

**Paul GOCHET : Quine en Perspective, Essai de philosophie comparée, Flammarion, 1978, 225 pp (with a short preface by W.V. Quine).**

Few people seem to doubt that Willard Van Orman Quine, "le maître de Harvard", is one of the prominent philosophers of our day. In view of his considerable productivity<sup>1</sup> and of the popularity of some of his theses ("to be is to be the value of a variable", the so-called Duhem—Quine thesis, the empirical nature of logic and mathematics, the indeterminacy of translation), the absence of a Quinean school of thought, even remotely comparable to the uprise of Popperianism in the fifties and sixties, is rather conspicuous.

Presley<sup>2</sup> thinks that the predominantly polemical character of Quine's work is responsible for this fact. Gochet does not agree : the problem is not that it lacks Quine of an original, 'positive' philosophy, but that this philosophy is difficult in the sense that it often defies intuition. "Some of his most original theses (...) seem to oscillate dangerously between two perils : a certain interpretation makes them trivial, while another interpretation makes them plainly false. We will defend here a third interpretation, which makes them at the same time true and original." (p. 14) I think there is a second way in which intuition stands between Quine and the philosophical public : on the basis of intuition (or 'loose philosophical argument') alone, it is impossible to grasp the overall consistency of Quine's thought. Some examples will make this clear.

— While displaying a great tolerance towards the concept of 'logical truth' (in denying its analytical status and in proclaiming that even what is logical may be revised), Quine engaged in a vivid combat against deviant logics.

— One might expect a philosopher who places ontology on the forefront of his concerns to be somewhat more talkative about his own ontology; yet Quine confines ontology mainly to the realm of science and common sense.

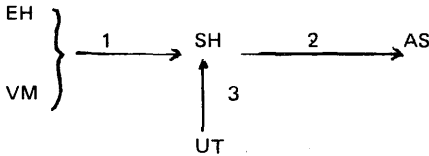
— It is not uncommon to hear of the ultimate impossibility of translation in a 'poetical' context. Quine, however, combines this impossibility doctrine with a 'down to earth', extensional and even behavioristic approach of language.

— Methodological holism and the essential underdetermination of theories are normal symptoms of rationalist/idealist 'everything has to do with everything else'-philosophies. But Quine depicts himself as a 'pragmatical realist', and when — in his famous 1951-essay — he attacked two dogma's of empiricism, he meant to purify empiricism and not to destroy it.

Professor Gochet is well aware of these and similar challenges to plain philosophical understanding. The importance of the book, then, is twofold : on the one hand he cautiously ponders criticisms and defences of Quine's major theses; on the other hand he investigates the interrelations, in search of an encompassing coherent position.

In comparison with Gochet's earlier *Esquisse d'une théorie nominaliste de la proposition*<sup>3</sup>, neither his sympathetic perspective on Quine, nor his attractive and 'dialectical' style has changed. the author succeeds in extracting from the vast and chaotic literature a transparent discussion on many of the relevant topics of Quine's work, and typically looks for a synthetic point of view, transcending the initial opposition between the concurrent parties.

Gochet begins with an investigation of Quine's **theory of knowledge** (Chapters I and II). At the core of the discussion stands the principle of semantical holism (SH), i.e. "the affirmation that the unit of meaning is science as a whole ... one of the most original and disturbing theses of Quine" (p. 23). It is presented as a logical consequence of the combination of epistemological holism (EH) (or Duhem—Quine thesis) with the verificationist theory of meaning (VM) (Peirce, Schlick), entailing at its turn the rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction (AS), while the underdetermination of theories (UT) may be regarded as an extension. Schematically :



#### Ad 1

If the meaning of a statement is the method of its verification (VM) and if it is principally impossible to verify an isolated hypothesis (EH), then meaning cannot be conveyed to any isolated statement. This is a negative conclusion and still far from SH. Quine reaches SH by strengthening radically EH — far beyond the intentions of Duhem : verification of a single hypothesis means that the totality of our knowledge (empirical or otherwise) appears before the Court of Nature.

#### Ad 2

Analytical statements are true on account of their meaning alone. However, since meaning has no use at this level, the class of analytical statements is not really defined.

#### Ad 3

According to Gochet, EH may be interpreted as affirming the existence of a plurality of theories compatible with actual observations. I am not convinced of the equivalence of this formulation with EH, but granted that it is, UT follows by enlarging the class of actual observations to the class of all possible observations : theories can be logically incompatible and at the same time empirically equivalent.

There are, of course many problems attached to this scheme. For one thing, hardly anyone will still subscribe to the naive VM version. Gochet rightly abandons it. But there is an even more disastrous difficulty, as Quine himself acknowledged, namely that it is incompatible to hold that theories verifiable by the same observations have the same meaning and that if theories have the same meaning, they can still differ more than verbally. Gochet argues that Quine regains consistency by giving up SH after all. Meaning units smaller than a theory are implicitly recognized. Moreover, the distinction between language and theory makes sense again. Does this mean a revival of analyticity too ? Not necessarily so. Gochet (following Mary Hesse) proposes to look on language as determined by theory, but always one step behind : language and theory differ by degree of rigidity. Since language is an intrinsically social phenomenon, one can hardly be surprised that it shows a certain conservatism.

Chapter III treats of the **theory of meaning**. After a brief exposition of the contributions of Frege and Russell, we encounter the purported scientific meaning conception of Quine. To ensure the objectivity of his approach, his favorite paradigm is the linguistic

situation of a hypothetical anthropologist confronted with a hitherto undiscovered jungle population. (For example a tribe consisting of the offspring of lost nineteenth century anthropologists who completely forgot their mother tongue.) The only possible access to the language is to relate their speech acts to the rest of their behavioral display. Quine's behavioral foundation of understanding language is the notion of stimulus meaning. The stimulus meaning of the statement A is the range of stimulation patterns that would prompt a speaker to assent to 'A'. It is clear that this recipe will not work with whatever statement A. Quine attributes an autonomous empirical meaning exclusively to occasional observation sentences, such as "Here's a peanut" and "It hurts". "It hurts to be in love" is not occasional; "This is the president" is not observational; "Two and two is four" is neither. (Frankly, I cannot consider the class of observation sentences clearly defined. What exactly makes a peanut more observational than a president?)

In **Word and Object** (1960) Quine gave an impression of the way semantics can be built up starting from the stimulus meaning of occasional observation sentences. Gochet closes the chapter with a confrontation between Chomsky's realistic interpretation of innate language dispositions and Quine's instrumentalistic conception.

Semantics is for Quine not epistemologically different from any other part of science. But there is something peculiar about its object: meanings are basically undetermined. Translation can be seen as the transformation of one language in another language, meaning kept invariant. So the undetermined character of meaning infects translation. Hence Quine's much debated thesis of the indeterminacy of translation, which is the subject of Chapter IV. Gochet gives an interesting formulation of its epistemological and ontological status compared with the underdetermination of physical theory. "... physical theory is undetermined with respect to the infinite collection of all past, present, future and possible verifying observations, but it is determined with respect to the total distribution of elementary particles in the universe. Translations is underdetermined with respect to all behavioral reactions of speakers and undetermined with respect to the only reality worthy of this name: physical reality." (p. 86) The chapter continues with a discussion of the physicalistic assumption, the analytical hypotheses (the slender and unstable bridges between two languages), and the limits of indeterminacy, that are the limits of translation itself to wit empirical science. Before concluding with a regrettably sketchy paragraph on the comparison of Quine's views on translation with the linguistic tradition, Gochet remarks: "All Quine demands, in semantics, is to make our Galilean revolution" (p. 95) — "A Modest Proposal" indeed!

If obliged to state in a few words what Quine's philosophy is all about, we might say it concerns language, reality, and the relation therebetween. Does it concern about everything then? Well, I consider "On What There Is" (1953) indeed as the most typical of his intellectual products. In this paper, Quine proposed his criterion of ontological commitment. The windows of language on reality are references; this criterion provides an instrument to detect the relevant references in a given theory. Those kinds of entities are assumed to exist by a theory, of which members must be counted among the values of the bounded variables in order that the statements of the theory be true. Neither the wording nor the implications of the criterion are very clear. Gochet sets out to elucidate and defend it against the critics. His conclusion, reasonable as it may be, can not be said to make things easy: we have to distinguish carefully between three different things: what a statement says (its actual content), its ontological assumptions, and its ontology. "The statement '(E x) (x is a dog)', for example, asserts that there is at least one dog, ontologically assumes that there exist mammals ... and rests upon an ontology of individuals". (p. 113).

Quine repeatedly emphasized that his criterion does not decide between diverging ontologies. His views on **ontology** proper are presented in Chapter VI. I will suffice here to give a list of its properties as they seem to me to emerge from Gochet's discussion.

1. REVISIONISM : "Putting our house in ontological order is not a matter of making an already implicit ontology explicit by sorting and dusting up ordinary language. It is a matter of devising and imposing." (**The Roots of Reference**, p. 88).
2. PRAGMATICAL REALISM : be a pragmatist in the choice of your theories, but do not pretend they have nothing to do with reality.
3. METHODOLOGICAL NOMINALISM : it is a safe strategy to keep the ontological household as poor as scientifically possible — the burden of proof rests upon those who bring new furniture in.
4. Consequently, the ontologist has to be a REDUCTIONIST. Quine devised to this purpose a criterion of ontological reduction, a counterpart of that of ontological commitment.
5. RELATIVISM : reducing one theory ontologically to another theory means that we are working within a third one, which has a (broader) ontology of its own.

It will be clear that Quine's philosophy is notoriously dependent on the availability of logical tools. The remaining of Gochet's book focuses on the **philosophy of logic**, beginning with the problem of logical truth in Chapter VII. Since he has thrown away the concept of analyticity, Quine's primary concern is to give an alternative account of logical truth. He falls back on the grammatical structure of a sentence : "A logical truth is ... a sentence whose grammatical structure is such that all sentences with that structure are true ... a logical truth is a sentence that cannot be turned false by substitution for lexicon". (**Philosophy of Logic**, p. 58). But grammar is not the only constituent of logic. A more fundamental notion is that of truth, defined in terms of satisfaction by a sequence of individuals. So, ultimately, logic is the grammatical processing of reference. Gochet rightly remarks that Quine's approach does not transcend particular natural languages but he does not judge this to be a serious drawback. The author argues that the distinction between grammar and lexicon is not arbitrary, but his argument depends on the assumption that separate grammatical particles can be discerned. I wonder what can be made of this in Chinese. Furthermore, if we begin searching for grammatical particles in a 'jungle language', to what extent will we be putting in the logic instead of extracting it ?

Quine's struggle with modal logic and intentional constructions is related in the last two Chapters (VIII and IX). His critique of modal logics may be summarized as follows. In sound logic only sound reference matters. In modal logic the extensionalist principle, which states that terms with identical referents may be substituted *salva veritate*, fails. There are two main strategies to explain this anomaly away. Or the failure is attributed to a not purely referential occurrence of the terms (Frege, Church). But with the evaporation of reference, logic dissolves. Or one may stick to reference, but ascribe the failure to the fact that reference may shift from one situation ('possible world') to another. But here the problem rises how to recognize identical referents in different possible worlds. It seems impossible without an appeal to ontological essentialism — not a firm basis to build a logic on.

The problem with Quine's 'one world extensionalism' is, however, that it cannot account for some valid inferences with propositional attitudes. Quine changed his position towards propositional attitudes considerably over the years. It looks like he now comes close to accepting Hintikka's analysis, but he still thinks that there will be no place for it in the ultimate language of science.

By now the reader will have an impression of the vast domain covered by Quine's philosophy and bordered on in the book under review. It goes without saying that not all

topics could have been discussed in sufficient depth. Moreover, Gochet neglects Quine's foundational work in mathematics<sup>4</sup>. But that may indeed be seen as more of technical than of philosophical relevance.

Professor Gochet pays ample attention to the evolution of Quine's thought — his 'Conclusion' indicates the main trends — but it is to be regretted that there is no indication of its roots. Knowing to what extent Quine has been under the influence of the pragmatists, the new realists, the logical empiricists, etc. might have contributed to an understanding of the philosopher. Yet, a more serious shortcoming of the book is that it does not live up to its subtitle. We encounter occasional references to continental philosophers (Gonseth and Vuillemin most frequently), but there is no trace of a systematic comparison.

To conclude this review, I think we can now discern two more elements responsible for the absence of a Quinean philosophical school. There is, first, the undogmatical and dynamical character of his thought. But there is also the fact that it lacks many of Quine's positions of intellectual fertility; he closes more doors than he opens.

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#### NOTES

- (1) A complete list of his publications up to 1969 can be found in D. Davidson & J. Hintikka (eds.) : *Words and Objections* (Reidel, 1969).
- (2) P. Edwards (ed.) : *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. Quine.
- (3) *Librarie Armand Colin — Paris, 1972*. It is translated as *Outline of a Nominalistic Theory of Proposition* (Reidel, 1978).
- (4) We can refer the interested reader to an excellent exposition by W. Hatcher : Chapter 7 of his *Foundations of Mathematics* (Saunders, 1968).