

# QUINEAN RELATIVISM: BEYOND METAPHYSICAL REALISM AND IDEALISM

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Epistemological relativism has become a popular topic of discussion.<sup>1</sup> The relativists are united by their rejection of an ahistorical and *a priori* approach to epistemic problems which has characterized much of modern philosophy. They recommend that epistemologists discard the perspective of first philosophy and subsume their endeavors under one or another of the sciences or under the history of science. Epistemology as it is traditionally conceived, then, is declared dead and a new "naturalized" epistemology is to be pursued instead. Others contend, however, that traditional epistemology, far from being dead, is merely neglected and misunderstood.<sup>2</sup> This debate seems to center on the issue of metaphysical realism *versus* metaphysical idealism. The question, it seems, is whether human knowledge and the study of it must be relativized to a body of beliefs so that truth is a characteristic of consistent systems of statements and truth claims are to be evaluated only in terms of compatibility considerations (metaphysical idealism) or whether truth is to be characterized in terms of a correspondence of beliefs and an independent reality (metaphysical realism). It is commonly believed that the relativists deny metaphysical realism and opt, instead, for metaphysical idealism. However this need not be the case.<sup>3</sup>

Quine's rejection of traditional epistemology constitutes one of the best arguments for epistemological relativism, and his argument seems to lead toward a metaphysical idealism. I will show why this is not the case—and indicate why this does not mean that the Quinean relativist recommends a metaphysical realism either. I shall begin by briefly characterizing Quine's argument against the metaphysical realist, then I shall characterize the epistemic turn he recommends, and, finally I will argue that a Quinean relativism is beyond metaphysical realism and metaphysical idealism.

1. A correspondence theorist maintains that determinate word-world relationships are to ground our talk of truth and reference. Traditionally the rejection of such a theory has entailed the adoption of a coherence theory of truth which holds that truth and reference are matters of word-word correlations. Correspondence theorists maintain that to settle for

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word-word relations leaves us open to the possibility of a multitude of distinct, mutually contradictory, and equally coherent accounts, each of which must be considered true.

It is here that the doctrine of metaphysical realism emerges. In response to the coherence theorists the metaphysical realists maintain that there must be an external ground. Without such a ground there would be no distinction between fact and fiction, and talk of truth and reference would become senseless.

2. Quine argues that metaphysical realism is incoherent. The *reductio* argument he employs to this effect establishes that the supposition of correspondence relations between words and the world leaves one unable to account for truth and reference.<sup>4</sup> Thus only word-word correlations are allowable—it is only relative to a background theory that we may talk of truth and reference. The *reductio* argument he offers runs through three cases.

2.1 First he employs the well-known gavagai case of radical translation. According to Quine, we cannot determine what the natives of a heretofore undiscovered tribe refer to (which set of correspondence relations is correct for their terms) and, thus, their terms are inscrutable for us. It may be perfectly natural for us to translate “Gavagai”—an utterance made only in the presence of rabbits—as “Rabbit” given our apparatus of identity and individuation. But this is so only given *our* apparatus. Our only evidence for our translation of the native utterances is the native dispositions to utter, assent to, and dissent from stimuli in certain observable situations. This evidence is not strong enough to justify a choice among competing sets of correspondence relations. Rather than referring to rabbits, for example, the natives could be referring to sets of undetached rabbit parts. The stimulus conditions for (and thus the evidence for) such a word-world correlation are identical to those which obtain for reference to rabbits.

Of course, given our apparatus of identity and individuation, we could determine which of these competing relations obtained. A simple query would be in order. But nothing “gives” this apparatus here. We are confined to the evidence as we attempt to determine the reference of the natives’ utterances. To suppose the natives utilize our apparatus of individuation and identity would be to *presuppose* that their apparatus is a mirror-image of our own. We could make other presuppositions as to how they individuate. Moreover, we find that the evidence, the dispositions to overt behavior, equally support such alternative hypotheses. Thus, there are mutually exclusive yet evidentially equivalent presuppositions we may make about the reference of the natives’ terms. There is no justification (other than in terms of our preference) for a choice among these various alternatives.

2.2 In the second stage of his argument Quine notes that we need not seek out undiscovered tribes to encounter this inscrutability. Within our

own tribe the same argument applies. While we do not act this way, it is possible to contemplate a reconstrual of our neighbor's correspondence relations such that different word-world relations are required. Indeed, we can see that, just as in the case of the natives, there are several competing and incompatible manuals of translation of our neighbor's discourse into our own. The homophonic one, the one which picks out exactly the relations we pick out from among the alternative word-world correlations, is the one we do choose; but this is a choice which is neither dictated by nor justified by the (behavioral) evidence.

Given one's own apparatus of identity and individuation one might arrive at a unique set of such correspondence relations. But are we entitled to this liberty in regard to the reference of our neighbor's terms? Only the evidence can grant us the liberty of assigning to our neighbor our own apparatus of individuation and identity. However, the evidence lacks the strength and determinacy necessary to justify such a choice. Nor may we query this individual in order to determine the nature of such an apparatus:

It is of no avail to check on this fanciful version of our neighbor's meanings by asking him, say, whether he really means at a certain point to refer to formulas or to their Gödel numbers; for our question and his answer—"By all means, the numbers"—have lost their title to homophonic translation.<sup>5</sup>

2.3 Finally Quine brings his point all the way home. Imagine, he asks us, a systematic reconstrual of one's own relations of correspondence. Here too, he maintains, there is a multitude of possible correspondence relations which are justified by the evidence. The upshot is that we are left, in our own case, in exactly the position of the natives and our neighbors—we find that reference is inscrutable:

We seem to be maneuvering ourselves into the absurd position that there is no difference on any terms, interlinguistic or intralinguistic, objective or subjective, between referring to rabbits and referring to rabbit parts . . . Surely this is absurd, for it would imply that there is no difference between the rabbit and each of its parts . . . Reference would seem now to become nonsense not just in radical translation but at home (OR, pp. 47-48).

3. This nonsense is the direct result of the supposition that there are unique and determinate correspondence relations which ground truth and reference. This supposition yields the possibility of a multitude of evidentially equivalent but referentially incompatible relations. The theory is chronically rich. Where it requires a singularity it is blessed with a plethora. The result of this is that no choice can be made between the competing groups of relations. Accordingly, Quine questions the supposition of such determinate relations. The point is not that we cannot *tell* which set of competing relations *is* the correct set, but, rather, that talk of correctness here is inappropriate.

That is, if there is no (behavioral) evidence which distinguishes several incompatible relations, what sense does it make to call them distinct?<sup>6</sup> A distinction without a difference is no distinction at all. The correspondence theorist begins by positing a unique, determinate word-

world relation picked out just because it explains truth and reference. If we begin with this model, however, we discover that there are several evidentially equivalent alternative systems of relations. Moreover, we are forced to recognize that these alternatives are indistinguishable as no evidence could justify a choice among them. On the assumption of such correspondence relations, then, we can not distinguish between reference to rabbits and to undetached rabbit parts. Why not, then, suppose that the natives in the radical translation situation refer to some sort of “rabbitish” entity—a combination of the allowable alternatives?<sup>7</sup> Because we must do, then, the same in the case of our neighbor and of ourselves. But there *is* a difference between one’s referring to rabbits and referring to undetached rabbit parts. The assumption of correspondence relations makes such a difference disappear—it can not account for such a distinction. In short, the correspondence theory is committed to distinguishing among alternatives which it itself renders indistinguishable in principle.

4. Behind the correspondence theory lies a mistaken model—metaphysical realism. On this model, truth is a property which is correctly attributed to that theory which mirrors the world as it is and we are charged with judging various word-world relations for correctness. Yet how does one accomplish such a comparison of word and world? Quine’s point is that this comparison requires an illicit vantage point.<sup>8</sup> Here epistemologists must disassociate themselves from the conceptual scheme or body of beliefs to be examined and, from an independent vantage point, view both it and the world to judge the various correspondence relations. Thus, they are in the position of the radical linguist (or the parallel situations closer to home). Were such a disassociation possible, it would leave us unable to account for reference and truth. Rather than accepting this notion of correspondence relations and the nonsense it entails, Quine suggests that we confine ourselves to word-word relations. Metaphysical realism is rejected and a relativism arises.

5. According to Quine, we avoid the nonsense, and account for truth by recognizing that reference and truth *are* nonsense except relative to a coordinate system or background language.<sup>9</sup> Such a scheme is a complex and changing, socially inculcated system which is utilized in explaining and predicting experience. The different objects affirmed to exist within this system are called “posits.” These posits are the vehicles of our attempts to relate experiences to experiences.

To view the posits as arbitrary myths or fictions, however, is to fail to fully comprehend their role and to adopt the sort of metaphysically realistic perspective offered by the correspondence theorists.<sup>10</sup> According to Quine, there are two proper orientations toward these posits.

5.1 From the perspective of the epistemologist who studies the phenomena of knowledge, reference, and truth, these posits play a

certain role—they organize experience. Clearly, no set of posits may be absolutely preferable unless some guarantees as to the nature of experience are forthcoming. This insight leads to the worry that the metaphysical realist has with any philosophic system which allows only word-word relations: “How could one come to distinguish fact from fiction?” A coherence theory seems in the offing. In the sequel I will show how Quinean relativism responds to this worry.

5.2 In addition to the epistemologist’s orientation toward the posits, Quine stresses, each of us also has the orientation of a theory-holder. It is here that his appeal to Neurath’s boat metaphor is relevant.<sup>11</sup> We are to imagine that we are each in the position of an onboard shipwright. To imagine this metaphor correctly we must not visualize the boat as sailing upon the waters as a spectator at a regatta might see it; instead we must note that every individual is a passenger aboard such a vessel. The posits of this vessel may not be viewed apart from the vessel itself. From an epistemological point of view these posits are constructs utilized in an attempt to organize experiences. However, these posits also form the underlying conceptual system *from which* we must pursue our epistemic inquiries.<sup>12</sup>

5.3 In short, every epistemologist is also a theory-holder. According to Quine, a recognition of this fact forces us to do epistemology in a new setting. This setting specifies that epistemology is contained in natural science and natural science is contained in epistemology.<sup>13</sup> An understanding of this new (“naturalized”) setting will clarify how Quine can deny metaphysical realism and avoid the idealism characteristic of many traditional coherence theories.

6. One of the naturalized epistemologist’s first discoveries is that the posits of the background theory are subject to change and increasing systematization. It is clear that a number of posits are employed in attempts by a single subject to deal with a body of data. In the beginning phases of language acquisition, for example, a child may learn ‘red’ by coupling linguistic and nonlinguistic irritations. Later in an art class s/he may learn to “make” secondary colors by mixing various primary colors. Still later s/he may learn about the color spectrum and prisms in general science. This may lead to a study of waves in a ripple tank and finally to a study of harmonics and the inadequacies of wave theory.

This process evidences a tendency toward increasing systematization characteristic of the changes in human conceptual schemes. As individuals pass from ‘red’ to ‘quanta’ the distinctions between the hypothetical and the real come to be drawn somewhat differently at various stages. Here the realist’s worry surfaces: “Given that truth and reference are to be judged relative to a theory, how will we be able to determine factual from fanciful theories?”

7. It is only if one assumes the point of view of the epistemologist

exclusively that this tendency toward increasing systematization coupled with our inability to appeal to word-world correlations seems to yield an inability to distinguish fact from fiction. While recognizing the role of systematization, the naturalized epistemologist must also acknowledge that the predicament of her subjects is her own. All individuals are onboard shipwrights and are required to judge truth and reference relative to their held theory.

In contradistinction to the metaphysical realist who would stress the perspective of the epistemologist and distinguish between truth and falsity and between reality and myth in terms of (illicit) word-world correspondence relations, Quine locates these distinctions *in* held theory:

Unbemused by philosophy, we would all go along with Dr. Johnson, whose toe was his touchstone of reality. Sheep are real, unicorns are not. Clouds are real, the sky (as a solid canopy) not. Odd numbers are perhaps real, but prime even numbers other than 2 not. Everything, of course, is real; but there are sheep and there are no unicorns, there are clouds and there is (in the specified sense of the term) no sky, there are odd numbers and there are no even primes other than 2. Such is the ordinary sense of the word 'real', a separation of the sheep from the unicorns.<sup>14</sup>

That is, it is in learning the word-world correlations involved in the mastery of this background language that we come to master the concepts of truth and reality and the difference between rabbits and rabbit parts. Truth and reference are relative to this background language which provides us with our standards of truth and reference. If these standards are not mastered, there is no system and no assertions which may be true or false, no terms which may refer. We may not view this background language as merely a systematization of the data, rather it is “. . . a move prior to which no appreciable data would be available to systematize.”<sup>15</sup>

8. Here, however, a skeptical worry arises: “If it is the background scheme of beliefs itself which legitimizes talk of truth and reference, what legitimizes the system?” It appears that our system of knowledge becomes a “groundless fabrication” without significance in that it may refer to nothing external.<sup>16</sup> This skeptical worry, however, is inappropriate. The skeptic may question our claims to knowledge only relative to this background of shared beliefs. Relative to the background language with its distinctions between sheep and unicorns we may inquire whether that thing in the field is a sheep or merely a replica designed to mislead the unwary. However, such a worry or doubt may arise only *within* a body of beliefs that are not questioned. To attempt to question the background language itself as a whole is to attempt to adopt the external perspective urged by the metaphysical realist.<sup>17</sup>

Truth and reference and questions as to the truth or reference of claims, then, are relative to the held theory. Absolute queries in either regard require the adoption of a misleading epistemological model. The skeptic, no less than the metaphysical realist, is guilty of ignoring our

role as theory-holders and stressing exclusively the perspective of the epistemologist.

9. This internal resolution of the skeptics' challenge does not seem to fully meet the realists' worries however. In maintaining that only word-word correlations are available, that the very meaning of 'true' and 'refers' is to be explained in terms of these correlations, and that questions of truth and reference are relative to a held theory we seem to be asserting that all justification of, and all challenges to, a held theory are to be met within this theory. Surely, the realist contends, we have here a metaphysical idealism.

In denying the realist's attempt to explain truth and reference and to ground the truth claims of the held theory and its scheme of reference in determinate word-world correspondence relations the relativist is not asserting that meaning of and justification for these claims and this scheme is to be found in word-word coherence relations. The relativist's *reductio* argument sketched above has as its conclusion that truth and reference and questions as to the truth or reference of claims are questions which make sense only relative to the held theory. Thus questions as to the truth of or reference of the theory itself and characterization of truth independent of this theory are ruled out.<sup>18</sup> Neither correspondence nor coherence relations ground our claims to truth and our scheme of reference then. Both the realist and the idealist are mistaken in seeking such a ground and their infatuation with the external perspective is symptomatic of their mistake here.

10. What the relativist does offer in terms of evaluation at the level of the held theory is an evaluation of proposed *changes in* that theory. Here s/he offers neither coherence nor correspondence criteria but rather *pragmatic considerations*. This is *not* to say that s/he offers a pragmatic theory of truth. Talk of truth and reference is essentially relative to the background theory. Thus Peirce,<sup>19</sup> who would define truth in terms of the outcome of scientific inquiry, attempts to judge claims true not relative to a background theory, but would judge background theories relative to some fixed and determinate external standard. Quine rejects this and any other "pragmatic theory of truth."<sup>20</sup>

The pragmatic considerations apply only to the evaluation of changes *within* a held theory. The evaluation of "competing alternative held theories" is something that the relativist does not allow.<sup>21</sup> S/he points out that all of our evaluations (all questions as to truth and reference) are such that they must be raised only within a held theory. Within such a theory changes are possible and the pragmatic considerations are what we use in evaluating proposals for change here:

... it is meaningless, I suggest, to inquire into the absolute correctness of a conceptual scheme as a mirror of reality. Our standard for appraising basic changes of conceptual scheme must be, not a realistic standard of correspondence to reality, but a pragmatic standard. Concepts are language, and the purpose of concepts and language is efficacy in

communication and prediction. Such is the ultimate duty of language, science, and philosophy, and it is in relation to that duty that a conceptual scheme has finally to be appraised.<sup>22</sup>

We can not, given the relativity of truth and reference, judge the truth of, or superior referential characteristics of, “competing systems of background beliefs.” All our judgment must also employ the standards of our held theory and, thus, can not effect an independent evaluation of these standards as against those of another background theory. However, as epistemologists we may note that the role and purpose of the held theory is efficacy in relating and predicting experiences. It, more than any other faculty or facility we possess, is necessary for our continued survival and prospering. Thus various evaluative factors are easily suggested: elegance, simplicity, scope, fecundity, and success in relating and predicting experiences are all extremely relevant factors in evaluating proposed changes in the held theory.

11. It is in the analysis of the characteristics of and rationale for such change that we discover the difference between the Quinean relativist and the metaphysical idealist. The idealist countenances compatibility as the only relevant evaluative consideration in judgements as to the addition or removal of beliefs from the background theory. “Ideas,” being like nothing else but “ideas,” can be compared to “ideas” alone. However, Quine contends, the belief or posits of this background language have a role and purpose which must be considered in addition to any considerations of compatibility.<sup>23</sup> This role and purpose—the efficacious prediction and relating of experiences—provides us with several important evaluative considerations (the pragmatic ones) which we may employ whenever changes are suggested in the background theory. The question is, in such situations, which of the proposals yields the system which plays the designated role and fulfills the desired purpose. The pragmatic considerations provide criteria of evaluation here. This is not to say that compatibility is not a major consideration—however if it were the only consideration change would be inexplicable.

It is relative to the held theory, then, that we can talk of truth and reference—this theory is the Neurathian ship we are all confined to. However, we are, on the metaphor, not merely passengers but onboard shipwrights. The various tools at our disposal allow us to modify the character of the ship as we sail. Quine, then, posits a sort of transcendence from within.<sup>24</sup> The naturalized epistemologist may be limited as to where s/he may begin her inquiry, but the end-points are not subject to the same limitations. As the earlier discussion of color and increasing systematization indicated, we can move far indeed from our origins. The desires for systematization, simplicity, and increased accuracy of prediction may lead us away from talk of “red” to talk of “quanta.” Here the held theory changes (and, thus, what claims *are* true and *what* we refer to changes), because of several proposals for the



background theory, one better fulfills the role and meets the purpose of language. The pragmatic factors here favor the “scientific” rather than the “ordinary” concept because the former more efficaciously relates our experiences.

12. At this juncture the metaphysical realist will, certainly, comment that such pragmatic features as failures in prediction, fecundity, and the tendency toward increasing systematization indicate exactly the realistic (that is, transcendent and external) sort of correspondence considerations which characterize both truth and our attempts to attain it and which I have maintained the Quinean relativist denies. Theories, s/he would hold, are better than other theories when they avoid failures in prediction or are more systematic just because such features indicate that they are in closer accord with the world (that is, are true or “closer” to the truth).

In response to such comments the relativist must question the realist’s claim that the pragmatic considerations provide a non-relativistic point of correspondence or accord between theory and world. These considerations s/he must maintain, point to one theory being better than another not because it accords or corresponds more closely to the character of reality, but rather because it better meets certain needs and answers certain interests.<sup>25</sup>

Consider, for example, maps. We say one map is better than another not because it corresponds to or accords with the world better but, rather, because it meets certain needs and answers certain interests of the map-users. Thus, road maps frequently ignore important topological features in favor of noting such features as intersections and the locations of gas stations, restaurants, and way-side tables. Geological-survey maps may, on the other hand, ignore such features and stress radically different ones. A map which included all features, however (and thus corresponded most closely to the world), would be as unreadable as the world itself. Similarly we find that in certain circumstances it will be desirable to draw maps which shape Italy like a boot and France like a hexagon, while at other times such a map might be most inappropriate. The question “Which map is better?” is, clearly, an interest-relative one—the better map is judged so not in regard to its degree of correspondence but, rather, in regard to how well it relates to the map-user’s interests, desires and purposes.

Similarly the pragmatic considerations noted above are not considerations which enable us to state our preference among theories in terms of correspondence considerations. Theories are judged better than others in regard to certain of our desires and interests. Stressing both the perspectives of the theory-holder and the epistemologist is most helpful at this point. The former perspective provides us with our present standards of evaluation while the latter allows for change—change because our interests and desires are not being met, or change because these themselves have changed.

13. The metaphysical realist, however, views the “pragmatic considerations” merely as evidence of truth. Such considerations are adequate only if they generate *the correct* set of correspondence relations. Maps, s/he would maintain, will be adequate only if they meet our needs and one of our fundamental needs is that the maps be true. In short, s/he would maintain that it is conceivable that a map might have all the evidence for its truth that the pragmatic considerations could supply and yet be false. Ultimately, it is truth which is the desired characteristic of maps (and conceptual schemes).

Here, according to the relativist, the metaphysical realist occupies the perspective of the epistemologist too exclusively. Each epistemologist is also a theory-holder and it is only relative to the standards provided by the held theory that talk of truth makes sense. Moreover, it is the held theory which provides the evaluative criteria which may be employed in ascertaining whether a theory is true.<sup>26</sup> Granted, these are subject to change, however, at any given time individuals possess such criteria and it is only relative to these that they may speak of truth.

The realist would ask “How do we know our criteria are correct” meaning to ask how we are justified in our assumption that the held theory is one which correctly refers and has the true beliefs. The relativist would point out that such a question is inappropriate. In section 50 of his *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein maintains that “there is *one* thing of which one can say neither that it is one metre long, nor that it is not one metre long, and that is the standard metre in Paris.”<sup>27</sup> His point is that such standards may not be used to judge themselves. Any attempt, we have seen, to judge such standards from an external vantage point is not an option open to us, as such a procedure would reintroduce the perspective which the *reductio* argument argued against. To attempt to judge these standards from an internal perspective would require that we have some other set of standards, and this is (by hypothesis) false—as these are to be our standards of truth.

The relativist, of course, is not maintaining that these standards can not be changed. An example of such revision occurred in 1960. At that time the fundamental unit of length in the metric system was changed. From 1889 to 1960 the meter was defined to be the distance between two lines on the “International Prototype Meter.” After 1960 a meter became 1,650,763.73 vacuum wavelengths of the orange-red radiation of Krypton 86 under certain specified conditions. This change in standards was affected for complex considerations of increased systematization. Earlier developments necessitated a unit of length called the Angstrom which was defined to be the ten-thousandth-millionth part of a meter. This unit came to be most easily measured in terms of wavelengths, and the accuracy of this method of measurement so surpassed those which applied to the lines on the bar that the new standard came to be adopted.

The relativist, then, maintains that one may not judge one’s standard to be correct or incorrect, there must be some standard before talk of

correctness makes sense and before judgements of correctness or incorrectness may be offered. In emphasizing our role as theory holders (as against the realist's emphasis upon our role as epistemologists and upon an independent characterization of truth) the relativist would stress a view which avoids the nonsense of the *reductio* argument noted earlier. Instead of characterizing truth and reference by appealing to the external vantage point and to correspondence relations, the relativist both characterizes truth and evaluates truth claims relative to the standards offered by the held theory. The various pragmatic considerations noted are what are relevant in determining the desirability of any changes in these held standards. These considerations lead not to the new standards which "better correspond" to reality, but to standards which either better meet old interests or which meet new interests, desires, and purposes.

14. As epistemologists we recognize that such changes in the held theory are most important and a study of such processes is essential. This study is one which must be conducted "from within" however. That is, the epistemologist must *use* the very criteria s/he studies since the study of our criteria and of the change involved can appeal to no external criteria of evaluation.

A study of the processes of acquisition and change of background theories reveals at least three sorts of fundamental posits within the single unified background theory:

Sense data are *evidentially* fundamental: every man is beholden to his senses for every hint of bodies. The physical particles are *naturally* fundamental, in this kind of way: laws of the behavior of these particles afford, so far as we know, the *simplest formulation of a general theory of what happens*. Common-sense bodies, finally are *conceptually* fundamental: it is by reference to them that the very notions of reality and evidence are acquired. . . . (PR, p. 239).

Each sort of fundamental particle answers a different need. The conceptually fundamental particles are publicly observable, common, easily distinguishable, and have a distinct importance in regard to basic human needs. These factors make them extremely valuable in the social process of language acquisition. However, while common "things" like colors are readily learned, they are, frequently, not the sorts of posits we would utilize in offering more systematic and careful relations and predictions of experiences. Thus, the advanced sciences frequently ignore colors (and other conceptually fundamental particles) for "more significant" underlying things. Color is ignored and, instead, chemical composition may be considered basic. While such particles do an excellent job of organizing experience, they would be most unsuitable in the process of language acquisition—children can, naturally, distinguish colors while the distinction of chemical composition taxes the discriminatory powers of most adults.

The evidentially fundamental particles are basic when we turn to questions such as "What evidence do I have for the talk of tables and

quanta?" Here a different need must be met. Neither acquisition nor systematization but justification is at issue here. The naturalized epistemologist comes to recognize that the only evidence we have for either the naturally fundamental or the conceptually fundamental particles is the evidence of our senses. Thus the particles of sense become evidentially basic. None of these sorts of basic particles, however, is more basic than any of the others. As noted above, the conceptually fundamental particles may be necessary in the acquisition process and ill-suited to the needs of the systematizer. Similarly, the evidentially fundamental particles will be basic in the study of the acquisition of beliefs and in their justification, but they will be ill-suited to the acquisition and the systematization processes.

15. None of the different sorts of fundamental particles is uniquely suited for all the different needs which we have. While we begin with certain posits (the fundamental conceptual ones), and learn to distinguish truth from falsity, fact from fiction, in terms of these, we may come later to draw the distinction (partially or wholly) in terms of other particles (the naturally fundamental ones, say).

Such changes need not, indeed, be limited to the lifetime of single individuals. Changes in scientific theories may have an effect upon the language acquisition process because certain discriminations which were previously important become much less important. If this is the case, the movement, say, from conceptually fundamental to naturally fundamental particles may enable us to change the beginning points for the future generations and they may learn to draw the distinctions between truth and falsity, myth and reality differently than we did when we learned the background language. It is in this manner that there may be substantial change in the background theory or language.

16. Of course, these different sorts of fundamental particles and our movement among them do not constitute the only reasons for change of the held theory. Failures in prediction and explanation (along with all the other noted factors) may also lead to change. A central point to be kept in mind, however, when discussing such change is Quine's holism—his commitment to a Duhemian view of the dynamics of conceptual change. According to Quine, the need for change in no way dictates what must be changed. We may hold any of our beliefs constant "come what may"—though this procedure may require radical changes in other areas of the background theory.

A failure in prediction need not yield a change in theory. One can, after all, ignore the new result—explaining it as the result of some (unknown) unanticipated and mitigating factor. Persistent failures of prediction could also be ignored. We could still hold to the background theory and attempt to explain away the persistent error. However, such a procedure is frowned upon. In general the reason that this is so is tied intimately to the overall purpose of the background language.

17. According to the naturalized epistemologist, the background language is charged with the efficacious and efficient organization of experience. To the extent that it consistently fails to offer adequate predictions it will be deficient. Thus we tend to take persistent failure of prediction seriously and attempt to alter the held beliefs rather than explain away the unpredicted results. It is in such facts as these that we can see that compatibility is not the only evaluative criteria countenanced by Quine. The metaphysical idealist notes that ideas, concepts, or words cannot be compared to independent reality—such a process requires the illicit vantage point of the metaphysical realist. Assuming that comparison is the key to truth and reference, s/he asserts that we can compare words with words only. It is in the notion that comparison is the important relation that s/he goes wrong here.

As noted earlier,<sup>28</sup> Quine denies that the relevant evaluation of background languages is to be the realistic one of comparison with reality. However, he also denies that it is to be an idealistic criterion of compatibility. Truth and reference are, of course, relative to the background language—but not all evaluation is so limited to word-word compatibility comparisons. The purpose of language provides a nonlinguistic criterion which may be utilized in the evaluation of any changes in our held theory. Changes within this theory may be evaluated in terms of which alternatives allow language to play the desired role and enable us to accomplish our goals and meet our needs. Thus considerations enter into the evaluation of changes in the background theory which are much broader than considerations of compatibility.<sup>29</sup>

18. Here I must return a final time to the contrast between the realist and the relativist. It is in the countenancing of other factors than compatibility that the relativist differs from the idealist. These “pragmatic” factors in the evaluation of conceptual change may seem to suggest realism. As was noted earlier, the realist is likely to say that in conceptual change we prefer a later to an earlier theory just because it is true, or more true.

Consider our present highly scientific held theory with its talk of germs, electrons, gravity, and combustion. Contrast this background theory with that we can imagine was utilized by our Cro-Magnon predecessors. Given that the purpose and role of background theory is to efficaciously and efficiently order experience, the realist will inquire, is it not clear that ours is better than theirs—better because ours is true(er) and theirs, certainly, was not?

19. The relativist maintains that there is something important and something fallacious in such a statement. The fallacious element arises in asserting that our background language is closer to the truth than theirs. If, as the metaphysical realist must, one means by this that speaking absolutely one scheme correctly (or more correctly) characterizes the world, then one seeks to introduce the talk of

correspondence relations and absolute perspectives on truth and reference which lead, as we have seen, to an inability to provide for the very distinctions one would stress as so important.<sup>30</sup>

The important elements in the realist's statement is that there is a sense of "better" in which our scheme is better than theirs. The "direction of change" of background theories seems (according to *our* sciences of anthropology and sociology and *our* history of science) to be away from such primitive belief systems as the Cro-Magnons' and toward the more systematic scientific system which we employ. What explains this tendency is not, however, that the later system "corresponds better" than the earlier one.

The relativist maintains that our system is superior to the Cro-Magnons' because we share certain desires, interests, and purposes. For them, as well as for us, the purpose of language and concepts is efficacy in communication and prediction. The role of the held theory, then, is to efficiently relate experiences to experiences. Moreover, it seems clear that, just as the scientific theory which speaks of a "quanta" fulfills the purpose and meets our needs better than the child's which speaks of "red," so our theory will relate experiences more effectively than the Cro-Magnons'.

20. This is not to say that viewed absolutistically and externally our present conceptual scheme is preferable to the Cro-Magnon's. Such a statement makes no sense to the relativist. When s/he states that the "direction of change" is away from the Cro-Magnon sort of conceptual scheme and toward our scientific one and states that there is a strong presumption that both we and the Cro-Magnons share certain desires and interests s/he is speaking "from within"—or relative to—our presently held conceptual scheme. As a theory holder certain distinctions, desires, and interests are fundamental to any characterization of truth or evaluation of statements s/he may offer. While, as a naturalized epistemologist, s/he recognizes that these distinctions and interests may change over time, nevertheless s/he must employ the distinctions and be guided by the interests which s/he has as a theory holder.

21. To say with the realists, then, that our system is preferable to that of the Cro-Magnon epistemologist is to say that (according to our present theory) all persons share certain basic interests and desires—and, given these, certain ways of ordering experience are most efficient and efficacious. That is, we believe that there is a continuity underlying various changes in background structures of belief. The relativist can (indeed, given our Darwinian concepts, must) agree with this. What s/he must withhold her assent from is the assertion that this provides in any way insight into correspondence relations between human systems of belief and independent reality.

Given certain desires, interests, and a certain heritage, we fully believe

that a Cro-Magnon epistemologist confronted with the present system of knowledge and experience would (after a significant attack of culture shock) come to adopt many of our present beliefs. This is the case because our theory dictates that certain interests, desires, and experiences are shared by her and us. We judge our scheme, by comparison to hers prior to such a change, to be better, but this judgement is not one of correspondence but rather one relative to the held theory and our desires, interests, etc.

Truth, rather than being *the* measuring rod of belief systems, is relative to such systems and it is an inappropriate tool for purposes of evaluation of conceptual schemes and conceptual change. The pragmatic features which the relativist adds to considerations of compatibility judge changes in a scheme in terms of its goals, purposes and successes and failures. Correspondence and truth are not among such considerations, though, of course, efficacy and efficiency in prediction and explanation may be.

22. According to the Quinean relativist, then, we must reject both metaphysical realism and metaphysical idealism. The former places an exclusive emphasis upon our role as epistemologists and opens the door to skepticism and nonsense. It would recommend an external perspective which, in separating us from our standards of evaluation makes all evaluation impossible. The latter view emphasizes exclusively our role as theory-holders and traps us in the present background language. It would recommend an internal perspective which employs static criteria of evaluation and makes change incomprehensible. The relativist, by emphasizing both roles, offers a view which while relativistic is not idealistic. While confined to a background language, we are not condemned to it. Transcendental evaluation of background languages is precluded by the relativity of truth and reference to the background language. But transcendence from a particular background language to another is both possible, and explicable, given various pragmatic considerations. By stressing our roles as epistemologists and as theory-holders, the relativist comes to recognize that the function and purpose of the held theory force us to utilize pragmatic factors in our evaluation of theory-change and these factors take us beyond both metaphysical realism and metaphysical idealism.<sup>31</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Traditional epistemology is questioned and relativism advanced in such recent works as M. Williams' *Groundless Belief*, Yale, 1977; H. Putnam's *Meaning and the Moral Sciences*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978; N. Goodman's *Ways of World-Making*, Hackett, 1978; and R. Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton, 1979.

<sup>2</sup> Cf., L. Briksman's "Historicist Relativism and Bootstrap Rationality," *Monist*, v. 60, 1977, pp. 504-539; and Alan Goldman's "The Death of Epistemology: A Premature Burial," (forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> Many may object to the way I characterize these views here. In the body of this paper it

will become clear that the relativist offers a view of truth and reference which differs radically from those of the realists (who adopt a Tarski-like truth-conditional semantics which holds that true statements properly reflect an independent state-of-affairs) and of idealists (who maintain that truth and reference are, essentially, word-word relations). The relativist's program requires that both the traditional metaphysics and epistemology be revised.

<sup>4</sup> In my "Inscrutability and Correspondence," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, v. 17, 1979, pp. 199-212, I detail Quine's *reductio* argument and argue that recent attempts by H. Field and J. Corman to avoid Quine's argument fail. Here I will offer only a brief summary of Quine's argument as I wish to deal with some consequences of his rejection of the correspondence theory. A related point is offered by J. Meiland in his "Bernard Williams's Relativism," *Mind*, v. 88, 1979, pp. 258-262.

<sup>5</sup> Quine, W. V., "Ontological Relativity," in his *Ontological Relativity*, Columbia University Press, NY, NY, 1969, p. 47. All further citations to this text are followed by "OR" and the page reference.

<sup>6</sup> Quine argues this point in his "On the Reasons for the Indeterminacy of Translation," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 1970, pp. 178-183. His point is that if one is wedded to the correspondence model and its talk of determinate word-world relations and if, as he maintains, it is always possible to uncover a multitude of distinct correspondence relations which are indistinguishable on this model, then we must apply this model to ourselves. Thus, in our own case, either the distinct alternatives are only apparently distinct (and there is no difference between referring to rabbits and to collections) or the model must be relinquished. Since there is a difference, Quine opts for discarding the model. See also sections 4 and 10 below.

<sup>7</sup> This is suggested by H. Field in his "Quine and the Correspondence Theory," *The Philosophic Review*, 83 (1974), pp. 200-228. Here the correspondence theorist maintains that truth survives the conflicting reference relations because the same sentence ("Lo, gavagai," say) comes out true regardless of which of the reference relations (reference to rabbits, rabbit parts, etc.) is chosen. I discuss and dismiss this proposal in the paper cited in footnote 4 above. Let me point out here that his proposal relies upon the notion of a set of more basic terms which have unique referents and it is at that point that the whole Quinean argument applies again. For the correspondence theorist talk of truth must be tied to some sort of word-world relations and, thus, there can not be (except, perhaps, for logical truths) any assertion which is true for *all* possible reference relations. The heart of the correspondence theory is that the truth of our assertions is tied to the way the world is. Thus for such theorists to maintain that all talk of truth survived the conflicting reference relations would be for them to give up the notion of correspondence altogether. Determinate reference relations are required and the inscrutability of reference, thus, strikes at the heart of the theory.

<sup>8</sup> Cf., OR, p. 27. Here Quine discusses "the myth of the museum" and maintains that the correspondence theorists' account is vitiated by a desire to be more determinate than the evidence will allow.

<sup>9</sup> Cf., OR, p. 48.

<sup>10</sup> Cf., Quine, *Word and Object*, MIT, Cambridge, Mass., 1960, p. 22. All further citations to this work are followed by "WO" and the page reference.

<sup>11</sup> Neurath's metaphor appears in his "Protocol Sentences," in *Logical Positivism*, A. J. Ayer (ed.), Free Press, NY, NY, 1959, p. 201. Quine appeals to this metaphor at many points.

<sup>12</sup> Cf., WO, pp. 24-25.

<sup>13</sup> While Quine is unclear as to what sort of containment he has in mind, what seems most likely is that he means that the endeavor of the epistemologist is one that is to be considered that of a scientist while the procedure of the scientist is a part of the subject matter for the epistemologist. As I will show, the containment of epistemology in science argues for a view of epistemology which requires that we take our present beliefs seriously. The containment of science in epistemology illustrates the difference in scope of the two endeavors and illustrates how change is to come about in our held theory. Whereas the first sort of containment stresses the relative character of the investigator's procedure, the second stresses the changeable status of the presently held theory.



<sup>14</sup> Quine, W., "On Mental Entities," in his *The Ways of Paradox*, Random House, NY, NY, 1966, p. 212.

<sup>15</sup> Quine, W., "Posits and Reality," in *Ways of Paradox*, *op. cit.*, p. 238. All further citations to this work are followed by "PR" and the page reference.

<sup>16</sup> Cf., Quine, W., "The Scope and Language of Science," in PR, p. 216; PR, p. 237; WO, pp. 24-25; and Quine's *The Roots of Reference*, Open Court, La Salle, IL, 1973, p. 2. All further citations to this last work are followed by "Roots" and the page reference.

<sup>17</sup> Cf., the citations in notes 14 and 15 above.

<sup>18</sup> It is here that the difference between the relativists and the realists and idealists emerges. The realist maintains that truth is a property had by theories which properly mirror the independent states-of-affairs, the idealist maintains that truth is a characteristic of certain consistent correlations of words or concepts. The relativist holds that one may speak of truth only relative to a held theory. What it means to say that a theory or statement is true is that it is, in fact, one which is "held" by the theory holders. Where the metaphysics and epistemology of the traditional philosophers allow one to discuss the "truth of theories," the relativist disallows such talk. The relativist must, then, if at all, "evaluate" theories differently. Truth is not a characteristic of theories (at this fundamental level) and, thus, neither the realist's nor idealist's conception of what it means for a theory to be true or how we tell whether a given theory is such are relevant here.

<sup>19</sup> Cf., Peirce, C., *Collected Papers*, v. 5, Harvard, Cambridge, Mass., 1934, section 407.

<sup>20</sup> Cf., WO, p. 23.

<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the very notion of competing held theories is one which presupposes the illicit external vantage point.

<sup>22</sup> Quine, W., "Identity, Ostension, and Hypostasis," in his *From a Logical Point of View*, Harper and Row, NY, NY, 1961, p. 79. Cf., also PR, p. 241; WO, pp. 24-25; and Roots, section 36.

<sup>23</sup> Indeed, these considerations may be more important than those of compatibility. We worry little about the compatibility of physics and economics; but much more about whether the predictions in each science are adequate.

<sup>24</sup> Cf., WO, p. 4. Here Quine cites Wittgenstein's ladder metaphor and indicates that both this and the Neurathian metaphor are to indicate that we may go beyond the presently held theory.

<sup>25</sup> The realist holds that what it means for a theory to be true and that the criteria to be employed in testing for truth are both to be tied to the notion of correspondence. The relativist maintains that, properly speaking, truth is not a property of theories and that the relevant evaluative criteria allow for neither the notion of correspondence nor for the sort of independent vantage point the realist requires.

<sup>26</sup> In his "The Limits of Relativism," *The Philosophical Quarterly*, v. 29 (1979) T. E. Burke describes the interrelationship of statement-making and statement-evaluation. According to him, if individuals employ different criteria of evaluation then the statements they make are different and, thus, can not contradict one another. Thus, he maintains, relativism is right to insist that we must share standards if we are to discuss similar statements. I do not believe Burke succeeds in "limiting" relativism in any important sense, but this is another story.

<sup>27</sup> Wittgenstein, L. W., *Philosophical Investigations*, Macmillan, NY, 1958, Part I, Section 50. C. G. Luckhardt's "Wittgenstein: Investigations 50" (*The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 15 (1977), pp. 81-90) provides an excellent companion to this passage. He points out that Wittgenstein is maintaining that identifying the metre bar as the standard metre does not consist in describing it as having a property (a certain length) but, rather, in identifying it as playing a special role in the "game" of measurement. Measurement in metres presupposes this standard and its role as a standard logically precludes it from being one of the measurable objects here.

<sup>28</sup> Cf., Section 10 above.

<sup>29</sup> L. Laudan in his *Progress and Its Problems* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1977), L. Briskman in his "Historicist Relativism and Bootstrap Rationality" (*Monist*, 60, pp. 509-539), and J. Kekes in his *A Justification of Rationality* (State University of New York Press, Albany, 1976) each offer views which argue that the problems and aims which we have provide such evaluative factors. The latter two works, however, attempt to offer a

correspondence-type theory also and are, I believe, incorrect to that extent.

<sup>30</sup> One can, of course, say “Our scheme is correct” but here one is not performing an independent evaluation of their and our background schemes and discovering that ours is correct (what standards of evaluation would one employ here), rather, one is merely, as the relativist allows, asserting that one’s standards are one’s standards. The correct theory of truth, then, on the level of underlying held theories is the “disappearance theory of truth.”

<sup>31</sup> I wish to thank E. Zemach and R. Barrett who, at different times, provided the stimulus which led to this paper. R. Ketchum, G. Bailey, A Perrin, V. Herston, K. Henley and an anonymous reviewer for this journal also provided valuable comments and criticisms which led to a much improved paper.