

# Quine on the Dogmas of Empiricism

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## Abstract

In his works the American philosopher Willard van Quine constantly rejects the analytic/synthetic distinction claiming that it is not justified. This happens because, in his opinion, human statements about the external world face the tribunal of experience not individually but as a corporate body, which implies that the judgment on their validity ultimately rests on experience itself. Many problems arise at this point, since even language plays a fundamental role in the Quinean view, and it must be accommodated into the picture if the picture itself means to be coherent. Conceptual scheme and external world are both necessary, but language does not seem to be a factor whose ultimate legitimacy relies on something outside the conceptual sphere, and this means in turn that we face a dualistic situation. Conceptual schemes or world-views, like the ones provided by Newtonian mechanics or quantum theory, are the primary bearers of truth, and the truth of a statement strictly depends from the particular conceptual scheme one currently adopts.

**Keywords:** conceptual schemes; empiricism; science; epistemology; ontology; language.

## Introduction

How can we be sure that our beliefs really bear on the world? If we read carefully Quine's rejection of the second dogma of empiricism, it is clear that he relates the empirical significance of our statements about the world with their possibility of being subject to what he calls, in Kantian terms, "the tribunal of experience". We writes, in fact, that "Our statements about the external world face the tribunal of experience not individually but as a corporate body."<sup>1</sup> So it turns out that when we want to verify whether a belief of ours reflects what there is, the recourse to experience is always necessary. In other words, beliefs may be accepted if, and only if, the judgment on their validity ultimately rests on experience itself. However Quine obviously deems language, too, very important, and this means that language must be accommodated into the picture if the picture itself purports to be coherent. "It is obvious" - he states - "that truth in general depends on both language and extra-linguistic fact."<sup>2</sup> On the one hand extra-linguistic reality and language are not identified but, on the other, Quine's

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<sup>1</sup> W.V. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism", in W.V. Quine, *From A Logical Point of View*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1980, 2nd ed., p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

thesis is that they cannot be separated with a neat border line: "Taken collectively, science has its double dependence upon language and experience; but this duality is not significantly traceable into the statements of science taken one by one."<sup>3</sup> It goes without saying that, starting from these premises, once the second dogma is rejected, also the first one is: no statement can ever be free from an ultimate reference to experience. All this means that conceptual schemes or world-views, like the ones provided, say, by Newtonian mechanics or contemporary quantum theory, are the primary bearers of truth: the truth of a statement strictly depends on the particular conceptual scheme one currently adopts. And it may be noted that this is confirmed by scientific practice. It is the theory (for instance quantum theory) which a scientist endorses that instructs him in the use of the notations he currently works with.

This is why in Quine's empiricism without dogmas both language and experience play a key role. Not only is truth - which can be primarily predicated of a conceptual scheme - dependent on both language and experience, but language itself appears to be a factor which cannot be equated *totally* with experience: it manages to maintain somehow a certain independence. When dealing with the formation of beliefs, we must take into account an "external" element (experience) and an "internal" one (language). The question, of course, is to find out how this internal factor can be properly accommodated into the Quinean picture, because it is not difficult to see that "language" plays here the same role that "meaning" used to play in the analytic/synthetic dualism that Quine rejects. So, in Quine's picture the dichotomy between statements true in virtue of meaning alone, and statements whose truth depends also on how the external world is, is not overcome completely: it is given, rather, a new formulation.

### Quine's stance

Within our conceptual scheme we can appeal to something outside the system, i.e. the world, so that concepts and beliefs are somehow controlled by external constraints. The story with language is however different, since language, in Quine's view, does not seem to be a factor whose ultimate legitimacy relies on something outside the conceptual sphere, and this means in turn that we face a dualistic situation. Despite the many oscillations present in Quine's writings, we obviously have a real distinction which works for whole systems: the empirical content of a conceptual system or world-view never determines, just by itself, its empirical significance, because in any case we also need the contribution of language in order to make our picture coherent. Ontology is thus "internal" to language, which means that it is internal to a conceptual scheme or world-view. We can now see that language becomes the factor that guarantees our autonomy from the natural world. It is a limited kind of autonomy, but its limited

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<sup>3</sup> W.V. Quine, *ibid.*, p. 42.

range is sufficient for somehow granting us a special status in the natural order of things. And just at this point we meet some relevant difficulties.

Quine rejects the old notion of “meaning”, but at the same time he underlines the presence and the extent of man’s conceptual sovereignty in the formation of conceptual schemes or world-views:

We cannot strip away the conceptual trappings sentence by sentence and leave a description of the objective world; but we can investigate the world, and man as a part of it, and thus find out what cues he could have of what goes on around him. Subtracting his cues from his world view, we get man’s net contribution as the difference. This domain marks the extent of man’s conceptual sovereignty - the domain within which he can revise theory while saving the data.<sup>4</sup>

This amounts to saying that the so-called “empirical significance” is something more than mere empirical content: we somehow have a *creative* role in the elaboration of conceptual schemes. So, Quine goes on,

The philosopher’s task differs from the others’ [...] in no such drastic way as those suppose who imagine for the philosopher a vantage point outside the conceptual scheme that he takes in charge. There is no such cosmic exile. He cannot study and revise the fundamental conceptual scheme of science and common sense without having some conceptual scheme, whether the same or another no less in need of philosophical scrutiny, in which to work.<sup>5</sup>

The key point here is the following, although I formulate it in non-Quinean terms. The content of the world (reality) and the content of a conceptual scheme (world-view) do not coincide, and this happens because of the just mentioned conceptual sovereignty we exert. The conceptual sphere is not reducible to the natural order of things: it is the realm of rationality *and* of meaning. But a natural temptation arises at this point. In other words, we might be tempted to say that the content of conceptual schemes is a pure product of our mind, a mind that operates more or less freely and which is not controlled by external limits. Quine, of course, does not endorse such a stance, but the real nature of the conceptual sphere remains in his works somehow mysterious: his behaviorism does not explain its presence.

For Quine, empirical significance is a valid notion because we can explain it entirely in terms of the working of receptivity. But the previous remarks make us reflect on the fact that, according to this picture, not everything can be investigated in terms of natural science: there is, here, room for a return of the *a priori* on the stage. Language is something whose ultimate comprehension lies outside the domain of science. It is

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<sup>4</sup> W.V. Quine, *Word and Object*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1994, 20th pr., p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 275-276.

also worth noting how strong the influence of Quine's lesson is on Davidson, despite all their proclaimed differences. In an article by Davidson we find the following remarks:

It would be good if we could say how language came into existence in the first place, or at least give an account of how an individual learns his first language, given that others in his environment are already linguistically accomplished. These matters are, however, beyond the bounds of reasonable philosophical speculation.<sup>6</sup>

This is quite an important statement. It means, in the first place, that our capacity of describing correctly the surrounding environment is taken more or less for granted and, furthermore, that the basis of language cannot (neither needs to) be explained.

In Quine, however, positions like this do not fit well with the rest of his speculative building. If we conceive experience as the stimulation of sensory receptors - as Quine does - we seem to rule out the possibility of rational links between experience itself and beliefs, and we already said previously that conceptual schemes may be viewed not just as piecemeal beliefs, but rather as sets of logically interconnected beliefs. And this, in turn, seems to be a vindication of Sellars' theses. Sellars told us that the world of concepts is essentially formed by rational relations. In his most famous essay he claimed that when we describe the "states" that lead us to knowledge we not only describe them empirically, but also locate them in a logical space which has a rational character. And only within this logical-rational space are we able to *justify* what we say.<sup>7</sup>

### Conceptual schemes and language

Let then ask ourselves: Does the word "language" convey the same complexity as the term "conceptual scheme"? Quine, following Davidson's criticisms contained in "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme", subsequently abandoned the notion of conceptual schemes in favor of languages. He wrote:

It seems that in Davidson's mind the purported third dogma is somehow bound up with a puzzling use on my part of the phrase "conceptual scheme" [...] I have meant it as an ordinary language, serving no technical function [...] A triad - conceptual scheme, language, and world - is not what I envisage. I think rather, like Davidson, in terms of language and the world. I scout the *tertium quid* as a myth of a museum of labeled ideas. Where I have spoken of a conceptual scheme I could have spoken of a language.<sup>8</sup>

In my view these statements make things somewhat too simple. Quine's acceptance of Davidson's arguments is too fast: he surrenders the theses put forward by his former

<sup>6</sup> D. Davidson, "Three Varieties of Knowledge", in: A. Phillips Griffiths (ed.), *A.J. Ayer Memorial Essays*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, p. 157.

<sup>7</sup> W. Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," in W. Sellars, *Science, Perception and Reality*, cit., p. 169.

<sup>8</sup> W.V. Quine, "On the Very Idea of a Third Dogma", in W.V. Quine, *Theories and Things*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.)-London, 1981, p. 41.

pupil. Conceptual schemes are not reducible to successions of scattered beliefs. There is a structure in conceptual schemes because, as I previously noted, they are characterized by logical relations which hold beliefs together. Davidson's picture is articulated into the triad objects-causes-beliefs, but such a picture does not seem to accommodate the "conceptual sovereignty" which plays such an important role in *Word and Object*.

All this means that conceptual schemes or world-views, like the ones provided, say, by Newtonian mechanics or quantum theory, are the primary bearers of truth. The truth of a statement strictly depends from the particular conceptual scheme one currently adopts. Hilary Putnam, criticizing Hacking's brand of realism,<sup>9</sup> has observed that when Hacking pronounces the statement "positrons are real", our believing in their reality (and consequently our deeming that statement true) has a conceptual content only because we have a conceptual scheme (quantum theory) - a very strange, one which we don't fully understand, but a successful one nonetheless - which enables us to know what to say about positrons. He concludes that:

Hacking's attempt to draw a sharp line between fact and theory, and to say that one should be a realist about facts and a non-realist about the theories, founders on precisely the interpenetration of fact and theory. As James might have put it, the word "positron" isn't a copy of a reality, but a "notation", and it is the *theory* that instructs us in the use of the notation. Again the theory and the fact (positrons were sprayed) are not even notionally separable.<sup>10</sup>

It is worth noting that in Quine's "empiricism without dogmas" both language and experience play a key role. Not only is truth - which can be primarily predicated of a conceptual scheme - dependent on both language and experience, but language itself appears to be a factor which cannot be equated totally with experience: it manages to maintain somehow a certain independence. When dealing with the formation of beliefs, we must take into account an "external" element (experience) and an "internal" one (language). The question, of course, is to find out *how* this internal factor can be properly accommodated into the Quinean picture, because it is not difficult to see that "language" plays here the same role that "meaning" used to play in the analytic/synthetic dualism (the "first dogma") that Quine rejects in his famous paper of the 1950s. So in Quine's holistic picture the dichotomy between statements true in virtue of meaning alone, and statements whose truth depends also on how the external world is, is not overcome completely: it is given, rather, a new formulation.

In the conceptual scheme we find ourselves located, we can appeal to something outside the system, i.e. the world, so that beliefs are somehow controlled by external constraints. The story with language is, however, different, since language, in Quine's

<sup>9</sup> I. Hacking, *Representing and Intervening*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> H. Putnam, *Pragmatism: An Open Question*, Blackwell, Oxford-Cambridge (Mass.), 1995, pp. 59-61.

thought, does not seem to be a factor whose ultimate legitimacy relies on something *outside* the conceptual system, and this in turn means that we face once again a dualistic situation. Despite the many oscillations present in Quine's writings, we obviously have a *real* distinction which works for whole systems: the empirical content of a conceptual system or world-view never determines, just by itself, its empirical significance, because in any case we also need the contribution of language in order to make our picture coherent. What objects, then, are we allowed to admit into our ontology? Since according to Quine we cannot admit possible objects, meanings, intensional and abstract entities, what remains to be done is to determine the scope of our *ontological commitment*. Quine's answer is the following: the existence of any object is *relative to* the language we speak. If this is the situation, it would seem to follow that there are no objects independent of the language we use to talk about them and that, furthermore, there are no objects independent of the linguistic terms which denote them. Physical objects become postulated entities ("posits") that help us organize the flux of experience.

We already ruled out the possibility that language and reality are the same thing, while it looks more plausible to state that in the Quinean view language and reality, even though they do not coincide completely, are so inextricably connected that it is impossible to distinguish one from the other. Ontology is thus internal to language, which means that it is internal to a conceptual scheme or world-view. In an important essay entitled "Existence", our author makes the following claims:

Which ontology to ascribe to a man depends on what he does or intends with his variables and quantifiers. This second appeal to language is no more to be wondered at than the first; for what is in question in both cases is not just what there really is, but what someone says or implies that there is. Nowhere in all this should there be any suggestion that what there is depends on language.<sup>11</sup>

This means that, if we adopt his strategy, we remain at the linguistic level without touching the properly ontological one, in the sense that we just cannot step outside the barrier posed by our language; and, in fact, Quine's ontological commitment is not about what there is, but about what a true theory *claims* that there is. In any event, Quine in the essay mentioned above recognizes, although confusedly, that there is an ontological level which cannot be identified with the linguistic (logical) one. This is confirmed by what he claims soon afterwards:

What are we to say of the ontic commitment of a New Guinea aborigine - what are the purported values of his variables? I hold that there is in general no unique translation, not even unique in respect to ontic commitment, let alone logical style. I hold that our distinctively referential apparatus [...] belongs in an essential respect to the theoretical

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<sup>11</sup> W.V. Quine, "Existence", in W.Y. Yourgrau, A.D. Breck (eds.), *Physics, Logic and History*, Plenum Press, New York-London, 1970, p. 94.

part of our language: namely, it is underdetermined by all possible sensory stimulation. A result, or really another way of stating the point, is that our referential apparatus is subject to indeterminacy of translation. That is, translations not equivalent to each other could be reconciled with all behavior [...] It may in this sense be said that ontological questions are parochial to our culture. This is not to say that a thing may exist for one culture and be non-existent for another. Existence is absolute, and those who talk of existence can say so. What is parochial is the talking of it.<sup>12</sup>

We can find here two different concepts of reality; neither of them, however, is defined in clear terms.

(1) In a first sense, reality is composed by objects which, although not well-defined, are similar to common sense objects that we perceive through our sensory apparatus. The task of language is to *differentiate* reality into particular objects, and from this it follows that, whenever talking about reality, we always do it *relatively to* language.

(2) In a second sense, however, reality appears less determined and more confused, since it may be assimilated to a sort of *raw material* that produces the flux of experience or, to put it in another way, a sort of *substratum* that supports the sensible qualities of material things.

In Quine's view ontological talk rises when the human mind gives an order to the disordered fragments of raw experience which, in turn, are given to us by the just mentioned "substratum". This notion closely recalls a concept of non-differentiated reality similar to the Kantian one. We know, however, that Quine rejects any distinction between *a priori* and *a posteriori*: he believes that any kind of ordering whatsoever cannot be separated by the act of theorizing (which, in his view, is tantamount to talking). In fact, he claims in "On What There Is":

Our acceptance of an ontology is, I think, similar in principle to our acceptance of a scientific theory, say a system of physics: we adopt, at least insofar as we are reasonable, the simplest conceptual scheme into which the disordered fragments of raw experience can be fitted and arranged. Our ontology is determined once we have fixed upon the over-all conceptual scheme which is to accommodate science in the broadest sense; and the considerations which determine a reasonable construction of any part of that conceptual scheme, for example, the biological or the physical part, are not different in kind from the considerations which determine a reasonable construction of the whole. To whatever extent the adoption of any system of scientific theory may be said to be a matter of language, the same - but no more - may be said of the adoption of an ontology.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> W.V. Quine, *ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>13</sup> W.V. Quine, "On What There Is", in *From A Logical Point of View*, *cit.*, pp. 16-17.

## The metaphor of the conceptual ship

I deem it correct to claim that the metaphor of the “conceptual ship” introduced by Otto Neurath plays an absolutely fundamental role in Quine’s thought. Let us see what the American philosopher claims in an essay which first appeared in 1950 in the *Journal of Philosophy*:

The fundamental-seeming philosophical question, How much of our science is merely contributed by language and how much is a genuine reflection of reality? is perhaps a spurious question which itself arises wholly from a certain type of language. Certainly we are in a predicament if we try to answer the question; for to answer the question we must talk about the world as well as about language, and to talk about the world we must already impose upon the world some conceptual scheme peculiar to our own special language. Yet we must not leap to the fatalistic conclusion that we are stuck with the conceptual scheme that we grew up in. We can change it bit by bit, plank by plank, though meanwhile there is nothing to carry us along but the evolving conceptual scheme itself. The philosopher’s task was well compared by Neurath to that of a mariner who must rebuild his ship on the open sea. We can improve our conceptual scheme, our philosophy, bit by bit while continuing to depend on it for support; but we cannot detach ourselves from it and compare it objectively with an non-conceptualized reality.<sup>14</sup>

There is a clear Kantian heritage here: we can never know reality-in-itself, but can nonetheless know reality as we *say* it is. If we assume that we can never reach reality-in-itself, it is obvious that our conceptual schemes are only bound to determine what reality is *for us*, and it is clear, too, that the language we speak becomes something much more important than a simple instrument for *referring to* a reality which is non-linguistic in character. Quine, for instance, claims that our ontology is always relative to the language we speak, so that the adoption of an ontology is a largely arbitrary operation. From this follows, among other things, that there is no absolute ontology, but as many ontologies as we like.

Language thus becomes the factor that guarantees our (human) autonomy from the natural world. It is a limited kind of autonomy, but its limited range is sufficient for somehow granting us a “special” status in the natural order of things. And just at this point we meet some difficulties in Quine’s theoretical building. As is well known, the American philosopher rejects the old notion of “meaning”, but at the same time he underlines “the extent of man’s conceptual sovereignty” in the formation of conceptual schemes or world-views:

Analyze theory-building how we will, we all must start in the middle. Our conceptual firsts are middle-sized, middle-distanced objects, and our introduction to them and to everything comes mid-way in the cultural evolution of the race. In assimilating this

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<sup>14</sup> W.V.O. Quine, “Identity, Ostension and Hypostasis”, in *From a Logical Point of View*, cit., pp. 78-79.

cultural fare we are little more aware of a distinction between report and invention, substance and style, cues and conceptualization, than we are of a distinction between the proteins and the carbohydrates of our material intake. Retrospectively we may distinguish the components of theory-building, as we distinguish the proteins and carbohydrates while subsisting on them. We cannot strip away the conceptual trappings sentence by sentence and leave a description of the objective world; but we can investigate the world, and man as a part of it, and thus find out what cues he could have of what goes on around him. Subtracting his cues from his world view, we get man's net contribution as the difference. This domain marks the extent of man's conceptual sovereignty - the domain within which he can revise theory while saving the data. In a general way, therefore, I propose [...] to ponder our talk of physical phenomena as a physical phenomenon, and our scientific imaginings as activities within the world that we imagine.<sup>15</sup>

This amounts to saying that the so-called empirical significance is something more than mere empirical content: we somehow have a *creative* role in the elaboration of conceptual schemes. The key point here is the following: the content of the world (reality) and the content of a conceptual scheme (world-view) are different, and this happens because of the just mentioned conceptual sovereignty we exert. The conceptual sphere is not reducible to the natural order of things: it is the realm of rationality *and* of meaning. An obvious temptation arises at this point. In other words, we might be tempted to say that the content of conceptual schemes is a pure product of our mind, a mind that operates more or less freely, a mind which is not controlled by external constraints (i.e., reality as such). It is worth noting, too, that with a further step we might arrive to the following conclusion: language is the transcendental condition of experience. This is a Kantian-like conclusion, of course, and a little effort will suffice to show that, behind it, we find again a Kantian-like dualism according to which we face both a reality-in-itself about which we can say very little, and a reality-for-us which is the result of the conceptual sovereignty we exert through the production of conceptual schemes or world-views. In Quine we surely have a picture of this kind, but the real nature of the conceptual sphere remains somehow mysterious: Quine's behaviorism does not explain its presence, and we are led to conclude that, for the Harvard philosopher, it is unexplainable. Quine meant to get rid of the notion of "meaning", but it can be argued that the notion of "language" plays in his thought the same role:

In contrast, "empirical significance" is an intellectually respectable notion, because it is explicable entirely in terms of the law-governed operations of receptivity, untainted by the freedom of spontaneity. To put it in a more Quinean way, "empirical significance" can be investigated scientifically. "The extent of man's conceptual sovereignty", the extent to which the content of a world-view goes beyond its "empirical significance", is

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<sup>15</sup> W.V. Quine, *Word and Object*, cit., pp. 4-5.

just the extent to which such a notion of content lies outside the reach of science, and therefore outside the reach of first-rate intellectual endeavor.<sup>16</sup>

Now, it is interesting to note that Donald Davidson is not far away from such a stance. In an essay of his, in fact, he wrote that:

In communication, what a speaker and the speaker's interpreter must share is an understanding of what the speaker means by what he says. How is this possible? It would be good if we could say how language came into existence in the first place, or at least give an account of how an individual learns his first language, given that others in his environment are already linguistically accomplished. These matters are, however, beyond the bounds of reasonable philosophic speculation. What as philosophers we can do instead is to ask how a competent interpreter [...] can come to understand the speaker of an alien tongue. An answer to this question can reveal essential features of communication, and will throw indirect light on what makes possible a first entry into language.<sup>17</sup>

Roger Trigg notes in this regard:

This might make it look as if Quine is saying that physical objects no more exist than the Homeric gods, and that they are merely reflections of a particular scheme. The only distinction would be that we believe in physical objects, and not in Homeric gods. Quine does not think that this makes all the difference and points out that unlike physical objects, Homeric gods are useless for the purpose of scientific prediction. Yet he would deny that he is patronizing something by calling it a posit.<sup>18</sup>

And Quine, in fact, claims:

Everything to which we concede existence is a posit from the standpoint of a description of the theory-building process, and simultaneously real from the standpoint of the theory that is being built. Nor let us look down on the standpoint of the theory as makebelieve: for we can never do better than occupy the standpoint of some theory or other, the best we can muster at the time.<sup>19</sup>

Trigg concludes that:

Quine would therefore refuse to accept that there is any distinction between posits and reality. Posits can be real, and indeed in positing certain entities we are saying they are real. The reason we would deny reality to Homeric gods is not that they are posits, but that they are not *our* posits. According to Quine, reality is, in effect, what we *believe* exists. In terms of our *present* conceptual scheme, he thinks that this means looking to scientists to tell us what reality is like. Indeed, epistemology is secondary to science

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<sup>16</sup> J. McDowell, *Mind and World*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 1994, p. 132.

<sup>17</sup> D. Davidson, "Three Varieties of Knowledge," cit., p. 157.

<sup>18</sup> R. Trigg, *Reality at Risk*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, New York-London, 1989, 2nd ed., p. 70.

<sup>19</sup> W.V. Quine, *Word and Object*, cit., p. 22.

for him and is “only science self-applied”<sup>20</sup> Its task is merely to ask *how* we know what we do know from science. His theory rules out the possibility of skepticism, except as something parasitic on knowledge.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, the views of that civilization, its conceptual schemes, have been challenged and shown to be untenable. But our present view - our posits - will *not* have a different destiny. The only difference if you wish is that our posits - the scientific ones - now work better than the Homeric gods.

## Conclusions

At this point, however, a problem arises. Only human beings enjoy the aforementioned logical-rational space. On the one side it guarantees both their freedom and a high level of autonomy from the natural world. On the other, it may turn out to be a short-cut towards idealism. Many thinkers developed Kant’s heritage in this direction, claiming that our thought is *totally* free. It is clear that the (alleged) complete freedom in the conceptual dimension poses the following problem. If our thought is not conditioned by something which is external to the conceptual sphere, then one must conclude that our statements - the empirical ones included - are not connected to a reality which is independent of thought (and language). If so, why should we assume that experience is the foundation of our cognitive processes? And, furthermore, what grounds do we have for claiming that, thanks to conceptual activity, human beings can pronounce meaningful statements about the “world”? Any kind of world external to thought (and language) slowly seems to vanish.

In my view, we are likely to find a way out of these difficulties by changing what until now has been the traditional picture of the relations between mind and the world. A traditional philosophical stance places mind - and the subject - at the core of human nature, while perceptual experience is conceived of as something taking place somewhere (but we do not know exactly where) and somehow (but we do not know exactly how) in the “outer” domain. And it is interesting to note that the famous metaphor put forward by Quine in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” is coherent to such a traditional representation, even though it is normally taken to be its overturning:

The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs [...] is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges. Or, to change the figure, total science is like a field of force whose boundary conditions are experience. A conflict with experience at the periphery occasions readjustments in the interior of the field.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> W.V. Quine, “Replies”, in D. Davidson, J., Hintikka (eds.), *Words and Objections. Essays on the Work of W.V. Quine*, Reidel, Dordrecht, 1975, p. 293.

<sup>21</sup> R. Trigg, *ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>22</sup> W.V. Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”, *cit.*, pp. 42-43.

As a matter of fact, Quine's metaphor of the "net" (or field of force) is a slightly modified version of this view of the mind. In order to switch view and avoid the difficulties mentioned above, we may turn such net, so to speak, inside out. The outcome of this move will be that the elements that are at the periphery in Quine's metaphor - and in particular the agent/world relationship - become, instead, central. In other words, the interaction agent/environment becomes the starting point of the whole process, and thought no longer is something which is performed exclusively at the internal level and more or less independently of this interaction. According to this line of reasoning, the mind cannot be artificially detached from natural phenomena: it has a long evolutionary history and, essentially, it turns out to be a particular (and, of course, extremely important) variant of the agent/world interaction.

In this regard, the distinction between "internal" and "external" is not as precise as the aforementioned traditional view would like us to believe. And this means that it is quite hard to detach the mind from *some* kind of environment. No doubt this entails, furthermore, that we are allowed to think of *other* kinds of mind which, in turn, cannot be separated from *other* kinds of environment. The way one experiences the world has a fundamental bearing on both thought and language. When we try to describe subatomic phenomena by having recourse to the language of everyday experience, we meet difficulties because our concepts are not attuned to that dimension of reality.

An important consequence follows from this change of attitude. Unlike those thinkers who claim that the structure of the world is somehow reflected in the structure of our language, we have no reason to believe that natural language is such a reliable guide to how the world-as-such is structured. There is an obvious and natural connection between linguistic systems and the world, but this connection regards the ontology of common sense, that is to say, the ontology of the "manifest" image. The scientific image (think again of quantum theory) is not reflected, if only we recall that the contemporary models of physical reality can be understood only by having recourse to enormously complex mathematical models. It goes without saying that, in the commonsense world-view, singular names are associated with singular objects, and that, furthermore, we organize our daily life according to such a view. But there is no reason to believe that the properties of the language - in which names work - mirror the properties of non-linguistic reality.

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