

SECOND EXCURSUS

The Inscrutability of Reference and the Scrutability of Truth

In his 1960 book *Word and Object*, W. V. Quine put forward the thesis of the Inscrutability of Reference. This thesis says very roughly that there is no fact of the matter about what a given expression refers to, because there are too many equally good candidates. This thesis is a metaphysical rather than an epistemological thesis: it concerns the existence and determinacy of reference, rather than our knowledge of reference. Perhaps because of this, and because the term ‘inscrutability’ suggests an epistemological thesis, Quine later came to think that this name for the thesis was suboptimal. In his 1990 book *Pursuit of Truth* he renamed it the thesis of the *indeterminacy of reference*.

My scrutability theses, unlike Quine’s, are epistemological. We can bring out a connection between the two, however, by considering epistemological theses in the vicinity of Quine’s. In particular, Quine’s metaphysical thesis of the indeterminacy of reference can be seen as a challenge to an epistemological thesis about reference. If we start from this thesis, and modify it to meet Quine’s challenge and other challenges, this motivates something like the scrutability theses I have discussed.

To start with: if we follow Quine’s later practice and reserve ‘scrutability’ for broadly epistemological theses, one might call the following thesis the *scrutability of reference*.

The Scrutability of Reference: For any referring expression *E*, once we know enough about the world, we are in a position to know what *E* refers to.

The thesis has commonsense appeal. At the beginning of enquiry, we may not know what a term such as ‘Hesperus’, or ‘Jack the Ripper’, or ‘arthritis’ refers to. But once we discover enough about the world—which heavenly bodies are where, who murdered whom, which diseases have which properties—then we are in a position to know the referents of these terms. I have suggested a picture like this informally in section 4 of chapter 1.

Still, there are various potential problems with the thesis as it stands. One problem is that it is not clear just what counts as knowing what an expression refers to. One might suggest that to know what ‘Hesperus’ refers to, one must

know, of some object, that ‘Hesperus’ refers to it. But it is notoriously hard to give a precise content to the notion of (*de re*) knowledge of an object. Arguably, one expresses *de re* knowledge by saying ‘‘Hesperus’ refers to *that*’, looking in the sky, or perhaps even by saying ‘‘Hesperus’ refers to Hesperus’. But this sort of knowledge is much easier to obtain than the more substantial knowledge of reference envisaged in the scrutability thesis, such as the knowledge that we have after we do some astronomy. Alternatively, one might suggest that to know what ‘Hesperus’ refers to, one must have knowledge expressible in the form ‘‘Hesperus’ refers to *X*’, where *X* is a special sort of canonical designator. But here it is not clear what counts as a canonical designator of an object. For example, if ‘Venus’ is a canonical designator, does this mean that any user of ‘Venus’ knows what ‘Venus’ refers to?

Another problem is Quine’s indeterminacy thesis. If reference is indeterminate, so that there is no fact of the matter about what our expressions refer to, then we cannot know what our expressions refer to. Quine argues that there are multiple ways of assigning referents to our terms that make sense of all available data (including data about our judgments concerning whether sentences containing those terms are true), and that there is no fact of the matter about which assignment is correct. Even if one has doubts about the generality of Quine’s argument, many have made similar arguments concerning specific domains. For example, Paul Benacerraf (1965) argues that many different sorts of entities are equally well-qualified to be the referents of number terms, all yielding the same truth-values for numerical statements. In a related way, David Lewis (1993) argues that we can take various different entities to be the referent of ‘cat’, while Terence Horgan (1986) argues that we can take various different sorts of entities to be the referent of ‘symphony’. In all of these domains, it is often held that reference is indeterminate.

Strikingly, both of these problems can be bypassed if we move from the scrutability of reference to the scrutability of truth.

The Scrutability of Truth (informal version):¹ For any truth *S*, once we know enough about the world, we are in a position to know that *S* is true.

The scrutability of truth captures much of the force of the scrutability of reference. The former thesis implies that for *any* true claim of the form ‘Hesperus is *X*’, then once we know enough about the world, we are in a position to know that ‘Hesperus is *X*’ is true. So we are in a position to know the truth-value of ‘Hesperus is Venus’, ‘Hesperus is the second planet from the Sun’, and so on for any designator at all. Most of the intuitive backing behind the scrutability of

¹ For a perfect analogy with the scrutability of reference, this should really be the scrutability of truth-value. But the shorter label works just as well.

reference (e.g. that given enough qualitative information, we can know who Jack the Ripper is) is reflected in the scrutability of truth (e.g. that given enough qualitative information, we can know whether Jack the Ripper was Prince Albert Victor).

In the reverse direction, it is arguable that the scrutability of reference entails the scrutability of truth. If one holds with Frege that sentences are referring expressions that refer to their truth-values, then the entailment is immediate. Even if one rejects this claim, it is not hard to construct a referring expression that functions to refer to the truth-value of a given sentence: we might just use ‘the truth-value of *S*’, or perhaps better (in order to avoid semantic ascent), we might stipulate an operator ‘whether’ such that ‘whether *S*’ behaves this way. Then applying the scrutability of reference to these expressions yields the scrutability of truth.

Furthermore, the first problem concerning knowledge of reference has no parallel in the case of knowledge of truth. Truth is canonically presented under the concept *true*. To know that *E* is true, it suffices to have knowledge of the form *E is true*, deploying this concept. Further, if one knows the truth of ‘Hesperus is *X*’ for all relevant *X*, then it seems reasonable to say that one knows what Hesperus refers to.

Importantly, Quine’s central case for the inscrutability of reference causes no problems for the scrutability of truth. This case starts by assuming that the truth-values of sentences are fixed, and makes the case that there are multiple assignments of reference that yield the same truth-values. Even if this argument makes a case for the indeterminacy of reference, it does not make a corresponding case for the indeterminacy of truth: while reference varies between the multiple assignments, truth-values do not. One might suggest that if reference is indeterminate, truth must then be indeterminate too, but this is far from obvious: if one accepts Quine’s picture here, one will presumably accept a picture on which determinate truth-values do not require determinate referents (perhaps denying that truth-value is determined by referents, or perhaps holding that truth-value is determined by supervalueing over possible assignments of reference). In any case, there is certainly no direct argument for the indeterminacy of truth-value here.

Quine has other arguments for the indeterminacy of truth-value, tied to his arguments for the indeterminacy of translation. These arguments do not start by holding fixed the truth-value of all sentences, but only the truth-value of certain observational sentences. In this case, multiple assignments of reference are put forward in a way that makes a difference to the truth-value of non-observational sentences. This is a case for the indeterminacy of reference that also makes a case for the indeterminacy of truth-value. But these arguments concerning the indeterminacy of translation are usually held to be distinct from the central

arguments concerning the inscrutability of reference. Further, these arguments are often held to be much more problematic than the arguments concerning the inscrutability of reference, because they rest on much stronger verificationist or behaviorist assumptions. If this is right, Quine's best case for the indeterminacy of reference does not undermine the scrutability of truth.

As for related arguments, such as Benacerraf's, these have at best minor implications for matters concerning truth. In these arguments, as with Quine's, the multiple assignments of reference are usually chosen precisely so that they preserve the truth-values of first-order sentences (such as ' $2 + 2 = 4$ ' and 'There are an infinite number of primes') in the domain in question. If so, almost all of the indeterminacies will drop out when it comes to the truth-values of statements. An exception may be quasi-philosophical statements such as 'the number two is a set of sets', and the like. But now the issue is restricted to a few isolated sentences in the metaphysical domain, and these can be handled in the same way that one handles other sentences with indeterminate truth-value. The highly limited indeterminacy here contrasts with the issue concerning reference, which potentially affects every use of the relevant words, thereby rendering the scrutability of reference either false or useless.

The moral is that the inscrutability of reference is quite compatible with the scrutability of truth. Even if one is inclined to accept the arguments for the inscrutability of reference (I am not), one does not have corresponding reasons to reject the scrutability of truth.

Of course the thesis of the scrutability of truth is still informal and unclear in certain respects. We need to clarify 'know enough about the world', for example so that this does not typically allow the trivializing knowledge that S is true. The obvious thought is that the relevant information about the world should be restricted to a limited (compact) vocabulary, and that the relevant class of truths is limited (compact) in a similar way.

So clarified, the thesis now becomes:

The Scrutability of Truth (second version): There is a compact class C of truths such that for all truths S , once we know enough truths in C , we are in a position to know that S is true.

This version of the thesis is quite close to the Inferential Scrutability thesis. It is subject to the Fitch-style problems discussed in the first excursus, but as discussed there, one can get around these by changing the scope and using a conditional formulation. This yields a version of Conditional Scrutability: there is a compact class of truths such that we are in a position to know that *if* these truths are true, then S is true.

This line of motivation does not yet get to A Priori Scrutability, but one might get there by a certain clarification of 'in a position to know'. One natural

thought is that being in a position to know such-and-such should involve being able to know such-and-such, given ideal rational reflection and without further empirical information. Furthermore, it is natural to interpret the second version of the thesis above as holding that the compact class of base truths contains all the empirical information that is required to know the truth in question. In the conditional version of the thesis, all this information is built into the antecedent of the conditional. So it is natural to require that this conditional can be known (on ideal rational reflection) without any further empirical information at all; that is, that it can be known a priori. This yields the following.

Scrutability of Truth (final version): There is a compact class of truths such that for all truths S , there is a conjunction D of truths in this class such that 'If D , then S ' is knowable a priori.

This is a version of the A Priori Scrutability thesis. In this fashion, A Priori Scrutability can be motivated by starting from claims about the scrutability of reference and by modifying them to avoid the most pressing objections.