

Quine's 1934 "Lectures on Carnap"

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Draft: comments welcomed

In November of 1934, over successive Thursdays, the 26-year-old Willard van Orman Quine gave three "Lectures on Carnap" at Harvard University, the ostensive aim of which was a presentation of the "central doctrine" of Carnap's *Logische Syntax der Sprache*, "that philosophy is syntax." These were among Quine's very first public lectures, and they constituted the American premier of Carnap's *logische Syntax* program.¹

¹ The lectures were published only in 1990, in Quine, W. v. O., and Carnap, R., *Dear Carnap, Dear Van: The Quine-Carnap Correspondence and Related Work*. Edited, with an introduction, by R. Creath (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 45-103. Unless otherwise indicated, page references below are to this volume; the passages quoted above are on p. 47. The lectures have been discussed by Richard Creath (see the introduction to his 1990 and "The Initial Reception of Carnap's Doctrine of Analyticity," *Nous* 21(4): 477-499) and Peter Hylton (see his "The Defensible Province of Philosophy': Quine's 1934 Lectures On Carnap," in Floyd, J. and Shieh, S. (Eds.), *Future Pasts: The Analytic Tradition in Twentieth-Century Philosophy*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 257-275.)

Note that this was the *American* premier, as opposed to its premier *in English*. Glimpses of the logical syntax program were available already in January of 1934, in Carnap's paper in the first issue *Philosophy of Science*, "On the Character of Philosophic Problems," translated from Carnap's German by the journal's editor, William Malisoff (*Philosophy of Science* 1(1), 1934: 5-19). On October 8th, 10th, and 12th of 1934 Carnap outlined the *logische Syntax* program in a series of lectures at the University of London arranged by Susan Stebbing; a revised form of

As such, these lectures are of considerable significance to the history of analytic philosophy. They show, for example, one way Carnap's syntactical program was presented and understood in the 1930s, and indeed they show how Quine, emerging even in 1934 as one of America's brightest logicians, understood that particular project. Moreover, they promise to tell something about how Quine himself was thinking about central philosophical issues—the *a priori*, analyticity, and philosophy itself—early in his career, before he wrote the papers and books on those topics that made him famous.²

these lectures were published in 1935 in R. Carnap, *Philosophy and Logical Syntax* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, & Co, 1935) (C. A. M. Maund and L. W. Reeves provided a contemporary account in their "Report of Lectures on *Philosophy and Logical Syntax* ... by Professor Rudolf Carnap," *Analysis* 2(3) 1934, 42-48). There was, finally, Quine's brief review of *Logische Syntax der Sprache* (*The Philosophical Review* (XLIV) 1934, 394-397), which appeared in xxxx of 1934.

² The first of Quine's best-known papers, "Truth By Convention," was written in the months following the "Lectures on Carnap" and develops the main ideas of the first lecture (see O. H. Lee (Ed.), *Philosophical Essays for A. N. Whitehead* (New York: Longman's, 1936), pp. 90-124. Reprinted in Quine, W. v. O., *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays, revised and enlarged edition* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1976), pp. 77-106. Page references below are to Quine (1976). On the provenance of "Truth by Convention" see Quine, W. v. O. *The Time of My Life: An Autobiography* (Cambridge, Ma.: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 121-122, and "Autobiography of W. V. Quine," in Hahn, L. E. and Schilpp, P. A. (Eds.), *The Philosophy of W. V. Quine* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court Press, 1986), pp. 1-46, p. 16).

This paper takes up this last topic. My aim is to reconstruct and understand how Quine was thinking about the *a priori*, analyticity, and philosophy itself in 1934, what he aimed to accomplish in the “Lectures on Carnap,” and the considerable extent to which he accomplished that aim. What Quine accomplished, in short, was the outline of a fascinating and original anti-metaphysics, with conventionalism (specifically, implicit definition) at its heart. This was an anti-metaphysics that invited (but, significantly, could not demand) adoption of a particular conception of philosophy.

My reconstruction of Quine’s early views provokes comparisons with his later papers, notably “Truth by Convention,” “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” and “Carnap on Logical Truth.” What happened to Quine’s early metaphysics, and why? I’ll pursue the comparisons below, considering “Truth by Convention” in some detail and the others more programmatically.

In later autobiographical asides Quine described the “Lectures on Carnap” as “uncritical” [ref] and “abjectly sequacious” to Carnap (“Two Dogmas in Retrospect,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 25 (1991), pp. 265-274, p. 266), and recalled “Truth by Convention,” in contrast, as “[drawing] upon the lectures but show[ing] already the beginnings of my misgivings over analyticity; the seeds of my apostasy” (1986, p.16). As we will see below, these descriptions are misleading. The “Lectures on Carnap” develop a distinctly Quinean theme in light of Carnap’s *logische syntax* program (indeed, Quine’s central, first, lecture addresses *Logische Syntax der Sprache* only obliquely), and (as Richard Creath has argued), “Truth by Convention” in turn develops rather than departs from the themes embraced in the “Lectures on Carnap.”

I. Convention, Choice, and Metaphysics

Near the start of the first of his three “Lectures on Carnap,” titled “The A Priori,” Quine suggests that this lecture is merely propaedeutic: “I will,” he says, “present none of Carnap’s actual work this time, but will attempt only to put [the doctrine that philosophy is syntax] in a suitable setting.” “In the remaining two lectures,” he adds, “we can get into the details of Carnap’s own developments.”³

The “setting” Quine constructs in this first lecture, however, is vital to the lectures as a whole; it provides Quine’s strategy for accounting for the *a priori* by means of analyticity and a conception of philosophy in harmony with that strategy. In the remaining two lectures Quine explores Carnap’s *logische Syntax* program, emphasizing the prevalence of quasi-syntactic statements—statements about objects that can be recast, loosely speaking, as statements about the syntactical properties of expressions—and displaying the benefits of adopting their syntactic correlates. But these aspects of the *logische Syntax* program are presented as *implementations* of a project outlined in the first lecture, a lecture strikingly detached from both the technical apparatus and the broader theme’s of Carnap’s *logische Syntax* program. In short, the setting Quine offers in this first lecture for the *logische Syntax* program in this first lecture is important and his own.

The specific task of the first lecture is a demonstration of how the *a priori* sentences of our language, those which (as Quine puts it, quoting Kant) have “the

³ P. 47.

character of an inward necessity,”⁴ can be made analytically true sentences, that is, sentences true by definition. Quine believes such a demonstration will have two distinct benefits, although he does not describe the benefits as such and they are not, initially at least, easily discerned. One benefit Quine believes would follow from a demonstration that all the *a priori* sentences can be rendered true by definition is a thoroughly *non-metaphysical* account of the *a priori*. It is non-metaphysical in that it makes possible a completely *transparent* account of the *a priori*—an account free of any sort of theory, or, we might even say, any *story* about what makes these sentences true. Showing how we could have made some *a priori* sentence true by means of a convention entirely within our control (some definition), eliminates any call for a further metaphysical account, i.e. some *story* about what makes the sentence true *a priori*.

Second, a demonstration that *a priori* truths can be rendered truths by definition would clarify the nature of philosophy, specifically, the sense in which philosophy can be understood as logical syntax. It’s Quine’s view, in 1934, that philosophy forwards statements, and indeed *a priori* statements distinct from scientific claims. Our capacity to render all *a priori* claims true as a matter of definition provides one simple sense in which philosophy is syntax: true philosophical claims are, as such, wholly as a matter of definitional, i.e. syntactical, choices. But there is a more subtle sense in which philosophy is involved with syntax, one that emerges with reflection upon the conventional aspect of definition. Definition is rife with choice.

⁴ P. 47.

There are, as Quine will emphasize, many truths we might seek, or decline, to render true by definition, and there are many adequate ways to render those truths analytic. If philosophical claims are rendered analytic, they will have been so by virtue of a conventional, syntactical, choice. Philosophy's status as syntax, then, depends upon our wholly syntactical choices.

Let us see more precisely how both these benefits emerge then in the course of the first lecture. Quine's overall aim in that lecture, recall, is to bring definition to bear on *a priori* sentences in a way that illuminates the epistemological status of the *a priori* and thus philosophy itself. The central apparatus for this is what Quine terms *implicit*, as opposed to *explicit*, definition.⁵ *Explicit* definition reflects the notion that to define a term K is to show how, in principle, to *eliminate* it. To do this requires associating K with an expression containing only other terms, such that the latter expression can be put in place of K in every context in which K occurs. As an example, Quine considers 'momentum': "The definition of momentum as mass times velocity" "is a linguistic convention whereby the word 'momentum' is introduced as an arbitrary abbreviation for the compound expression 'mass times velocity'"(48). Explicit definition of K renders the *definiendum* a notational

⁵ In "Truth by Convention," implicit definition is postulation and explicit definition is simply definition. In "Truth by Convention," and thereafter, Quine would adopt the terms 'postulational method' and 'postulation' to refer to what he here calls implicit definition, and employ 'definition' to refer (exclusively) to explicit definition. See below, pp. xx-xx.

abbreviation, and its use therefore requires that certain other terms, namely those in the *definiens*, already be defined.

Implicit definition is different. It reflects the notion that defining a term is to set down how it will occur in sentences or contexts; we might say (although Quine does not) that the essence of implicit definition is not elimination but *regimentation*.

Implicit definition thus consists in setting down as *true*, or *accepted*, certain of the contexts or sentences in which K occurs, and perhaps specifying a rule that provides for the generation, from those first starting points and previously generated sentences, of other sentences containing K as a term. The result—the initially specified sentences and all the sentences generated from them by the given rules—are then true by the (implicit) definition. The implicit definition of K is the initially specified sentence or context and the rule for generating other sentences.⁶ Unlike explicit definition, implicit definition does not require that there be already available defined terms. An *explicit* definition K is “necessarily relative” to “our uses of certain other words... where the use of these words has presumably been already stipulated in the past” (49). Explicit definition lets us render sentences true on the basis only of other sentences. Implicit definition lets us start from scratch.

Quine now employs an initially puzzling tactic, one largely unappreciated by the lectures’ commentators. It is indeed toward the *a priori* sentences, the ones that, for lack of a better definition, have “the character of an inward necessity,” that implicit definition will be directed; the basic idea is to use implicit definition to

render these sentences true. But initially Quine broadens that target class of sentences to be rendered true by implicit definition. And the broadening is considerable. Quine invites us to follow along on a project of rendering true by definition not just all the *a priori* true sentences but all the “admittedly true” sentences, *a priori* or not. If we start by considering some term K, the class of sentences to be rendered true by an implicit definition of K is the amalgamation of the “whole range of admittedly true sentences in which K occurs.” This is, in fact, what it sounds like; the “admittedly true” sentences containing K, or K-sentences, are just those “true sentences under the usual implicit, common-sense use of the word K, and true according to the given stage in the progress of science.”

Confirming that we’ve stepped well outside the bounds of the *a priori* K-sentences, Quine adds that “the distinction between *a priori* and empirical does not concern me here.”⁷ So, for example, if K happens to be ‘yellow’ then among the accepted K-sentences, each of which Quine proposes we render true by definition of K, is ‘Some people own yellow mugs.’, ‘Every yellow mug is a mug.’, ‘There is a yellow or a blue mug in Emerson Hall at noon on January 19, 1934.’, and so on.

This is a dramatic broadening of this target class from *a priori* K-sentences to accepted K-sentences. But it serves a purely tactical end. A pursuit of implicit definitions of the various terms required to render the entire class of accepted sentences true will lead Quine to mount an argument to *stop* this definitional project at just the point where the *a priori* accepted sentences, but no others, have

⁷ P. 49. Emphasis in original.

been provided for by way of implicit definition. And expanding the target class of sentences for implicit definition to the class of accepted sentences only to settle, down the road, for rendering only the *a priori* sentences true by definition gives Quine, as we will see, exactly the right perspective to show what he takes to be the syntactic (and, likewise, pragmatic and syntactic) character of the *a priori*.

So the official project of the first lecture is to render the entire set of accepted sentences true by implicit definition. Given the strategy behind implicit definition, namely, of simply setting down as true those sentences one needs to be true so as to define K, one might think that rendering the entire set of accepted sentences true would be a matter of simply by setting down the accepted sentences as truths. And it would be, but for the fact that that set is (denumerably) infinite and an implicit definition is finite. The infinity of the set of accepted sentences is not a consequence, incidentally, of adopting the strategy of pursuing the accepted, as opposed to the *a priori*, statements; the set of *a priori* sentences themselves taken by themselves is likewise denumerable. So the inevitable task is to show how to derive an *infinity* of truths by *finite* means As quine puts it, “confronted with the job of defining K,” our task is to “frame a definition which fulfills all the accepted K-sentences;” by ‘fulfills’ Quine mean ‘implies’.⁸

⁸ This adequacy condition on an implicit definition of K appear at first overly restrictive: note that it requires that an implicit definition of K must *entail*, rather than merely avoid conflict with, *all* the accepted sentences containing K (materially, rather than vacuously; see the following

The infinite is accommodated within the finite by means, of course, of the fact that among the denumerably many accepted sentences are those with like structures or forms, and these structures or forms are, in turn, finite in number. And to talk of structure or form Quine employs the distinction between the *vacuous* and the *material* occurrence of a term in a sentence. The word H occurs vacuously in a sentence S just if S contains H and S “remains unaffected in point of truth or falsity by all possible substitutions upon the word H.” Otherwise, H’s occurrence in S is material.⁹ Given the notion of vacuous occurrence, an *infinite* subset of the accepted truths can be captured by a *finite* implicit definition, provided that in one accepted truth in the subset a vacuously occurring term or phrase can be identified such that any *other* member of the subset can be generated by substituting a term of phrase for that vacuous occurrence. The subset is then captured finitely simply

paragraph) (p. 49-50). But in fact the restrictiveness is illusory; various considerations effectively relax this requirement, as we see below.

⁹ P. 51. The definition is initially given for the vacuous occurrence of *words*, but bears obvious extension to phrases and sentences used within sentences. In “Truth by Convention” this definition undergoes some refinement; specifically, vacuous occurrence is contrasted not with material occurrence (offered in the lectures as a synonym for ‘non-vacuous’) but with *essential* occurrence, defined such that an expression occurs “essentially in a statement if it occurs in all the vacuous variants of the statement, i.e., if it forms part of the aforementioned skeleton” (this is, it turns out, distinct from non-vacuous occurrence) (“Truth by Convention,” p. 80). Interestingly, Quine seems insensitive in the Lectures and in “Truth by Convention” to grammaticality and, moreover, to substitutions for mentioned, as opposed to used, terms within sentences (or, briefly: to wordhood).

by listing one member of the subset with its vacuous term or phrase replaced by a schematic letter (or similar placeholder), and giving a (similarly finite) substitution rule governing that schematic letter. The sentence containing a placeholder for the vacuous term thus serves to implicitly define the remaining term or terms, i.e., those occurring materially in the sentence.¹⁰

From this point of view the efficient approach to capturing *all* the accepted truths is, naturally, to identify the most pervasive structural patterns among them and exploit these for implicit definitions. And the most pervasive patterns will be those we find among the truths that depend on a *single* word or phrase, the other words of the sentence being vacuous. And these we have, of course: they will be accepted sentences the truth of which turns solely on the terms associated with negation, conjunction, and the other truth-functional relations. Put another way: the most efficient beginning for this project of implicit definition, with respect to regimentation, is to set down as true, in one fell swoop and with the aid of placeholders for vacuous occurrences, just those sentences that contain truth-

¹⁰ In many cases, of course, two or more terms will occur materially, introducing a question of ordering. Quine thus offers the following guidelines: “Relatively to every concept, either individually or at wholesale, the priority of every concept must be favorably or unfavorably decided upon. In each case the choice of priority is conventional and arbitrary, and presumably to be guided by considerations of simplicity in the result. Such considerations seem to point in any case to giving general or abstract notions priority over special or concrete notions, and to giving so-called logical and mathematical notions priority over so-called empirical notions. Thus for example ‘two’ may be expected to be given precedence over ‘apple’.” (p. 52)

functional logical terms, and only truth-functional logical terms, materially. Taking advantage of its expressive adequacy with respect to truth functions Quine thus proposes an implicit definition of the “neither-nor” construction,¹¹ consisting specifically of a schema and a transformation rule, effectively disjunctive syllogism.¹² The schema (or, more precisely, its instances under uniform substitution of sentences for schema letters) and the transformation rule suffice, Quine notes, for the derivation of all and only the sentences within the body of accepted truths that contain ‘neither-nor’ materially, all other expressions vacuously.¹³

And with this we are off. Since ‘neither-nor’ is by itself expressively adequate with respect to the truth-functions, the appropriate explicit definitions bring the remaining truth-functions into the fold. “All such sentences,” Quine writes, that is,

¹¹ For which Quine (p. 58) credits Sheffer (1913), apparently unaware of Peirce’s 1880 anticipation of the result, then just published in the fourth volume of Peirce’s collected papers. See Church, A. *Introduction to Mathematical Logic* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1956), fn. 207.

¹² Presuming fidelity of the reproduction in Quine and Carnap (1990), Quine’s typescript apparently contains several errors, in both the definition (p. 54) and the expository derivation Quine offers a few pages later. The corrected formulations are recoverable on inspection.

¹³ Quine does not give the proof, but rather references without citation a proof of Lukasiewicz’s “concerned with a different starting point than A) and B) and ‘neither-nor,’” which can, he claims, be adapted to show the completeness of A) and B) (p. 55). See §13 of Quine, *Methods of Logic, 4th Edition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

all sentences containing only truth-functional terms materially, “become analytic—direct consequences of our conventions as to the use of words.”¹⁴

We will return to the definitional project in a moment. Let us pause to note what has been accomplished so far, at least by Quine’s lights. Quine has rendered a subset of the set of accepted truths, namely those we would recognize as truth-functional truths, true by implicit definition of ‘neither-nor’. Of course, the sentences in question were *already* recognized by us as truths, so these definitions cannot be said to offer any discovery, any *new* truths. Nor does Quine invite us to regard the definitions as reaffirmations of the accepted truths, somehow buttressing our conviction that they are indeed true. What *has* been accomplished is this: the truth of each of the members of this infinite subset of accepted sentences is now *transparent*, nothing more than the result of setting up a definition *designed* to make it true. That is an act entirely within our control and, hence, our understanding.

Here is a closely related point: the implicit definition Quine offers is one of many possible definitions, any of which would be adequate in the sense that it entails the desired class of accepted sentences. Here is an obvious alternative definition: replace Quine’s implicit definition of ‘neither-nor’ with an implicit definition of the expressively adequate ‘not-both’. With explicit definitions adjusted appropriately, exactly the same accepted sentences are captured. Or more drastically, we could start with an implicit definition directed toward an entirely

¹⁴ P. 59.

different (but still infinite) set of accepted truths, forgoing the considerable convenience of starting with the logical terms, that is, those at the heart of the most pervasive patterns among the accepted truths. That starting point was motivated after all, as Quine repeatedly notes,¹⁵ by nothing more than the pragmatic virtue of convenience. Giving it up is inconvenient, but not mistaken, or wrong in any other sense.

The fact that these various approaches, Quine's included, to rendering the class of accepted truths true by definition are distinguished *only* according to their "economy and simplicity" provides the key to understanding what a non-metaphysical approach is for Quine, or was, at least, in 1934. The fact that there are choices, both concerning how to render a sentence true by implicit definition as well as concerning which sentences to so render first, shows that in rendering a *particular* sentence true by definition we are not revealing some alleged genuine "source" of the sentence's truth. The sentence 'It is or is not Sunday' is rendered true by the implicit definition Quine offers of 'neither-nor', but the same sentence could have been rendered true in many different ways, before or after many other sentences. And this shows that in rendering it true we are not showing *why* it is true; that is, we are not giving a *theory* of its particular truth. *That* would be a bit of unacceptable metaphysics. At the same time, however, we *are* showing the

¹⁵ See for example pp. 51, 52, 61, and 65 in the first lecture; also the start (p. 85) of the third. The emphasis on economy and simplicity is particularly evident in the ordering principles Quine recommends for the implicit definitions of terms; see p. 51 and fn. 9 above.

sentence to be true on a definition, and this is, for Quine, an entirely non-metaphysical demonstration.

Let us return then to the definitional project, which of course ends not with the implicit definition of the truth-functional truths, but has, indeed, the full class of accepted truths as its target. Having handled the truth-functions, Quine proceeds quickly in this first lecture over the ground beyond, gesturing toward the additional implicit definitions needed for quantified sentences and noting, on the authority of *Principia Mathematica*, that these are sufficient for mathematics.¹⁶ Logic and mathematics covered, Quine proceeds, again quite programmatically, towards central “empirical words” such as ‘event’, ‘energy’, and ‘time’, the aim being to fashion additional implicit definitions that, in concert with those already in hand, entail those accepted sentences that contain only ‘event’ and previously defined words materially.

Now we are really moving. And “obviously,” writes Quine,

[w]e could go on indefinitely in the same way, introducing one word after another, and providing in each definition for the derivation of all accepted sentences which materially involve the word there defined and preceding words but no others. Suppose we were to keep this up until we have defined, implicitly or explicitly, and one after another, every word in the English language. Then *every* accepted sentence, no matter in what words, would be

¹⁶ p. 60.

provided for by the implicit or explicit definitions; every accepted sentence would become analytic, that is, directly derivable from our conventions as to the use of words.¹⁷

The question, of course, is, *should* we carry the project on to that very end? And if not, where should we stop it? Quine poses and answers those questions as follows. Past the point at which the sentences to be defined lack “generality” or “importance,” the benefit of according them truth by definition wanes; “we simply would not bother” with these, he writes. So the definitional project stops short of these mundane sentences. But *important, general* accepted sentences may be spared truth by definition as well, Quine adds, if we suspect that they may sometime soon be rejected to accommodate “new discoveries in science.”¹⁸ In short, the question of where to halt the definitional project is shaped by something like a cost/benefit calculation, where the benefit of definition (namely, rigor) is weighed against the cost of concocting a definition and of having to “redefine and retrodefine” as the set of accepted sentences changes. It is, Quine writes, “therefore convenient to maintain a merely provisional, non-analytic status for such principles as we shall be most willing to sacrifice when need of revision... arises.” Otherwise, “[a]t every stage the entire conceptual scheme would be crystallized.”¹⁹ So we find

¹⁷ pp. 61-62. Emphasis in original.

¹⁸ pp. 62-63.

¹⁹ p. 63

that the definitional project halts where it does as a function of convenience and simplicity—of, that is, purely pragmatic virtues. It is not guided by any antecedent divide between the empirical and the logical; indeed, that distinction can only be understood as a *product* of our choice of where to halt the definitional project.

As might be expected, this pragmatic criterion leaves logic and mathematics to convention; these we can cast as analytic, central as they are. Certain heretofore empirical notions, e.g. simultaneity,²⁰ should also be cast as analytic because, again, “of the key position which they occupy.”²¹ All this has what would become a Quinean ring, familiar to modern readers: our understanding of the world is a web, with center and periphery. What is different here, and perhaps it is a difference only in emphasis, is that we *make* the web, and that there are many ways to do that—many possibilities for center and periphery—and distinctions of only convenience and simplicity between the options. The way we construct the implicit definitions, and the parts we leave undefined, are entirely and truly up to us. And it is on the fact of this choice that Quine hangs an account of the *a priori* that is, like his earlier account of ‘neither-nor’, profoundly anti-metaphysical, non-theoretical, and transparent. Starting from the observation that “there are more and less firmly accepted sentences prior to any sophisticated system of thoroughgoing definition,” Quine observes that

²⁰ cf. C. I. Lewis.

²¹ Pp. 64.

[t]he more firmly accepted sentences we choose to modify last, if at all, in the course of evolving and revamping our sciences in the face of new discoveries. And among these accepted sentences which we choose to give up last, if at all, there are those which we are not going to give up at all, so basic are they to our whole conceptual scheme. These, if any, are the sentences to which the epithet ‘a priori’ would have to apply. And we have seen... that it is *convenient* so to frame our definitions as to make all these sentences analytic....

But all this is a question only of how we choose to systematize on language. We are equally free to leave some of our firmly accepted sentences outside the analytic realm, and yet to continue to hold to them by what we may call deliberate dogma, or mystic intuition, or divine revelation: but what’s the use, since suitable definition *can* be made to do the trick without any such troublesome assumptions? If we disapprove of the gratuitous creation of metaphysical problems, we will provide for such firmly accepted sentences within our definitions, or else cease to accept them so firmly.

Kant’s recognition of *a priori* synthetic propositions, and the modern denial of such, are thus to be construed as statements of conventions as to linguistic procedure.²²

²² P. 65. Emphasis in original.

The *a priori* sentences, which Quine takes to be those sentences which we would “choose to give up last, if at all,” are rendered true on some implicit definition. Yet, as before, in so doing we are not giving an *explanation* or *theory* of their truth, for that truth could be established as effectively in quite disparate ways. The very fact of this choice, among alternative means to render the *a priori* true by definition, extricates the account from metaphysics and makes the *a priori* transparent. Quine continues:

The doctrine that the *a priori* is analytic *gains* in force by thus turning out to be a matter of syntactic convention; for the objection is thereby forestalled that our exclusion of the metaphysical difficulties of the *a priori* synthetic depends upon our adoption of a gratuitous metaphysical point of view in turn.²³

Simultaneously, Quine’s approach to the *a priori* places him in a significant rhetorical predicament, insofar as he cannot, consistent with his evasion of metaphysics, offer an *argument* for rendering the *a priori* analytic, in the sense of offering grounds other than the pragmatic ones of simplicity and convenience for regarding the *a priori* as analytic as opposed to true by virtue of “deliberate dogma, or mystic intuition, or divine revelation.” To offer grounds other than the pragmatic ones would be to deny us our genuine choice with respect to how we account for the

²³ P. 66.

a priori, to insist, that is, that there is a particular fact or explanation for the truth of the *a priori* independent of our choice—and that would land us back in metaphysics. So Quine is in the position of *displaying* the practical advantages of rendering the *a priori*, and, roughly, only the *a priori*, sentences true by definition, and imploring us, as we glimpsed above, rather than offering us an argument, to accept those advantages and that approach. This, it appears, is the anti-metaphysical predicament.

Not surprisingly, this proposal to render the *a priori* true by definition also illuminates the nature of philosophy itself—philosophy, that is, as logical syntax. Quine has no antecedent commitment to a particular identity for philosophy, but insofar as we take philosophy to actually make claims and to be different from a natural science it must be analytic; presuming we adopt Quine’s syntactic proposal. Philosophy is thus syntax in the sense not only that philosophical truths are such merely by dint of syntactical convention but also in the sense that it is the task of philosophers to explore the different possible syntactic systems and tally their advantages and disadvantages. Indeed, this latter, broader, perspective reminds us that philosophy is syntax in the first sense *only because* we’ve chosen it to be so; the very dictum that philosophy is syntax is thereby also exempt from metaphysics.²⁴

²⁴ P. 66. Here Quine puts the point succinctly: “Carnap’s thesis that philosophy is syntax is thus seen to follow from the principle that everything is analytic except the contingent propositions of empirical science. But, like the principle that the *a priori* is analytic, Carnap’s thesis is to be regarded not as a metaphysical conclusion, but as a syntactic decision. This conclusion should be

Evading metaphysics, both in coming to terms with our deeply accepted truths and in understanding philosophy itself, is, really, the unifying theme of Quine's first lecture on Carnap.

Lectures II and III, "Syntax" and "Philosophy as Syntax," respectively, provide accessible if abbreviated overviews of the main parts of Carnap's logical syntax program proper. Lecture II outlines an overly simple version of Carnap's artificial symbolic language with formative rules (Carnap's *Formregeln*) and a truncated set of primitives (including indefinitely many descriptive operators). The implicit definition of 'neither-nor', in conjunction with a rule for substitution (which Quine indicates can be understood as an implicit definition of 'all',²⁵) are cast as transformation rules (Carnap's *Formungsregeln*). Following Carnap closely now, Quine offers syntactical definitions for a slew of notions in this "specimen" language, including consequence, analyticity, contradiction, and synonymy, emphasizing that in each case what is defined, strictly, is consequence, analyticity, and so forth *for this language only*.

The benefit of such definitions is, of course, clarity. With the resources of syntax, says Quine, these notions are, for the first time, "sharply formulated... and put on a basis where we have full command of what we are talking about."²⁶ The

gratifying to Carnap himself: for if philosophy is syntax, the philosophical view that philosophy is syntax should be syntax in turn; and this we see it to be."

²⁵ P. 75.

²⁶ P. 81.

fact that the syntactically-captured notions can be expressed within this specimen language itself—Quine here gives a rather compressed outline of the Gödel-numbering and arithmetization of syntax—only underscores the gains in clarity syntax affords.

At the start of Lecture III, “Philosophy as Syntax,” Quine returns to the moral of Lecture I, to wit, that our choice, “guided by considerations of convenience,” calls upon us “to provide for all so-called *a priori* judgments on the analytic side so that nothing remains synthetic except some of the propositions of the empirical sciences.”²⁷ What seems to me to be a sensitivity to the rhetorical quandary encountered in the first lecture—Quine cannot, on pain of engaging in metaphysics, *argue* this particular choice, but is left instead to describe its pragmatic advantages and urge us toward them—moves Quine in this last lecture to, he tells us, “show in detail the form assumed by certain representative philosophic matters when approached from the syntactic standpoint. By so doing” he writes, “I hope to suggest, better than I could by any dialectic, the constructive quality and importance of Carnap’s method.”²⁸

From this point, a primer on use versus mention leads Quine to the notion of a *syntactic* property of a sign—one, that is, that can be assessed without “going beyond” the sign, and from this we get the definition of a *quasi-syntactic* property as a non-syntactic property that has a *syntactic correlate*, that is, a syntactic property

²⁷ P. 87.

²⁸ P. 88

which is true of a *sign* for some object just when the non-syntactic property is had by the object itself. To the extent that the properties in which we are interested admit of syntactic correlates, i.e., are quasi-syntactic, our discussion of these properties comes entirely under the heading of syntax. And this, of course, is to be preferred on the grounds of *directness*: “[c]learly,” writes Quine, “the quasi-syntactic is an indirect idiom, and should be eliminated in favor of the syntactic translation when we are concerned with a logical analysis of what is being said.”²⁹

On these grounds, Quine urges that the quasi-syntactical relations of meaning, denotation, possibility, necessity, property, and number be put aside for their syntactical correlates; the problems associated with these concepts can be avoided within syntax, and this shows the concepts to have been “gratuitously invoked”³⁰ and to be “needless complications.”³¹ It is important to see that, for Quine, here, what is being offered is not simply an alternative, syntactic, formulation—even a clearer one—of some philosophical issues. In bringing meaning, modality, and so on within the realm of syntax we bring it, on Quine’s view, within the fold of our free conventional choice, and thus give these notions the kind of transparency enjoyed by the analytic sentences. And it is with *that transparency* that we loose metaphysics and the range of disputes that go with it: “controversies about modalities,... universals,... the nature of number,... the ultimate given,” Quine

²⁹ P. 92.

³⁰ P. 94.

³¹ P. 98

writes, “all become merely descriptions of dissimilar syntaxes, once the quasi-syntactic is abandoned in favor of the syntactic rendering.”³²

Other Perspectives on the “Lectures on Carnap”

I hope so far to have conveyed something of the state of Quine’s thought in these lectures, placing emphasis on the evasion of metaphysics, the significance of choice, and what I’ve called the rhetorical quandary Quine finds himself in with respect to logical syntax. Before turning to consider Quine’s subsequent treatments of the *a priori* and analyticity, I want to contrast my understanding of these lectures with what Richard Creath and Peter Hylton, respectively, have had to say about them.

In his introduction to the volume in which Quine’s lectures were published, Creath describes a tension he detects in Quine’s lectures, namely, between “Carnapian doctrines” Quine embraces on one hand and the commitments that “would eventually force him to reject” these doctrines on the other. The tensions emerge, according to Creath, along several dimensions. For example, in discussing definition Quine “explicitly sets aside all questions of justification,” although “justification,” according to Creath, “is the very core of Carnap’s conception of meaning.” Quine also, in the first lecture at least, presents the logical syntax program within the framework of a natural language—English—while Carnap, of course, relies on constructed artificial languages. Quine also “reveals in embryonic form a theory of knowledge that is both holistic and naturalistic,” which is quite at

³² P. 102. [reference to other of Quine’s work at this time]

odds with Carnap's views.³³ And finally, Creath describes Quine's handling of the logical modalities as tantamount to a denial of their existence, in contrast to Carnap, who "rejected *both* the assertion that there are such entities *and the denial* of their existence; both were metaphysical nonsense."³⁴ A choice of language that recognized the modalities may be pragmatically ill-advised, but it must, on Carnap's view, be tolerated.

It is indeed tempting to try and read in these lectures hints of the "mature" Quine and, accordingly, to spot the points where this Quine-to-come chafes against the embrace of analyticity in the logical syntax program. But I think Creath's attempt at that sort of reading isn't supported by the lectures. Quine's central goal in these lectures, I've argued, is a genuinely non-metaphysical justification for the sentences to which we hold fast, a justification that appeals to the transparency of implicit definition and choice. This is, *pace* Creath, a different thing than simply *ignoring* justification. I cannot locate a passage in the lectures in which Quine "explicitly sets aside all questions of justification." Indeed, Quine's appeal to implicit definition as the preferable means by which we should "hold to" our firmly accepted sentences³⁵ all but explicitly assigns a justificational role, albeit a non-metaphysical one, to implicit definition.

³³ Creath, p. 29.

³⁴ Creath, p. 30.

³⁵ P. 65.

To take up another of Creath's points:, the attitude Quine adopts toward the modalities in the lectures is not obviously a denial of their existence; Quine's view is that the modalities as such are quasi-syntactic, and that their use thus invites speculation as to the source and nature of possibility and necessity, that is, metaphysics. Adopting their syntactic correlates saves us from pursuing these metaphysical questions and that, as we saw above, in turn confers a practical advantage to forgoing terms like 'possible', 'necessary', 'impossible', and so forth. Quine does advertise the fact that under adoption of a syntactic over a quasi-syntactic idiom the logical and empirical modalities "drop out," "disappear," or "give way"; mention of them can be eliminate[d]." But these claims, read in the context of the lectures, concern the practical reasons for, and consequences of, adopting a certain idiom, of which Quine, like Carnap at this time, is in overwhelming favor. Tolerance does not, after all, preclude criticism.

It is true that what would become a distinctive difference between Carnap's and Quine's respective approaches, namely concerning the status of natural as opposed to artificial languages, is detectable in Quine's lectures, and it is true, as Creath puts it, that "Quine's view here is not strictly un-Carnapian, but it is, nonetheless, the framework around which Quine was [later] to fashion his sharpest attacks on analyticity."³⁶ On that framework, our accepted sentences are arrayed in a plain, with those we are least inclined to give up at the center. Moreover, they are linked; adjustments occasion adjustments elsewhere, and those adjustments range from

³⁶ P. 29. See also Hylton, p. 264.

benign to violent. Yet the nodes, or sentences, are separable in all the relevant senses and the task of altering the web itself is, as we saw above, a matter of syntax and not science.³⁷ But it is, as Creath's comment above suggests, difficult to see that this particular difference creates any *tension* in the lectures. It seems to be Quine's view that this is a minor difference, since he describes Carnap's preference for an artificial symbolic language in *Logische Syntax der Sprache* to be born of convenience, motivated not by any principle but by the *de facto* complexity of natural language.³⁸ The virtues Quine prizes in the logical syntax program—chiefly, rendering transparent the truths we already firmly accept—are not sacrificed when the definitional project is taken up by us in, and for, our natural language, as opposed to in, or for, an artificial language.

Lastly, on the matter of holism and naturalism. The lectures are, *pace* Creath, remarkably absent of the holism or naturalism definitive of the later Quine. Indeed, although Quine proposes that we start the definitional project with the entire body of our accepted truths, he clearly regards these to be independent of one another in the senses relevant to holism; they have their meanings independently and can be confirmed or denied individually. Further, in the Lectures Quine clearly rules out of court the notion that philosophical propositions might be scientific ones:

³⁷ Compare the different use of the “web of belief” metaphor in *Two Dogmas of Empiricism*. Some may find merit in the metaphor's flexibility; I am inclined to think that the flexibility is too extreme to be beneficial.

³⁸ p. 69.

“[s]yntax,” Quine writes, in providing “for everything outside the natural sciences” must provide as well “for whatever is valid in philosophy itself, when philosophy is purged of ingredients proper to natural science.”³⁹ Naturalism is simply a non-starter.⁴⁰ Quine does indeed present the “web of belief” metaphor in these lectures, but this fact just serves, in my view, to underscore the metaphor’s malleability rather than reflect an early commitment to naturalism or holism.

My resistance to reading the later Quine into these lectures might seem tantamount to reading them as written by a Quine wholly under Carnap’s sway. But I will want to resist that too; instead, the Quine of the lectures, as I will argue below, stands apart from both Carnap and the later Quine of, for example, “Two Dogmas.”

Like Creath, Hylton detects a tension within Quine’s lectures, albeit with a different source. There is, Hylton argues, “an internal tension in the lectures,” one revealed precisely at the point where Quine avers to implicit definition to evade metaphysical responses to the a priori.⁴¹ In Hylton’s view, Quine’s purpose in these lectures, in giving an implicit definition, is to “give non-metaphysical answers to questions about ‘the source of the validity’ of some of our judgments. It is to explain

³⁹ p. 66.

⁴⁰ Hylton finds “no sign at all [of epistemological holism] in the lectures.” See Hylton, Peter, “The Defensible Province of Philosophy’: Quine’s 1934 Lectures On Carnap,” in Floyd, J. and Shieh, S. (Eds.), *Future Pasts: The Analytic Tradition in Twentieth-Century Philosophy*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 257-275. P. 270.

⁴¹ Hylton, p. 258.

how we come to know certain sentences, or at least accept them to be true.”⁴² But it is far from clear, claims Hylton, how implicit definition could be adequate to this task; there is a “question of the explanatory value of a notion of analyticity based on implicit definitions. The starting point is a body of truths which we accept, independently of any system of definitions. How could this acceptance be explained by the subsequent imposition of a system of definition?”⁴³ A few paragraphs later, Hylton develops this line of inquiry:

The tension we have found in Quine’s lectures could be phrased like this: does the notion of analyticity have any explanatory value? Does it, in particular, have an explanatory role in epistemology, as an account of the basis of the truth of some of the sentences we are inclined to accept (those generally thought of as a priori)? The way in which Quine articulates the notion of analyticity suggests negative answers to both these questions (and such, I think, would accord with Carnap’s view of the matter). His account of the purpose of analyticity, of the reason for wanting to construct such a notion in the first place, however, suggests a positive answer: again, “enabling us to pursue foundations of mathematics and the logic of science without encountering extra-logical questions as to the source of validity of our *a*

⁴² P. 263.

⁴³ P. 265.

priori judgments” (pp. 65-66). Perhaps the suggestion of a positive answer is defeasible; or perhaps the tension could be resolved by finding an ambiguity or unclarity in the idea of explanation, as it is deployed here. From the point of view of the mature Quine, however, I think that no such resolution is possible.⁴⁴

Not surprisingly, Hylton finds that this question has ramifications for Quine’s understanding of philosophy itself in the lectures, which according to Hylton is torn between logical syntax and scientific naturalism:

The Quine of 1934 is strongly attracted to the Carnapian picture of philosophy; he comes, indeed, almost as close as one could wish to being a true believer. [But] he is trying to square that picture with an inchoate view that is quite different: a robust conception of the subject—philosophy as confronting genuine problems and offering genuine explanations and solutions. The tension over analyticity, I suggest, indicates the difficulty of reconciling the two views.⁴⁵

But Hylton’s reading of Quine’s project in these lectures, like Creath’s, is not quite on. Quine’s aim in presenting an implicit definition of, e.g., ‘neither-nor’,

⁴⁴ P. 266.

⁴⁵ p. 267.

which implies sentences like ‘Today is or is not Sunday’ (a sentence that holds fast for us, indeed), and simultaneously emphasizing the convention, choice, and arbitrariness behind this presentation, is precisely *not* to provide some kind of answer to a question about the source of the sentence’s truth—that question is an invitation to metaphysics—but, rather, to disarm the question entirely by, in effect, *declaring* the sentence true. Hylton’s presentation of Quine’s project in these lectures errs in saddling Quine with the notion that implicit definitions are explanatory. Naturally this notion grates against the anti-metaphysical aspirations that run through the lectures. But Quine’s notion of implicit definition, of analyticity, is not intended to be explanatory, and it can’t be expected to do metaphysical work. It’s work, rather, is in *freeing* us from metaphysics.

On Quine’s Notion of Philosophy: Quine After the Lectures on Carnap

My perspective on Quine’s “Lectures on Carnap”, with its emphasis on choice, convention, and the evasion of metaphysics, raises some obvious issues concerning Quine’s later, famous work addressing analyticity.

Let us begin with some clear continuities between these lectures and Quine’s immediately subsequent work. We find in “Truth by Convention” the bulk of Quine’s first lecture on Carnap, with, albeit, some technical adjustments, most notably a reversion to using the term ‘definition’ exclusively for explicit definition; what were implicit definitions in the first lecture are now postulates, and the

rendering true of some statements by implicit definition of their essentially occurring terms is now called the “method of postulates.” Given that and other minor changes, though, Quine proceeds in “Truth by Convention” as in the lecture on Carnap, offering first a set of postulates for the primitive logical terms, showing how with a properly supplemented set mathematics can be covered as well, and then suggesting, with brief illustration, that the method is not limited to logic and mathematics but can be turned toward heretofore empirical terms and claims. It is actually to this result that Quine has alluded at the essay’s start, in noting that he intends to question less “the validity of this contrast [between the analytic and empirical] than its sense.”⁴⁶ In light of our capacity to extend the range of the postulates as far as we like into the empirical, there is no detectable antecedent *divide* between analytic and empirical. This is a repudiation not of the analytic, but of any divide, independent of our choice, between analytic and synthetic. *We draw that line.*⁴⁷

This much we find in the first lecture. In fact, his embrace of analyticity in “Truth by Convention” leads Quine to express a point not quite developed in the first lecture on Carnap, concerning the *immunity* of this concept of analyticity in the face of changes in what we accept as truths. New data will on occasion invite changes in our conceptual scheme, and with it reworkings of our definitions, that is, of what is analytic. This is for Quine not the mark against analyticity that some,

⁴⁶ p. 77,

⁴⁷ p. 102.

having rooted analyticity in necessity rather than convention, might have taken it to be.⁴⁸

We find as well in “Truth by Convention” an emphasis on the various choices of postulates available to us for the task at hand, distinguishable only on the grounds of simplicity and convenience, and, further, we find the first lecture’s central theme, namely, the manner by which truth via convention releases us from metaphysics. There are statements that, for us, are *a priori*, that is, for Quine, statements we would not surrender at all, “so basic are they to our whole conceptual scheme.”⁴⁹ And “since these statements are destined to be maintained independently of our observations of the world,” writes Quine, “we may as well make use here of our technique of conventional truth assignment and thereby forestall awkward metaphysical questions as to our *a priori* insight into necessary truths.”⁵⁰ This is precisely the crucial work accorded implicit definition in the first Lecture on Carnap.

Of course, Quine does raise what he calls a “difficulty” not mentioned in the lectures, and often associated with Lewis Carroll. In adopting these postulates—specifically, in drawing from them the infinitude of truths we need—the postulates themselves are required. The point applies across postulate systems, though Quine takes time to spell it out in some detail for the particular system he’s presented, in

⁴⁸ pp. 101-102; cf. C. I. Lewis.

⁴⁹ p. 102.

⁵⁰ p. 102.

which *modus ponens* appears as a postulate and yet is required in its own application to generate new truths. Here *modus ponens* cannot be used on pain of an infinite regress, and the same result can be expected, *mutatis mutandis*, for other postulate systems. Quine's reaction to this insight is to grant the point: if our task is to generate an infinitude of truths from nothing at all, or to show in principle how we could do such, then surely we will fail. Quine is not much troubled by this, however. For he proceeds immediately to describe a different role that postulates *can* play without risk of regress. Observing conventions "from the start," "through behavior," "without first announcing them in words," writes Quine, we can turn to postulates in a "subsequent sophisticated stage where we frame general statements of the conventions and show how various specific conventional truths... fit into the general conventions as thus formulated."⁵¹ Thus Quine, in effect, distinguishes two ways in which we might attempt to use postulates, one of which is historically factual, so to speak, and encounters a regress, the other of which is after-the-fact and promises a non-metaphysical account of some particular truth.

Quine's sympathies are with the second sort of attempt, of course; he proceeds immediately to call into question any explanatory value one might attempt to attach to postulates, a line of argument that would become Quine's mantra against analyticity in the 1950s. The point I want to make here, in closing, is that Quine's attack on implicit definition, or the method of postulates, in terms of its explanatory value leaves untouched its use as a tool for offering a non-metaphysical account of

⁵¹ p. 105.

the *a priori*. “Truth by Convention” admits as much; between the “Lectures on Carnap” and “Truth by Convention” we have a difference not of doctrine but of emphasis, the lectures emphasizing the positive role of implicit definition in evading metaphysics, “Truth by Convention” emphasizing the explanatory impotence of postulates against those who, on Quine’s view, would look to them for explanatory power. In Quine’s later work this latter emphasis dominates; indeed, the emphasis of the Lectures on Carnap withers and disappears. Whether it ought to have, or whether indeed we find in Quine’s “Lectures on Carnap” a subtle approach to analyticity and the *a priori* that we might dust off and adapt to our present needs, is a matter for discussion.

Endnotes