IS QUINE A VERIFICATIONIST?

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I

Although Quine is widely known as an influential critic of logical positivism, there is now a growing tendency to emphasize the similarities between him and the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle.[1] In particular, it has become usual to classify Quine as an adherent of verificationism, even if it is recognized that his position is somehow different from that of the positivists in being more holistic in character.[2]

For example, Cheryl Misak in her book-length examination of verificationism writes that 'the holist [such as Quine] need not reject verificationism, if it is suitably formulated. Indeed, Quine often describes himself as a verificationist'.[3] Misak concludes that Quine 'can be described as a verificationist who thinks that the unit of meaning is large';[4] and when comparing Dummett and Quine, Misak states that 'both can be, and in fact are, verificationists'.[5]

Further, it is remarkable that Roger Gibson, arguably the leading expositor of Quine's philosophy, whose understanding of Quine's thought has been repeatedly praised by Quine himself, interprets Quine unqualifiedly as a verificationist. Gibson speaks of 'Quine's explicit commitment to verificationism'.[6] He cites as evidence the following well-known passage

from Quine's famous article 'Epistemology Naturalized': 'If we recognize with Peirce that the meaning of a sentence turns on what would count as evidence for its truth, and if we recognize with Duhem that theoretical sentences have their evidence not as single sentences but as larger blocks of theory, then the indeterminacy of translation is the natural conclusion.'[7] And Gibson continues: 'If this quotation leaves a lingering doubt as to whether Quine would really call himself a verificationist, the following quotation should erase all doubt'. Gibson then cites the following striking passage from Quine's reply to Gibson himself in the Quine-volume of *The Library of Living Philosophers*:

> Gibson cites Føllesdal's interesting observation that the indeterminacy or translation follows from holism and verification theory of meaning. Føllesdal mistrusts this defense because of doubts about verificationism, and I gather that Gibson agrees. But I find it attractive. The statement of verificationism relevant to this purpose is that 'evidence for the truth of a sentence is identical with the meaning of the sentence'; and I submit that if sentences in general had meanings, their meanings would be just that. It is only holism itself that tells that in general they do not have them.[8]

And, returning to the previous quotation from 'Epistemology Naturalized', Quine continues: 'Should the unwellcomeness of the conclusion persuade us to abandon the verification theory of meaning? Certainly not. The sort of meaning that is basic to translation, and to the learning of one's own language, is necessarily empirical meaning and nothing more.'[9] Gibson cites also this passage of Quine, and concludes himself that 'it is the empirical conditions of the settings of radical translation and ordinary language learning which provide the support for Quine's verificationism'.[10]

Moreover, Misak in turn refers also to the following words of Quine: 'A sentence or set of sentences is devoid of empirical content unless it is testable. These words echo an old verification theory of meaning, but they gain new force from our holistic standard of testability.'[11]

In addition, one might also appeal, as evidence for interpreting Quine as a verificationist, to Quine's statement, in 'Epistemology Naturalized', of the sound core of empiricism: 'Two cardinal tenets of empiricism remained unassailable, however, and so remain to this day. One is that whatever evidence there is for science is sensory evidence. The other … is that all inculcation of meanings must rest ultimately on sensory evidence.'[12] The latter tenet certainly resembles the verification theory of meaning.

Hence Gibson and Misak (and others) appear indeed to have convincing textual evidence for their interpretation. Nevertheless, it is my aim in this short note to question this interpretation which seems to be gaining ground, that one can straightforwardly take Quine to be a verificationist.

II

Naturally the whole issue of whether Quine should be considered a verificationist depends essentially on one's understanding of the term 'verificationism'. There are certain apparently broader uses of it according to which Quine could easily be included as an adherent of verificationism. For example, it is true that Quine's empirical constrains for language acquisition and understanding resemble in some respects Dummett's 'verificationist' views of these issues (although there are also important differences). But if Quine's not particularly

radical view that there are no innate language and telepathy, and that languages are learned by observation, is enough to make him a verificationist, there is a threat that all except 'mad dog nativists' are verificationists.

Consequently, I think that the interesting and informative sense of the term is narrower and that the above-mentioned commentators of Quine have had in mind something more specific. Moreover, many of them (e.g. Putnam, Fodor and LePore, Bergström and Føllesdal – but not Misak and Gibson) appear to think that Quine commits himself to verificationism in a form that is now generally agreed to be untenable, that is, something very similar to the verifiability criterion of meaningfulness of logical positivists; many seem to think that mere pointing out that Quine is a verificationist is enough to show that there is something deeply wrong in his thought. I want to argue, however, that whatever problems there are in Quine's views, he just cannot be that easily refuted.

To be precise, let us thus be more specific about the sense of 'verificationism' at stake here. Note first that by 'verificationism' one can understand either a view about meaningfulness or a view of meanings. That is, one can only present verifiability as a criterion of meaningfulness, or one can identify the meaning of a sentence with its method of verification or something like that. But even in the latter case, the ultimate motivation has apparently been the desire to clearly demarcate cognitively meaningful from nonsense. Thus, according to Misak, the essential idea of verificationism is that a belief, or a hypothesis, with no connection to experience is in some way illegitimate or spurious.[13] This harmonizes well with Barry Stroud's explanation of the term: '**Verificationism**. Any view according to which the conditions of a sentence's or a thought's being meaningful or intelligible are equated with the conditions of its being verifiable or falsifiable.'[14] I think that this is indeed the standard

understanding of 'verificationism'. So presumably it is in this sense that Misak and others claim that Quine underwrites verificationism.[15]

The content of Gibson's claim is also quite clear: that Quine 'explicitly commits' himself to verificationism in the form of 'Peirce's thesis' that the meaning of a sentence turns purely on what would count as evidence for its truth. Here the focus is on meanings rather than meaningfulness. Nevertheless, whether or not Gibson's intends it, this easily suggests that Quine also holds that a sentence with no empirical consequences is meaningless, or illegitimate, or spurious. I shall argue below that Quine is not a verificationist in such a sense.[16]

III

Let us first recall that logical positivists used two somewhat different strategies for showing that metaphysics is meaningless. First, they famously appealed to the verification theory of meaning, and urged that since the claims of metaphysics are even in principle unverifiable by observation, they are completely devoid of meaning. But secondly, it was also argued that many metaphysical statements are senseless already because they are 'ungrammatical', that is, they are at odds with rules of logical syntax. This latter approach, which was clearly inspired by Russell's theory of types, was advocated forcefully for example in Carnap's influential paper 'The Elimination of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language'.[17]

Now although the former, i.e. verificationism, is the main subject of this paper, let us nevertheless briefly consider Quine's view on the latter approach, viz. ruling out certain

sentences as meaningless by classifying them as ungrammatical. The fact is that Quine has repeatedly distanced himself from this sort of view:[18]

> Over the years I have represented a minority of philosophers who preferred the opposite line: we can simplify grammar and logic by minimizing the number of our grammatical categories and maximizing their size. Instead of agreeing with Carnap that it is meaningless to say 'This stone is thinking about Vienna', and with Russell that it is meaningless to say 'Quadruplicity drinks procrastination', we can accommodate these sentences as meaningful and trivially false. Stones simply never think, as it happens, and quadruplicity never drinks.[19]

And Quine has several reasons for his 'minority view': 'it is well, in opposition to this attitude, to note three points: the obscurity of the notion of category involved, the needlessness for formal logic of any such strictures on negation and complement, and the considerable theoretical simplifications that are gained by lifting such bans'.[20]

IV

It should be also noted that Quine's views on ontology are at odds with those of the positivists. In an unfortunately much less well-known – although very informative – passage in 'Existence and Quantification' Quine considers critically the attempts of positivists to get rid of the ontological commitment to abstract objects by expressions such as 'x is a number' or 'x is a class':

I think the positivists were mistaken when they despaired of evidence in such cases and accordingly tried to draw up boundaries that would exclude such sentences as meaningless. Existence statements in this philosophical vein do admit evidence, in the sense that we can have reasons, and essentially scientific reasons, for including numbers or classes or the like in the range of values of our variables. And other existence statements in this metaphysical vein can be subject to counterevidence; we can have essentially scientific reasons for excluding propositions, perhaps, or attributes...

Considerations for and against existence are more broadly systematic, in these philosophical cases, than in the case of rabbits or unicorns or prime numbers between 10 and 20; but I am persuaded that the difference is a matter of degree. Our theory of nature grades off from the most concrete fact to speculations about the curvature of space-time, or the continuous creation of hydrogen atoms in an expanding universe: and our evidence grades off correspondingly, from specific observation to broadly systematic considerations. Existential quantifications of the philosophical sort belong to the same inclusive theory and are situated way out at the end, farthest form observable fact.[21]

V

Nevertheless, although the quotations I have so far given certainly point out important differences between Quine and logical positivism, they have not, strictly speaking, really touched the question of verificationism.

However, in an apparently less well known passage Quine considers explicitly the notion of meaninglessness and the normative role it played in the heyday of the Vienna Circle, when metaphysics was denounced as meaningless. As Quine puts it, '[f]or this purpose a sentence was rated as meaningless if neither it nor its negation was either analytic or empirically

verifiable.' 'However', Quine adds, 'the notion of analyticity has its troubles, and the notion of verifiability has had, increasingly down the years, its troubles too'.[22]

Further, in his recent response to Bergström, Quine expresses his view on the verificationist criterion of meaningfulness quite clearly: 'Contrary to positivist spirit, I do not repudiate sentences for lack of empirical content.'[23] Quine then continues his reply by citing himself in *From Stimulus to Science*:

> Even if I had a satisfactory notion of shared content, I would not want to impose it in a positivist spirit as a condition of meaningfulness. Much that is accepted as true or plausible even in the hard sciences, I expect, is accepted without thought of its joining forces with other plausible hypotheses to form a testable set. Such acceptations may be prompted by symmetries and analogies, or as welcome unifying links in the structure of the theory. Surely it often happens that a hypothesis remote from all checkpoints suggests further hypotheses that are testable. This must be a major source of hypotheses worth testing. Positivistic insistence on empirical content could, if heeded, impede the progress of science.[24]

In a very similar vein, Quine writes the following on another occasion:

> ... let me add, contrary to positivism, that a sentence does not even need to be testable in order to qualify as a respectable sentence of science. A sentence is testable, in my liberal or holistic sense, if adding it to previously accepted sentences clinches an observation categorical that was not implied by those previous sentences alone; but much good science is untestable even in this liberal sense. We believe many things because they fit in smoothly by analogy, or they symmetrize and simplify the overall design. Surely much history and social science is of this sort, and some hard science. Moreover, such acceptations are not idle fancy; their proliferation

generates, every here and there, a hypothesis that can indeed be tested. Surely this is the major source of testable hypotheses and the growth of science.[25]

These quotations show quite clearly that Quine does not accept, at least without qualifications, verifiability as a criterion of meaningfulness.[26]

But what then is Quine's own view of meaningfulness? To begin with, it should be clear that Quine repudiates the very notion of meaningful, if understood as having a meaning, where meaning in turn is taken to be some sort of mental or abstract entity (the 'idea' idea). Consequently, Quine has preferred to use 'significant' instead of 'having meaning'. Now Quine naturally admits that the notion of significant sequence 'is needed in setting the grammarians task.' 'But', Quine adds, 'it is describable, without appeal to meanings as such, as denoting any sequence which could be uttered in the society under consideration without reactions suggesting bizarreness of idiom.'[27] In another context, Quine relates this issue directly to the aims of positivists:

> However, what to count as meaningful is not at all clear. The empirical linguistic manages the point after a fashion by considering what sentences could be elicited by reasonable means from naive native speakers. But such a criterion is of little value to a philosopher with a reform program.[28]

Quine in fact compares the notion of meaninglessness to the notion of analyticity – which he has famously attacked:

> A notion which has much in common with that of analyticity is the notion of meaninglessness. Both are prominent in philosophy. Both are linguistic in the sense of purporting to apply to

expressions. And both are challenged by the externalizing of empiricism. While the museum myth lasted, a meaningless expression could just be thought of as an unattached label. But when we try to infer meaninglessness from verbal behavior, we cannot easily distinguish it from mere extravagance.[29]

And he concludes:

Is the notion of meaninglessness, like that of analyticity, to be declared meaningless? Not exactly, this declaration would be false or meaningless. But what we can say of both notions is that no definition of them are at hand which meet the demands of users of the terms and at the same time the demands of clarity.[30]

In sum, according to Quine, an empirically and scientifically respectable notion of meaningfulness simply can not be used for positivistic purposes.

VI

What then about the above-quoted passages from 'Epistemology Naturalized' and 'Reply to Gibson', which have been so often interpreted as showing that Quine commits himself to verificationism? How can these be accommodated to the position I am defending here, according to which Quine is not a verificationist?

These passages should, I think, be compared to the closely related considerations in *Philosophy of Logic*. There Quine, while discussing the question of propositions, and the idea that the sameness of propositions amounts to the sameness of objective information, also considers verificationism: 'A different way of reckoning objective information is suggested by the empiricist tradition of epistemology. Say what difference the truth of falsity of a sentence would make to possible experience, and you have said all there is to say about the meaning of the sentence: such, in substantially the words of C. S. Peirce, is the verification theory of meaning.'[31]

But, Quine adds: 'a doctrine of propositions as empirical meanings runs into trouble. The trouble comes, as we shall see, in trying to distribute the sensory evidence over separate sentences.' The source of trouble is, of course, the holistic character of empirical confirmation, the fact known as the Duhem-Quine Thesis. And a few pages later, under the telling subtitle 'Propositions dismissed', Quine concludes: 'In this connection [the problem of individuation of propositions] *a passing attraction* of an empirical theory of meaning was the fairly clear individuation enjoyed by the domain of sensory evidence. However, we have since been finding reasons to despair this line.'[32]

Thus, it would be (pace Gibson) more appropriate to say that Quine, as an empiricist, has felt 'a passing attraction' towards verificationism, but then found it untenable, than to claim that Quine is explicitly committed to verificationism, as Gibson does. Verificationism occurs in Quine's reasoning, so to say, as a temporary assumption which may be discharged after it has done its job, rather than as a premise to whose truth Quine needs to commit himself. Let us recall that in the passage that Gibson cited as his best evidence, what Quine really said was:

'... if sentences in general had meanings, their meanings would be just that [evidence for their truth]. It is only holism itself that tells that in general they do not have them.'

In this connection one should after all still keep in mind what Quine wrote already a long way back in his classic 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism':

> But the dogma of reductionism has, in a subtler and more tenuous form, continued to influence the thought of empiricists. The notion lingers that to each statement, or each synthetic statement, there is associated a unique range of possible sensory events such that the occurrence of any of them would add to the likelihood of truth of the statement, and there is associated also another unique range of possible sensory events whose occurrence would detract from that likelihood. This notion is of course implicit in the verification theory of meaning.[33]

And it is exactly this notion, one hardly needs to say, that is famously refuted by Quine's confirmation holism (the Duhem-Quine Thesis), that is, by the observation that scientific statements are not separately vulnerable to adverse observations, because it is only jointly as a theory that they imply their observable consequences. And if this notion, viz. the idea that each sentence has its own empirical content, is implicit in the verification theory of meaning, so much worse for the latter: verificationism obviously gets refuted as well.

VII

Now I think that already the textual evidence I have presented above at least strongly suggests that it is a mistake to straightforwardly and unqualifiedly classify Quine as an advocate of verificationism. But I shall finish my argument by presenting Quine's

informative statement in a private letter, dated September 6, 1997, where Quine clarifies his relation to verificationism as follows:

Verificationism. The confirmation of science resides for the most part in the observations that it predicts. They are predicted mostly by substantial conjunctions of sentences; sentences separately for the most part predict none. Many sentences do not even participate in the implying of observations, but still serve science in helping to integrate the theory and suggest further hypotheses. I do not seek a demarcation between meaningful and the meaningless. I see gradiations.

It should by now be abundantly clear that one should not classify Quine as a verificationist, at least, not without a number of qualifications. Although Quine wrote that '[a] sentence or set of sentences is devoid of empirical content unless it is testable', one should not be misled as Quine also writes: 'Contrary to positivist spirit, I do not repudiate sentences for lack of empirical content.'

NOTES

[1]   See e.g. H. Putnam, 'The Greatest Logical Positivist', in his *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); J. Van Evra, 'Quine and Logical Positivism', *Journal of Philosophical Research* 19 (1994).

[2]   In addition to the references discussed below, see e.g. L. Bergström, 'Quine on Underdetermination', in R.B. Barrett and R. Gibson, eds. (1990) *Perspectives on Quine*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 38-52; M. Dummett, 'The Significance of Quine's Indeterminacy Thesis', reprinted in his *Truth and Other Enigmas* (London: Duckworth, 1978), p. 379; J. Fodor and E. Lepore, *Holism: A Shopper's Guide*, (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992), 41, 216-217; D. Føllesdal, 'Indeterminacy of Translation and Under-Determination of the Theory of Nature', *Dialectica* 27 (1973), p. 289-301; H. Putnam, '"Two Dogmas" Revisited', reprinted in his *Realism and Reason, Philosophical Papers*, Volume 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 92; H. Putnam, 'Meaning Holism', in L. E. Hahn and P. A. Schilpp (eds.) *The Philosophy of W. V. Quine* (La Salle: Open Court, 1986), p. 409.

[3]   C.J. Misak, *Verificationism: Its History and Prospects* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 148.

[4]   Misak, *Verificationism: Its History and Prospects,* p. 149.

[5]   Misak, *Verificationism: Its History and Prospects*, p. 152.

[6]   R. Gibson, 'Review of Christopher Hookway [1988]: Quine: Language, Experience and Reality', *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 40 (1989), p. 562. Also in his *Enlightened Empiricism* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1988), p. 21, Gibson states: 'Contrary to popular opinion, Quine retains the positivists criterion of verifiability'.

[7] W. V. Quine, 'Epistemology Naturalized', in his *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), pp. 80-81.

[8] W. V. Quine, 'Reply to Gibson', in L. E. Hahn and P. A. Schilpp (eds.) *The Philosophy of W. V. Quine* (La Salle: Open Court, 1986), pp. 155-6.

[9] Quine, 'Epistemology Naturalized', p. 81. Cf. W. V. Quine, *Roots of Reference* (La Salle: Open Court, 1974), p. 38.

[10] Gibson, 'Review of Hookway', p. 563.

[11] W. V. Quine, 'Three Indeterminacies', in R. Barrett and R. Gibson (eds.) *Perspectives on Quine* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), p. 12.

[12] Quine, 'Epistemology Naturalized', p. 75.

[13] Misak, *ibid*., p. ix-xi.

[14] B. Stroud, 'Verificationism', in: Jonathan Dancy and Ernst Sosa (eds.) *A Companion to Epistemology,* Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, p. 518.

[15] The formulations of verificationism mentioned here seem to assume that verificationism must be applied to sentences individually. Is this a problem, given Quine's holism? I don't think so. To begin with, also all the passages of Quine one has cited as an evidence for Quine's verificationism talk about sentences (see Section I). Hence focusing on sentences is only natural here. Moreover, I don't think that extending the unit of meaning would make much difference. For, as Quine has always

emphasized, even a comprehensive theory may have no observable consequences without the help of all kinds of auxiliary hypotheses. Now certainly Quine thinks that science as a whole must have some connection to experience, but arguably one would totally water down the concept if one called this quite weak view 'verificationism'.

[16] Moreover, I shall argue in Section VI that Quine does not in fact commit himself to Peirce's thesis, as a theory of meanings, either.

[17] R. Carnap, R.: 1932, 'Überwindung der Metaphysik durch Logische Analyse der Sprache', *Erkenntnis* 2 (1932), pp. 219-241. English translation in A. J. Ayer (ed.) *Logical Positivism* (New York: The Free Press, 1959), pp. 60-81.

[18] In addition to the passages quoted below, see e.g. W.V. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1960), pp. 229-230; W.V. Quine, 'Philosophical Progress in Language Theory', *Metaphilosophy* 1, p. 7.

[19] W.V. Quine, 'On the Individuation of Attributes', reprinted in his *Theories and Things* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 110. Cf. W.V. Quine, 'Philosophical Progress in Language Theory', *Metaphilosophy* 1, p. 7.

[20] W.V. Quine, 'Mr. Strawson on Logical Theory', reprinted in his *Ways of Paradox and Other Essays*, Revised enlarged edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), p. 155.

[21] W.V. Quine, 'Existence and Quantification', in his *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), pp. 97-98.

[22] W.V. Quine, 'Philosophical Progress in Language Theory', *Metaphilosophy* 1, p. 7.

[23] W.V. Quine, 'Responses', *Inquiry*, 37 (1994), p. 497.

[24] W.V. Quine, *From Stimulus to Science* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 49.

[25] W.V. Quine, 'Naturalism; Or, Living Within Ones Means', *Dialectica*, 49 (1995), p. 256.

[26] Cf. W.V. Quine, *Pursuit of Truth*, Second revised edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 17-18.

[27] W.V. Quine, 'The Problem of Meaning in Linguistics', in his *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), p. 54. Cf. W.V. Quine, 'On What There Is', in *From a Logical Point of View*, pp. 11-12; and 'Philosophical Progress in Language Theory', p. 8.

[28] Quine, 'Existence and Quantification', p. 92.

[29] Quine, 'Philosophical Progress in Language Theory', p. 7.

[30] *Ibid*., p. 8.

[31] W.V. Quine, *Philosophy of Logic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 5.

[32] Quine, *Philosophy of Logic*, p. 8, my italics.

[33] W.V. Quine, 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism', reprinted in *From a Logical Point of View*, p. 41, my italics.