

Quine's relativism

by

LARS BERGSTRÖM

Stockholm University

Abstract: W. V. Quine claimed that relativism is paradoxical and unacceptable; nevertheless, his own views concerning truth and the underdetermination of theories by data amount to an interesting and plausible form of relativism.

Keywords: Quine, relativism, truth, underdetermination.

1. Introduction

IT HAS BEEN CLAIMED that “the central problem of relativism is one of giving it a coherent formulation, making the doctrine more than the platitude that differently situated people may judge differently, and less than the falsehood that contradictory views may each be true”.¹ I shall argue that W. V. Quine has solved this problem. I claim that his underdetermination thesis that “there are various defensible ways of conceiving the world”,² together with his thesis that truth is ‘immanent’,³ constitutes an interesting and plausible form of relativism.

2. Relativism

The kind of relativism that is at issue here is often called ‘cognitive relativism’ or ‘relativism about truth’.⁴ This is the thesis that (1) truth is always relative to some perspective, culture, community, conceptual scheme, theory, social class, historical period, or individual subject, etc., perhaps in combination with the further thesis that (2) there is no objective, absolute or universal truth. It is not obvious what this means. It may seem that (2) follows from (1), but this is not so if absolute truth is the same as truth

¹ Blackburn (1994), p. 326.

² Quine (1992), p. 102.

³ See e.g. Quine (1981), pp. 21–2.

⁴ I am not concerned with what Quine has called ‘ontological relativity’ or ‘indeterminacy of reference’; see e.g. Quine (1969): 26–68, and Quine (1994b), p. 498.

relative to all perspectives – as is sometimes taken for granted.⁵

Notice that relativism in this sense does not entail the actual existence of more than one perspective. If truth is relative to the only perspective or community there is, it is still relative. However, I suggest that a relativist should at least believe (3) that it is *possible* that there are other perspectives or communities (human or Martian or extragalactic perspectives?) relative to which different theories would be true.

We might add further clauses to the above definition of 'relativism'. For example, we may add the clause that (4) there exist more than one perspective, etc., or that (5) at any given time, there exist more than one perspective, etc. Such clauses may be more or less plausible depending upon what is meant by a 'perspective', 'community', etc. However, they do not seem to be essential to the philosophical idea of relativism. From a practical or anthropological perspective, the truth or falsity of (4) and (5) may be quite important, but it would not matter much from an ontological or epistemological point of view. The main problem of relativism has to do with the relativity of truth, i.e. clause (1) above. In what follows, I shall not presuppose clauses (4) and/or (5).

The term 'relativism' occurs very seldom in Quine's work. In one place, he explicitly rejects relativism on the ground that it is paradoxical.⁶ There is also a short paper entitled "Relativism and absolutism"⁷ in which he says that his view of science "involves both relativistic and absolutistic strains". But he does not give a clear answer to the rather natural question of whether his thesis of underdetermination is a form of relativism. He ends the paper by saying that "we can treat of the world and its objects only within some scientific idiom, this or another; there are others, but none higher. Such, then, is my absolutism. Or does it ring relativistic after all?"

3. Underdetermination

Quine's underdetermination thesis may be interpreted in different ways.⁸ The simplest formulation of the thesis is that "different theories can be

⁵ See e.g. Hales (1997), p.35.

⁶ Quine (1975a), p. 327.

⁷ Quine (1984).

⁸ See e.g. Bergström (1990).

empirically equivalent”.⁹ This may seem trivial, since by ‘theories’ Quine means ‘theory formulations’. Obviously, different formulations may be logically – and, therefore, empirically – equivalent. But the underdetermination thesis goes beyond this triviality. The relevant kind of difference between the theory formulations in question is that we cannot convert one of them into a formulation logically equivalent with the other by re-interpretation sentence by sentence.¹⁰ Theories that are different in this sense can be called *genuinely different*. They can be drastically different. Moreover, it should be noticed that Quine is mainly concerned here with very comprehensive theories, global systems of the world. The underdetermination thesis says that genuinely different systems of the world can be empirically equivalent.

But what does it mean that two theories are ‘empirically equivalent’? On one definition, roughly speaking, two theories are empirically equivalent when they have the same empirical content.¹¹ But this definition is only applicable to testable theories – i.e. theories that imply synthetic observation categoricals – and Quine notes that “much solid experimental science fails of testability in the defined sense”.¹² Therefore, he also has a more general definition, according to which two theories are empirically equivalent when “whatever observation would be counted for or against the one theory counts equally for or against the other”.¹³ These

⁹ Quine (1984), p. 294. Indeed, what he says here is “that scientific theory is under-determined by all possible data; in other words, that different theories can be empirically equivalent”. But these are two different ideas, and in another context he has said that “it is a poor idea to assume compatibility with all possible data. [...] What matters is that the theories be empirically equivalent” (Quine (1990), p. 53).

¹⁰ See e.g. Quine (1975a), p. 320, and Quine (1992), p. 97.

¹¹ See Quine (1992), pp. 16–8. More precisely, Quine says that two theories are empirically equivalent for a given community if they have the same empirical content for each member of the community. Empirical content consists of so-called observation categoricals. An ‘observation categorical’ is a sentence of the form ‘Whenever this, that’, where ‘this’ and ‘that’ are observation sentences, i.e. sentences that are directly and firmly associated with sensory stimulations for every member of the community and on which all members give the same verdict on witnessing the same situation (*ibid.*, p. 3). The empirical content of a theory for a given individual is the set of synthetic observation categoricals implied by it, plus all synonymous sentences. An observation categorical is ‘synthetic’ for a given speaker if the stimulations associated with the antecedent are not completely included among the stimulations associated with the consequent. Two observation categoricals are synonymous for a speaker if their respective components are associated with the same stimulations.

¹² Quine (1992), p. 95.

¹³ Quine (1992), p. 96.

two notions of empirical equivalence are not the same.

In order to illustrate the difference, let G be our more or less well-established global system of the physical world, and let C be some more controversial theory – such as certain theological statements about the existence and nature of God, or the ‘many-worlds interpretation’ of quantum mechanics, or something like Gödel’s axiom that all sets are constructible. Let us assume, plausibly, that G does not imply C . Now, G and the conjunction $G\&C$ are genuinely different, but they are empirically equivalent in the sense that they have the same empirical content. However, they are not empirically equivalent in the sense that whatever observation would be counted for or against the one theory counts equally for or against the other. Presumably, the evidence we have for G does not give equal support to the more controversial and problematic $G\&C$.

Quine’s underdetermination thesis is false if ‘empirical equivalence’ is taken in his general sense, the sense in which it is required that whatever observation would be counted for or against the one theory counts equally for or against the other. In order for certain observations to ‘count for’ a theory, the theory must constitute a good, or ‘the best’, explanation of the observations. This means that, apart from being empirically adequate, the theory must have certain theoretical virtues, such as simplicity, scope, fruitfulness, consistency, precision, and so on. Such theoretical virtues can only be determined by the attitudes and behavior of scientists, but these attitudes and behavior cannot constrain the scientific value of a theory with any precision. The virtues can be interpreted and aggregated in different ways. Therefore, they can never establish the truth of a claim to the effect that two genuinely different theories have *exactly the same* scientific value (even if this is what some scientists believe). At a given time, the scientific community may agree that so far neither of two genuinely different theories has been shown to be scientifically better than the other, but such a situation lacks stability. Scientists can be expected to make it their business to show that one of the theories is better after all, and there is always room for such a conclusion.¹⁴

However, another version of Quine’s underdetermination thesis is still plausible: genuinely different systems of the world may have the same empirical content. Indeed, this is trivial, as is shown by the case involving

¹⁴ This claim is defended in more detail in Bergström (1993), pp. 339–40, and in Bergström (1996).

G and $G\&C$. This case is not very interesting, since G and $G\&C$ have so much in common. But there may be cases that are more interesting. The most interesting case would be one in which two theoretically advanced and genuinely different systems have *nothing* in common, except their empirical content. Let us say that the *degree* to which a given theory is underdetermined is the degree to which it is different from genuinely different theories with the same empirical content. This is rather vague, but it should be sufficient for our purposes here. The important point is that some very different system of the world – a possibly unknown system that has a lot of unfamiliar theoretical content – may be empirically just as successful as our own system. Surely, this is an interesting possibility.

4. Immanent truth

Our own system of the world is what we believe is true. What should we say about a very different system with the same empirical content?¹⁵ We can hardly say that it is true, for we may not even understand what its alien sentences mean. To the extent that we can translate them into the language of our own theory we can say that they are true or false, depending upon the truth-values, according to our theory, of their translations. We might even say that they are true or false *relative to* our specific translation manual.¹⁶ However, what is relative here is not really truth, but translation or meaning. This is what is fixed by a translation manual. Truth, as judged from within our own system, is still absolute.

However, it is important to emphasize the point that truth can only be ascribed from within a particular system. This is what Quine has in mind when he says that truth is *immanent*. He says that “it is a confusion to suppose that we can stand aloof and recognize all the alternative ontologies as true in their several ways, all the envisaged worlds as real. It is a confusion of truth with evidential support. Truth is immanent, and there is no higher. We must speak from within a theory, albeit any of various”.¹⁷ This suggests that truth is relative to theory after all.

¹⁵ This is a pure thought experiment. In practice, we may never come across such a system. Quine has considered the question in many contexts, and he has vacillated among different answers; see e.g. Quine (1984), p. 295, and Quine (1992), pp. 95–101.

¹⁶ See Quine (1994a), p. 496.

¹⁷ Quine (1981), pp. 21–2. Similarly, Thomas Kuhn says that ‘truth’ is a term “with only intra-theoretical applications”; see Kuhn (1970), p. 266.

Thus, Donald Davidson has worried “that when [Quine] wrote that truth is ‘immanent’ he was expressing the idea that truth is relative not only to language, but also relative in some further way”.¹⁸ But Davidson goes on to say that Quine has subsequently assured him that “no other relativization is implied beyond the familiar, and unavoidable, relativization to language”.¹⁹ And Quine, in his response to Davidson, refers to “our common foe who would relativize truth to theory”.²⁰ On the other hand, Davidson believes that truth is relative to language, and he notes that theory and language “are not to be clearly distinguished in Quine’s writings”,²¹ so one may wonder how it could be possible for truth to be relative to language but not to theory.

What are we to make of this? If a sentence can belong to different languages, it might be true in one language and false in another, simply because it does not have the same meaning in the two languages. But this does not make truth relative in any serious sense. If *S* occurs with different meanings in L_1 and L_2 , and if it is true with the former meaning and false with the latter, it would be misleading to say that *S* is true-in- L_1 and false-in- L_2 . Rather, one should say that *S*-in- L_1 is (absolutely) true, while *S*-in- L_2 is (absolutely) false.

Besides, Quine sometimes uses the term ‘sentence’ in such a way that a sentence cannot occur in different languages. For example, he has written: “Unless pretty firmly and directly conditioned to sensory stimulation, a sentence *S* is meaningless except relative to its own theory; meaningless intertheoretically”.²² This presupposes that every theoretical sentence has a theory – and thereby a language – it can call its own. And in his response to Davidson, Quine says that the role of theory “was not in legislating truth, but in clarifying the theoretical sentence”.²³ So far, then, no relativivity of truth seems to be involved.²⁴

¹⁸ Davidson (1994), p. 437.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Quine (1994b), p. 498.

²¹ Davidson (1994), p. 437.

²² Quine (1960), p. 24. Quine himself refers to this very passage in his response to Davidson; see Quine (1994b), p. 498.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ When Davidson refers to ‘the unavoidable relativization [of truth] to language’, he may have in mind the point that an inductive definition of truth (of the kind invented by Tarski) is restricted to a particular (formalized) language. But this does not seem to have much to do with Quine’s claim that truth is immanent.

Let us now ask how a theoretical sentence is ‘clarified’ by the theory to which it belongs. For Quine, “there is no meaning but empirical meaning”.²⁵ Consequently, theories with the same empirical content have the same meaning. What they say about ‘the observable world’ is the same. But Quine also insists that “theories say incomparably more” about the world than is said by their observational parts.²⁶ If this is so, it seems to follow that theoretical sentences have some kind of meaning. However, most theoretical sentences have no (empirical) meaning, according to Quine. Nevertheless, he himself suggests that a theoretical sentence is not completely meaningless, when he says that such a sentence “is meaningless *except* relative to its own theory”.²⁷ This supports our conclusion that theoretical sentences have a meaning relative to their own theory. This must be a kind of *immanent* meaning.²⁸

But Quine’s claim that truth is ‘immanent’ can hardly be taken to mean simply that the theory to which a sentence belongs determines its (immanent) meaning. This is part of what he means, but it is not all. In addition, he means that the predicate ‘true’ itself is tied to our own theory. In one place, Quine explains the immanence of truth as follows: “It means that I view ‘true’ as a predicate within science; second-order, yes, like ‘sentence’ or ‘phoneme’, but not transcendent”.²⁹ Consequently, if *S* is a theoretical sentence that belongs to our theory, so is the sentence ‘*S* is true’. In general, ‘*S* is true’, like most theoretical sentences, does not have any empirical meaning of its own. But it does have an immanent meaning, a meaning within our system of the world. The meaning of ‘*S* is true’ is determined by its place within the system, i.e. by its relations to other sentences of the system. Now, it seems to me that there is indeed a kind of relativism here. To some extent, Davidson’s suspicion was justified. Immanent truth appears to be a kind of relative truth after all.

5. Immanence plus underdetermination

On the other hand, there is of course also a sense in which truth, according

²⁵ Quine (1975b), p.80.

²⁶ Quine (1994a), p. 497.

²⁷ Quine (1960), p. 24. My italics.

²⁸ For the idea that empirically meaningless sentences may still have a kind of immanent, non-empirical meaning; see Bergström (2001), pp. 24–5, and Gibson (1998), p. 678.

²⁹ Quine (1994a), p. 497.

to Quine, is *not* relative. When Quine says that a sentence is true, he says that it is true, not that it is true relative to some theory (perspective, conceptual scheme, etc). A statement to the effect that *S* is true is not, according to Quine, elliptic – except, possibly, if *S* belongs to an alien language, in which case it can only be true relative to some translation manual.

However, a statement to the effect that *S* is true is meaningful only within its own system of the world, and it gets its meaning from this system. Now, if we combine the thesis that truth is immanent with Quine's underdetermination thesis, we realize that there may be other systems from within which other sentences may be said to be 'true' – even though they are not true in our sense. This amounts to a kind of relativism. Immanence of truth may not by itself merit the label 'relativism', but immanence of truth plus underdetermination of theory surely does.

As before, let *G* be our system of the world and let 'the aliens' be some people, perhaps of another culture, who accept some genuinely different theory *H*, with the same empirical content as *G*. Suppose also that we have found out, within *G*, that the aliens accept a particular sentence *Z*, which is contained in *H*. It would then be quite natural for us to say that *Z* is 'true for them'. Quine never uses such an expression, but as far as I can see, it would not be incoherent from his point of view.³⁰

At the beginning of this paper, I mentioned the problem of making the doctrine of relativism involve more than the platitude that differently situated people may judge differently. Now, the aliens 'judge differently' from us, but that is by no means the whole story. What makes their judgments particularly interesting is that their system *H* has the same empirical content as ours, even though it is drastically different in other respects.

³⁰ Indeed, Quine says that we are free to "oscillate between the two theories for the sake of added perspective from which to triangulate on problems" (Quine (1992), p. 100). When we accept the one theory, we deem it true and the alien theory meaningless, but we can "readily shift the shoe to the other foot" (*ibid.*) – in which case, presumably, we would regard the second theory as true (in the alien's sense of 'true'). Moreover, in the presence of an alien system like *H*, we might also say, modestly, that our own system *G* is 'true for us'. We still regard our system as true – or else it would not be ours – but by saying that it is true *for us*, we recognize the existence of a genuinely different system that is epistemologically on a par with our own. Nevertheless, expressions like 'true for them' and 'true for us' may be misleading, since they may tend to blur the distinction between 'true' and 'believed to be true'. This distinction should of course be retained, and Quine certainly wants to retain it. He recognizes the possibility that some of our beliefs are false: "When a scientific tenet is dislodged by further research, we do not say that it had been true but became false. We say that it was false, unbeknownst, all along" (Quine (1994b), p. 500).

It may not be empirically equivalent to ours in Quine's general sense, but it is, by our own lights, empirically adequate. It is empirically just as successful as our own system *G*. This calls for a relativistic humbleness. The situation is not merely one in which differently situated people judge differently. Rather, their judgments are, to some extent, just as good, epistemically, as ours. A doctrine that recognizes this possibility may well be called 'relativism'.

The second problem mentioned at the beginning of this paper was that of making relativism say less than the falsehood that contradictory views may each be true. This problem is also solved by Quine's doctrines of the immanence of truth and the underdetermination of theories. Quine's doctrines do not imply that contradictory views may each be true. In the first place, it is not clear that global theories with the same empirical content can be logically incompatible.³¹ At most, they can be logically incompatible *relative* to some translation manual, which translates the sentences of one of the theories into the language of the other. Moreover, and more importantly, we are not committed to the thesis that an alien sentence *Z* that is 'true for them' in the way outlined above, is thereby also true.³² Therefore, even if *Z* should be incompatible with something we hold to be true, there is no basis for the conclusion that 'contradictory views may each be true'. So far, so good.

6. Quine's objection

We have seen that Quine's relativism avoids certain well-known objections. But Quine himself does not want to accept relativism. He believes it is paradoxical. His argument is the following: "Truth, says the cultural relativist, is culture-bound. But if it were, then he, within his own culture, ought to see his own culture-bound truth as absolute. He cannot proclaim cultural relativism without rising above it, and he cannot rise above it

³¹ In some places, Quine says that empirically equivalent theories can be logically incompatible, but he also claims that such incompatibilities can always be removed by reinterpretation of terms; see e.g. Quine (1992), pp. 96–8. For a discussion of this, see Bergström (2004).

³² This is a point on which Quine himself has sometimes gone wrong; see e.g. Quine (1984), p. 295. To regard both *G* and *H* as true is to take an *ecumenical* attitude; see e.g. Quine (1992), pp. 99–100. A non-ecumenical, *sectarian* attitude is more in accordance with Quine's naturalism. For a more detailed argument, see Bergström (2004).

without giving it up".³³

In order to come to grips with this argument (let us call it 'A1'), we may compare it with the following version (which may be called 'A2'): 'Truth, says Quine, is immanent. But if it were, then Quine, from within his own theory, ought to see his own immanent truth as absolute. He cannot proclaim the immanence of truth without rising above it, and he cannot rise above it without giving it up'.

A1 and A2 have exactly the same structure. But Quine would probably not accept A2 as a refutation of the immanence of truth. He claims that truth is immanent, and he would certainly also say that this very claim is itself true. Moreover, there is no reason to expect him to say that the truth of this particular claim is an exception from the rule. He would certainly insist, in accordance with his naturalism, that this truth is also immanent. But if so, it seems that he *can* proclaim the immanence of truth without 'rising above it'. Hence, he need not give it up. So A2 is not a refutation of the immanence of truth. This suggests that Quine should not accept A1 as a refutation of relativism either. Not of his own relativism, in any case.

I have taken it for granted here that by 'absolute truth' Quine means non-immanent (i.e. transcendent) truth. But suppose he means by 'absolute truth' just truth, *simpliciter*. If so, A2 is still invalid, but it might be thought that A1 could now be valid. The crucial idea would be to interpret 'culture-bound truth' as something distinct from truth. A1 might then run somewhat as follows: 'The relativist claims that there is no truth at all. But this very claim cannot be made unless the relativist also claims, by implication, that it is true. Hence, the claim is self-defeating. One cannot make the claim without giving it up'.

On this interpretation, A1 is perhaps valid, but what it refutes is only a very strange form of relativism. It does not refute the kind of relativism that I have attributed to Quine.

The claim that relativism is paradoxical or incoherent or self-defeating is of course quite commonly made.³⁴ In one place, Hilary Putnam puts the point as follows: "After all, is it not *obviously* contradictory to *hold* a point of view while at the same time holding that *no* point of view is more

³³ Quine (1975a), pp. 327–8.

³⁴ Hilary Putnam claims that it "is a truism among philosophers" that (total) relativism is inconsistent, see Putnam (1981), p. 119. More or less the same thesis is argued for at length in Siegel (1987). Siegel believes that Quine's argument A1 is valid; see *ibid.*, p. 43–4.

justified or right than any other?"³⁵ Well, maybe it is, but a relativist need not hold that no point of view is more justified than *any* other. It is quite sufficient that the relativist holds a point of view and at the same time claims that there may be other points of view which are (roughly) just as justified. This is precisely Quine's position, if 'point of view' is replaced by 'system of the world'. There is no contradiction here, provided truth and justification are kept apart. For Quine, this distinction is crucial.

7. Conclusion

A plausible form of relativism should satisfy certain requirements or desiderata. First, it should recognize the distinction between belief and truth. Second, it should avoid the falsehood that contradictory theories may each be true.³⁶ Third, it should be in accordance with the basic tenet of cognitive relativism that all truth is relative, but it should also allow (non-elliptic) attributions of truth without relativization. Fourth, it should recognize the possibility that there may be several genuinely different – perhaps even 'incommensurable' – theories of the world that are equally warranted or otherwise somehow on a par.

I claim that Quine's doctrine of the underdetermination of theories – together with the immanence of truth – satisfies all these requirements. Moreover, it succeeds in doing this without sacrificing the objectivity of science. "The objectivity of our knowledge of the external world remains rooted in our contact with the external world, hence in our neural intake and the observation sentences that respond to it. [...] Man proposes; the world disposes, but only by holophrastic yes-or-no verdicts on the observation sentences that embody man's predictions".³⁷

Even if we regard our own system of the world as a better theory than some genuinely different system, we should recognize the possibility that the rival system is better from its own point of view. Quine puts the point

³⁵ Putnam (1981), p. 119.

³⁶ This requirement seems to be violated, for example, by Nelson Goodman's version of relativism. Goodman writes: "Some truths conflict. The earth stands still, revolves about the sun, and runs many other course all at the same time. Yet nothing moves while at rest"; Goodman (1984), p. 30. This is hard to believe, if only because the second sentence seems to conflict with the third, and the first sentence appears to be self-contradictory.

³⁷ Quine (1992), p. 36.

as follows: "Might another culture, another species, take a radically different line of scientific development, guided by norms that differ sharply from ours but that are justified by their scientific findings as ours are by ours? And might these people predict as successfully and thrive as well as we? Yes, I think that we must admit this as a possibility in principle; that we must admit it even from the point of view of our own science, which is the only point of view I can offer. I should be surprised to see this possibility realized, but I cannot picture a disproof".³⁸ I agree. Moreover, this quotation suggests that rival systems of the world need not even have exactly the same empirical content.³⁹ It is quite sufficient that the systems are 'equally successful' in a somewhat weaker sense.⁴⁰

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³⁸ Quine (1981), p. 181.

³⁹ It may indeed be problematic to say that genuinely different systems of the world can have the same empirical content in Quine's sense, if they are formulated in different languages.

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