QUINE'S REVISIONISM: RE-ENTRY INTO IMMUNITY

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One of Quine's most famous remarks is his second-order dictum, "no statement is immune to revision."[1] I shall denote this sentence as "S" and call the doctrine it embodies, revisionism. Acceptance of this doctrine is not without logical oddities which are mainly due to the status of S. Does S apply to itself or only to other statements? Statements, like classes, may be reflexive, and so possess the property which includes themselves. The class of persons is not a person, but a collection of classes is itself a class. A recall is a call,[2] and a meta-statement is a statement. Furthermore, recalls and meta-statements must conform to the formation rules of calls and statements for them to be what they purport to be (whatever that might be). Sentential conformity is like the behavior of negation: the negation of a negation is a negation. The recall of a recall needs to be a call. (Think of Ford Pintos.) So likewise a meta-statement or a statement about statements is itself a statement and conforms to whatever rules apply to the formation of statements. This is the case even where rules are themselves statements.

Is S subject to itself? If it is, then S is not immune to revision, which means that S is revisable. Or, there is some statement which is immune, and it is the result of applying itself to itself, like the law of negation. "No statement is immune to revision" includes this one. Revised then, S would look like: some statements are immune, and it would be those statements which are second-order statements.

But this result won't do, because Quine wants this to be true of second-order or meta-statements, too.[3] All statements are revisable, even logical truths like "All gray cats are gray." However, a revision of S would amount to a denial of S. This won't do either, so let us look at the other alternative. Does S apply only to other statements? This seems to be the more desirable step to take. S is exempt from its stated requirements. One way of viewing this exempt condition is to treat S like the last statement in the syntax of a formal system, like SL.[4] A SL (sentence logic) calculus consists of a set SF of the following statement forms:

1. If A (some specific sentence being represented) V (the set of variables, like x, y, and z), then A SF.
2. If A SF, then A SF.
3. If A, B SF, then (A & B) SF.

4-6. The remaining connectives, "v", " ", "=", are expressed like 3.
7. Nothing else is in SF.

Quine's statement S functions like 7 in the above recursive definition of the set SF. Along with some other Quinean remarks, S creates a set--the set of permissible sentences.

If we don't treat S in this way then we have an instance of Russell's Paradox. Suppose S is the statement of all statements. If S is such a set then it must include itself since by definition it includes all statements. If all statements are revisable then this one is too. But a revision of the revision requirement leads to immunity which contradicts itself. So then suppose S does not include itself. If S does not include itself, then it cannot be the statement of all statements because there remains for such a statement to be formulated since S is not it. S is not S. This is acceptable, because we can take Russell's way out, which is the theory of types. S is of another order or type. The level between S and what it refers to must be preserved. There is no statement of all statements. However, this strategy is not Quine's way out, since he rejects the theory of types.

As J.L. Austin says in his opening lecture of How to Do Things with Words,[5] our notion of "statement" is indeed problematic, especially if it embodies such logical oddities as the above. According to our understanding of the syntax of a formal system, at least three statements (1, 2, and 7) are necessary to capture enough of a notion of a language to develop the concept of a statement. Maybe S is an undecidable statement. (Decidable statements are decidable by the methods of reasoning to which we have restricted ourselves above, SL and the set SF it generates.[6])

Does Quine have a way out other than the syntactical analogy? One possible way is to find a more suitable equivalence. S transforms into "All statements are revisable" (I shall denote this as S'.) Sentences with this logical form, "All S is P", are law-like and are to be treated as hypotheses. S' has been confirmed, but is it true? It is true, if all statements are in principle revisable. So what about S'? One of the Virtues of hypotheses is refutability.[7] Hence, immunity must remain a distinct possibility, and at the expense of the content of S'. An air of paradox still looms over S by the way S' is to be

treated. The one statement which is immune to revision is the statement that All statements are revisable. Treating S as either logic or science has oddities associated with it. Does this show, like Russell's Paradox, that there is no statement of statements? What I have exhibited above is a reductio ad absurdum against Quine's claim.

The oddity I have pointed to concerning S and its counterpart S' is representative of Quine's view of philosophy. The oddity indeed applies to philosophy as the theory of theory, or the science of science. The philosopher seeks theoretical truth about truth.[8] Supposedly, S is one of these "theoretical truths." But, then, I wonder what governs them if it is the case that they enjoy "the same observational base"?[9]

NOTES

1. W.V.O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," From a Logical Point of View (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), p. 43.
2. G. Spencer Brown, Laws of Form (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), pp. 1, 5.
3. Op. cit., and W.V. Quine and J.S. Ullian, The Web of Belief (sec. ed.; New York: Random House, 1978), Ch. IV, on self-evidence.
4. For examples of such systems see G.N. Georgacarokos and Robin Smith, Elementary Formal Logic (New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1979), p. 128; and Meerrie Bergmann, James Moor, and Jack Nelson, The Logic Book (New York: Random House, 1980), p. 56.
5. J.L. Austin, How to Do Things with Words (sec. ed.; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), pp. 1ff.
6. Brown, Laws of Form, p. 99, for the notion of decidability.
7. The Web of Belief, Ch. VI, pp. 79-82.
8. George D. Romanos, Quine and Analytic Philosophy: The Language of Language (Cambridge, MA: The MA: The MIT Press, 1983), p. 188.
9. Ibid, p. 189; and The Web of Belief, Ch. III, on observation and observational sentences.