but that he thought that any attempt to justify science from the outside already presupposes scientific knowledge. The view, for example, that we can resort to sense data as a neutral starting point in the chain of justification presupposes that we can freely posit sense data as if it were not also an outcome of scientific theorizing.

A second contribution (chapter 3) of the book is a sorting out of some aspects of Quine's criticism of Carnap on metaphysics. In his 1950 'Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology' Carnap put forth two distinctions between internal and external questions about existence. Internal questions are formulated within a linguistic framework about the existence of some entity. External questions are either (i) questions about the existence of some entity formulated without providing a linguistic framework (in which case it is unclear what the words that make up the alleged question mean, rendering it a pseudo-question) or (ii) pragmatic questions about which framework is best for a given purpose (in which case they are not questions about ontology, but about the choice of a language for a given purpose). Hence, there are two senses of 'external question' in Carnap, and accordingly, two distinctions between internal and external questions. Quine rejects both distinctions, but for different reasons. He does not have any principled criterion of meaning—in particular, he has no verificationist criterion of meaning (a point stressed by Hylton's 2014 paper, 'Significance in Quine,' on which Verhaegh draws). Although Quine denies that there are such things as the meanings of sentences, he does not reject the distinction between meaningful and meaningless expressions. According to Quine, there are no clear boundaries between them, only a gradation. He does not claim that the sentences of traditional metaphysics are all meaningless, as does Carnap in his first sense of 'external question,' but he does agree with Carnap that for a question of existence to make sense, it has to be formulated within a linguistic framework or theory. Outside of any theory, an existence claim might not be meaningless, but it is surely useless. This is a point well made, since there have been commentators puzzled by Quine's advancement of ontology (thus metaphysics) on the one hand, and his criticism of metaphysics, on the other. Quine also takes issue with Carnap's second internal/external distinction, claiming that the choice of a linguistic framework (or a

theory, as he would prefer to say) is both guided by empirical and theoretical concerns *and* pragmatic concerns. These are two sides of the same coin, for Quine. Theory choice and assessment of evidence is in part pragmatic, as scientific values are always in play (simplicity, economy, fecundity, generality, modesty, etc.). Moreover, the choice of which pragmatic criteria to use on any given occasion is partly guided by what is already known about the world: pragmatic rules for action can only be useful if one knows something about the world to which they will be applied. So it is true that Quine was an anti-metaphysician in the sense that he regarded a priori metaphysics as useless. Yet it is also true that he did put forth a naturalized metaphysics, in the sense that he did not regard all questions about which categories best describe the world as merely pragmatic, but an inevitable part of the overall scientific and philosophical endeavor of formulating the best, simplest, clearest theory of the world. Hence, for Quine, questions about the existence of particular entities and questions about categories of entities are both scientific questions, which differ not in kind but only in degree of abstraction of generality. So in this sense there is no clear boundary between science and (naturalized) metaphysics.—Incidentally, this is also a key for interpreting some of Quine's remarks on skepticism: insofar as skeptical questions are asked about what there is from outside our evolving theories, they are useless, but insofar as they are asked from within, they can be useful for the furthering of science. Quine rejects radical skepticism not because its questions are meaningless—though at times they can be—but because they are useless for the advancement of science and philosophy. On the other hand, milder and more localized—i.e. non-radical—forms of skepticism are just integral parts of scientific inquiry in general.

A third contribution of the book (chapter 4) is its characterization of Quine's naturalism as comprising two theses, which the author dubs 'no transcendence' and 'scientific immanence.' This is helpful because one could accept one but not the other. No transcendence means no cosmic exile: if you have some knowledge claim about the world, you will have to state it from the standpoint of some of our evolving theories of the world—if not this theory, then another. The point is that any such claim is fallible and that criteria we have for getting them right are internal to those theories. They cannot be compared to reality from, say, a God's eye point of view, because it is those evolving theories themselves which tell us what is real and what is not. Scientific immanence means we have to work from within those evolving theories. We start with the ones we have, the ones we deem best, and improve on them using the evidence and tools we currently have. We begin from where we are (*'in mediis rebus,'* as Quine wrote) and work from within. Naturalism, in this sense, is not committed to our currently available theories. Future scientific theories may posit hypotheses wildly different from the ones currently posited. Who knows? Quine did defend physicalism, i.e. the thesis that all reality is physical (no minds, no values, no gods). This is a hypothesis of (naturalized) metaphysics, which he thought systematized the best theories of nature of his time. Science is constantly evolving and changing, and future systematizations may end up positing different overall hypotheses. Naturalism, in other words, is not committed to physicalism. It is only committed to starting from where we are (where else?) and working from within.

The three contributions outlined above are presented in chapters 2, 3 and 4. The following three chapters draw more heavily on archive material and contain many insights into the development of Quine's philosophy. We learn, for example, that Quine had already put forth a version of holism in his undergraduate papers, but that it was only much later that he formulated the 'wide-scope holism' that he became known for and which encompasses not only natural science, but also mathematics and logic. We also learn about his first attempts at *Word and Object*, its changing title, his difficulties and problems unsolved, etc. A first full draft was called *Sign and Object* and consisted mostly of transcriptions of his philosophy of language classes. The emphasis then was on how scientific and formal *languages* are offshoots of ordinary language—a disagreement he had both with Carnap and with the ordinary language philosophers of Oxford University. At that time, he was not so much focusing on how science is a continuation of ordinary common sense knowledge, but on the issue of how the languages of science relate to ordinary language. These are just some of the many interesting and helpful points made by Verhaegh. The book ends with an Appendix containing various documents transcribed from the Quine archive, which are also quite illuminating.

Overall, this is a welcome contribution to the study of this very influential philosopher. Perhaps its only drawback is that it engages the topics exclusively from an insider's perspective. It makes no attempt at discussing the shortcomings of Quine's naturalism. For example, it does not discuss at any length the apparent difficulties of a circular justification of the doctrine, nor does it dwell on some of its apparently counter-intuitive consequences, such as the view that if something is not postulated by science broadly conceived, then we have no reason to think it exists. Other philosophers have notoriously been more pluralistic about ontology. The book seems to have been written primarily for Quine scholars—but insofar as it is, it's no doubt an excellent read.

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