

Quine is Not a (Deweyan) Pragmatist

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response to Don Howard, March 31, 2012

I want to thank Don for his thoughtful talk on Quine's place in pragmatism and Quine's philosophy of science.

I will focus on only one feature of Don's paper, the relationship between Dewey and Quine. I won't take a position on whether we should praise Quine or bury him, that is, I won't speak to the merits of the view that Don has articulated.

I will explain why I do not find Quine a natural starting point for locating Dewey's (or a Deweyan) philosophy of science.

Dewey on Quine: "I am no judge of Quine's work; he seems however to be somewhat more careful than many of the logicians... he is working from the old epistemological tradition that separates 'sense' from, well from 'good sense'. All this may not be worth bothering with, but if any of the logicians are getting nearer facts, they might be worth special notice." (Letter to A. Bentley, Sept. 7, 1946)

Bentley: "Quine is better than most" (Letter to Dewey, Sept. 11, 1946).

Howard aims to show Quine's awareness of and agreement with Dewey, and takes Quine as the proper inheritor of the pragmatist mantle. And whereas Dewey produced no philosophy of science, Quine did, so we ought to turn to him.

1 WHAT'S AT STAKE?

1.1 A MATTER OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

In his paper, Howard rightly takes to task those who argue that Quine is not a pragmatist on the basis of his poor historical understanding of pragmatism.¹

An understanding of the history of pragmatism is neither necessary nor sufficient for counting as a pragmatist.

¹Though I did say that my discussion of this point would not be satisfactory. (Brown 2006)

Further, Quine's history is better than he is given credit for; it is *not* clear what pragmatism is, or who counts and why.

Creative reconstruction of "the pragmatist tradition" is common from the very beginning (Margolis 2009; Brown 2011).

1.2 A MATTER OF INFLUENCE

Were Quine's ideas meaningfully *influenced* by the pragmatists? Here's what Quine himself says:

"On essential points I seem to find myself especially in agreement with Dewey, although I was not influenced by Dewey. I didn't know his work that well in the old days. Certainly I'm much more sympathetic with Dewey than other pragmatists so called, notably William James. There are two points where I depart radically from James: one, his pragmatic theory of truth, second his 'Will to believe', which seems to me to be a way of giving aid and comfort to wishful thinkers. As for Charles Sanders Peirce, I've never succeeded in gaining a unified picture of Peirce. I admire his pioneering contributions to modern logic, but ... what little of his philosophy I've read hasn't appealed to me..."

This seems to me to more or less settle the question of influence. Quine owed no direct intellectual debt to Dewey.

Another possibility is that Quine got his pragmatism from Carnap, who in turn got it from Charles Morris who...

But Morris's insistence on *pragmatics* was a part of his deeply *anti*-pragmatist trichotomy of syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, of which Dewey was highly dismissive.

1.3 A MATTER OF DOCTRINE

After all (as I suggested in 2006) what may *really* be at stake in calling Quine a "pragmatist" is that he defends certain core commitments of pragmatism.

Despite the lack of influence, Quine claims to endorse several of Dewey's views.

And Quine *does* hold some distinctive pragmatist theses:

1. Naturalism (opposition to "first philosophy")
2. The denial of immediate, incorrigible knowledge.
3. Rejection of the semantics-pragmatics dichotomy.
4. That knowledge is more human creation than discovery.

Nevertheless, Quine parts company from Dewey's version of pragmatism in many fundamental ways, such that the differences outweigh the similarities.

In what follows, I will dispute much of Howard's interpretation of Dewey, and some of his interpretation of Quine — though on the latter I admit to being on shakier ground.

2 NATURALISM AND ONTOLOGY

2.1 QUINE IS A PHYSICALIST; DEWEY IS A PLURALIST

While Quine probably does not accept intertheoretic reductionism, he gives a special metaphysical place to the claims of physics.

Quine holds that all of the physical states across all of space-time plus some mathematical apparatus is ontologically if not epistemologically exhaustive.

Quine is probably what we would call a supervenience or non-reductive physicalist.

At other points, Quine's ontological views sound eliminative scientism; we see at various times Quine attempting to eliminate mental, modal, propositional, and normative entities.

Dewey rejects the fundamentality of physics.

Dewey holds that physics, like any other special science, is a set functional distinctions made in a context, abstractions from "inclusive situations."

2.2 QUINE IS A NOMINALIST; DEWEY IS NOT

Quine may have rejected nominalism in the sense that he accepted some abstract mathematical entities (sets or classes); he did not accept the existence of real kinds or universals.

Dewey spends a good chunk of time in the logic setting out an argument for the real existence of kinds in the Logic.

The one place where Quine is anti-nominalist (his Platonism about mathematical objects), Dewey agrees w/ the nominalists.

2.3 DEWEY ACCEPTS MODALITY; QUINE DOES NOT

Quine's attack on modality is well known.

Dewey's views on modality are complicated and controversial (Ralph Sleeper has an interesting view), but they depend in part on his understanding of hypothetical propositions:

Dewey: “An hypothesis concerns what is possible, and a proposition regarding possibles is indispensable in inquiry that has scientific standing” (*Logic* 379).

2.4 THEY DISAGREE ABOUT THE AIMS OF SCIENCE

Quine takes the aim of science to be the systematization of sensory inputs into a coherent web that enables prediction.

Dewey takes the aim of science to be problem-solving, and problems arise as disruptions of preexisting practices and activities.

The goal of inquiry is re-settled practice. Judgments are decisions about actions to take in the context of an environmentally-situated practice.

2.5 DEWEY’S NATURALISM ALLOWS FOR STRONGER NORMATIVITY IN EPISTEMOLOGY

At first glance, Dewey and Quine seem to agree on the nature of the normativity of logic and epistemology.

Dewey: “We know that some methods of inquiry are better than others in just the same way in which we know that some methods of surgery, farming, road-making, navigating or what-not are better than others.”

Quine: “For me, normative epistemology is a branch of engineering. It is the technology of truth-seeking. . .”

Both appear to reduce the normativity of epistemology to instrumental rationality.

The difference depends on the aims of science.

Quine’s version of naturalism lacks the resources to express the value of the goals of prediction and truth-seeking. Why should we go after these goals?

Dewey, on the other hand, begins with practices, which are irreducibly normative and involve intrinsic goods, giving logic and epistemology more serious normative bite.

3 HOLISM AND UNDERDETERMINATION

3.1 DEWEY IS A RADICAL CONTEXTUALIST; QUINE IS A UNIVERSALIST-HOLIST

It is a key feature of Quine’s holism that the entire body of belief meets experience as a whole.

So, judgments of confirmation or falsification are universal (though subject to underdetermination, etc.).

For Dewey, what counts as a ‘fact’ is determined contextually, potentially differing in validity from inquiry to inquiry.

The warrant for a judgment is bound to the context in which it is made, set by a problematic situation.

Continuity across situations cannot be assumed; it must be *maintained*.

3.2 QUINE TREATS THEORY AND OBSERVATION AS SAME IN KIND; DEWEY MAKES A FUNCTIONAL DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE TWO

Quine’s holism is relatively unstructured; all propositions are of the same basic kind.

Differences between observation sentences, theoretical posits and math and logic are matters of degree.

Their significant relations are primarily coherence.

By contrast, Dewey devotes significant attention to the different *types* of propositions and inferential relations that play a role in different parts of inquiry.

E.g., the role of hypotheses is quite distinct from the role of observations, and they relate in various ways.

These distinctions are functional distinctions drawn in a context, not absolute distinctions given in the nature of language or knowledge.

So while Dewey would agree with Quine’s basic argument against the analytic/synthetic or a priori/a posteriori distinctions, he would regard the subsequent lack of structure in the positive view as throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

3.3 UNDERDETERMINATION

Underdetermination does not play much of a role in Dewey’s philosophy of science, because he doesn’t begin from the narrow conception of evidential support that Quine and Neurath were criticizing.

Dewey would object to Neurath’s calling the additional factors “*auxilliary* motives.”

4 BEHAVIORISM

4.1 DEWEY IS NOT A BEHAVIORIST

It’s worth emphasizing that Quine was influenced by Watson, not Skinner.

Dewey was a functionalist and a critic of “narrow forms of behaviorism” like Watson’s. (e.g., in “Conduct and Experience”).

Dewey’s views are much closer to that of ecological psychology and enactivism than behaviorism, though all share some antagonisms to structuralism and classical cognitivism.

As Don mentions, Quine’s psychology is individualistic, and he excludes social sciences.

Dewey thought that the most fundamental fact about human psychology was its sociality.

5 TRUTH AND REALISM

5.1 QUINE DID NOT HOLD A PRAGMATIST THEORY OF TRUTH

Howard argues that Quine holds Tarski’s theory of truth, and Tarski’s theory of truth is truth in a formal language that does not amount to a correspondence theory.

This is puzzling, because Tarski clearly said that he intended to give a pretty standard correspondence theory of truth. (e.g., Tarski 1933/1983, pp. 152-3).

Quine endorsed, in a limited way, the correspondence theory: “Science, thanks to its links with observation, retains some title to a correspondence theory of truth” (Quine 1978).

More commonly Quine holds that “Truth is disquotation.” Quine calls this “the significant residue of the correspondence theory of truth.”

Quine is either a correspondence theorist or a deflationist, not a pragmatist.

If Quine is really a disquotationalist/deflationist, this means that Quine thought there was nothing interesting to say about truth; the pragmatists thought the opposite. (Misak)

Quine explicitly rejected both James’ and Peirce’s definitions of truth; he would likely be unsympathetic to Dewey’s.

Dewey’s expresses two views on truth: sometimes he is a Peircean, holding truth to depend on what would be held at the ideal limit of investigation.

Other times, Dewey has a contextual-pragmatist view of truth, holding that a judgment is a decision about a course of action in a context, and the truth of the judgment is the success of that decision.

5.2 QUINE IS A REALIST ABOUT UNOBSERVABLES; DEWEY IS NOT

For Quine, what occasions observations are retinal excitations and the like, but these are not the *objects* of knowledge.

Thus *all* the objects of knowledge are transcendental to experience: if you want to be a realist about ordinary objects, you must be a realist about your best science (i.e., the posits of physics) and about some parts of mathematics.

(This is of course assuming that you're working within a theory, taking it to be the best.)

For Dewey, the objects of knowledge are objects *in* experience, actual or possible.

Dewey is not a phenomenalist or some kind of weird idealist, but on his account experience *reaches out* into the world; it is a transaction between organism and environment.

Dewey's functionalist epistemology distinguishes between *existential propositions* dealing with conditions and things that we *actually* engage with, and the *hypothetical propositions* that posit abstract possibilities.

Dewey is closer to Hacking's *instrumental realism*.

6 QUINE HOLDS TO AN ABSOLUTE FACT/VALUE AND SCIENCE/ETHICS DICHOTOMIES

This is most problematic, from a pragmatist point of view.

On Dewey's view, social values play a role in science, which is itself continuous with ethical problem-solving.

Despite urging from pragmatists and feminists that value-judgment must play a role in scientific inference, Quine stubbornly refused to admit this into his view.

Further, he placed values in an entirely separate and "methodologically infirm" realm apart from science.

As a result, Quine encouraged a view of both science and philosophy as socially and politically aloof.

This raises some doubts about Don's insistence that Quine's conservatism "left no trace on his philosophy."

Quine's hostility to the idea that science or philosophy might be socially relevant seem to me to a politically charged view.

7 DEWEY'S DEWEYAN PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE

Don claims that we should turn to Quine because Dewey did not produce a “philosophy of science *per se*.” Luckily, “Quine did it for him.”

I have argued that we should not turn to Quine (for a Deweyan phil sci), because Quine departs too much from Dewey.

I would also argue that it is *unnecessary* to turn to Quine, because it is untrue that Dewey did not produce a philosophy of science.

In his day, Dewey was known as a philosopher of science.

That Dewey is no longer remembered in this way is in part due to unfair statements by Nagel and to overemphasis of popular works like *Quest for Certainty*.

It may also be a sign that Dewey failed to make the mistakes that became distinctive of philosophy of science as a field mid-century.

The core of Dewey's philosophy of science is the forbidding *Logic*. The rest is scattered throughout his works as a pervasive component of his thought.

For those who want a Deweyan philosophy of science, I would recommend going *back* to Dewey.

(See, e.g., my paper in *HOPOS*, “John Dewey's Logic of Science” (2012).)