

Searle and Quine on Indeterminacy

Theory of Meaning

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Both Quine and Searle agree:

(1) *If* facts about stimulus meanings are the only facts relevant to meaning, then meaning is indeterminate.

Quine argues:

(2) Facts about stimulus meanings are the only facts relevant to meaning.
(3) Therefore, meaning is indeterminate.

Searle argues:

(~3) Meaning is not indeterminate.
(~2) Therefore, facts about stimulus meanings are not the only facts relevant to meaning.

... if there really is no fact of the matter, then the inscrutability of reference can be brought even closer to home than the neighbor's case; we can apply it to ourselves. If it is to make sense to say even of oneself that one is referring to rabbits and formulas and not to rabbit stages and Gödel numbers, then it should make sense equally to say it of someone else." (Quine, "Ontological Relativity", 47)

Searle's argument for (~3):

- We know from our own case that 'rabbits' refers to rabbits.
- To deny this is to make it impossible even to state Quine's thesis.

The threat of regress:

1. There's a rabbit.
2. There is no fact of the matter whether 'rabbit' in (1) refers to rabbits or undetached rabbit parts.
3. There is no fact of the matter whether 'rabbits' in (2) refers to rabbits or undetached rabbit parts.
4. etc.

Quine's answer: "Ontological Relativity," 48–51.

Two relativizations:

- Questions about reference can be asked only relative to a background language (idiolect).
- Questions about reference have determinate answers only relative to a translation manual.

What am I saying when I say that 'rabbit' refers to rabbits?

1. 'Rabbit' in language L refers to rabbits.
2. 'Rabbit' in language L refers to the things referred to the language I'm now speaking as 'rabbits'.
3. 'Rabbit' in L refers to the things I refer to as 'rabbits.'

Now let L = the language I'm now speaking.

1. 'Rabbit' in the language I'm now speaking refers to rabbits.
2. 'Rabbit' in the language I'm now speaking refers to the things referred to as 'rabbit' in the language I'm now speaking.
3. 'Rabbit' in the language I'm now speaking refers to the things it refers to.

(3) here is a tautology, so Quine needn't deny it. But it also can't be a premise in an argument for the determinacy of meaning.

Word and Object, 221: "Brentano's thesis of the irreducibility of intentional idioms is of a piece with the thesis of indeterminacy of translation. One may accept the Brentano thesis either as showing the indispensability of intentional idioms and the importance of an autonomous science of intention, or as showing the baselessness of intentional idioms and the emptiness of a science of intention. My attitude, unlike Brentano's, is the second."