Abstract
In his 1987 article “Indeterminacy, Empiricism and the First Person”, John Searle argues that we actually know what we mean; therefore, W. V. O. Quine’s thesis of the indeterminacy of translation must be wrong. In this paper, I will try to identify the mistakes in Searle’s criticism of Quine’s story. I will argue that Quine’s indeterminacy thesis can be construed as containing two theses—that is, the immanent indeterminacy and the transcendent indeterminacy. With these two indeterminacies in mind, Quine’s indeterminacy thesis will still remain tenable even if we actually know what we mean.

Introduction
In philosophical discussions of Quine’s indeterminacy thesis, one can distinguish several lines of rejection. The familiar strategy, mainly adopted by John Searle, is to take the scheme of reference for our mother tongue, and then to argue that the alternative schemes of reference do not fit the facts as well as the initial one. Searle takes this argument to be successful and believes that he has shown that reference is substantially determinate, for there is something to be right or wrong about. Indeed, many who object to Quine’s indeterminacy thesis in this way think that it’s perfectly certain what they mean, treating this as an incorrigible psychological fact about themselves. This, however, is an awkward position. I think there is an important distinction of Quine’s arguments that has not been clearly recognized, according to which Quine’s indeterminacy thesis can be construed as containing two theses—that is, the immanent indeterminacy and the transcendent indeterminacy. The aim of this paper is to make plausible Quine’s indeterminacy thesis about how much of indeterminacy can be made sense of in terms of such a distinction.

It is helpful to take the indeterminacy thesis as a less metaphorical and more precise argument by making Quine’s point as follows: Putting the thesis transcendentally, translation between languages is said to be indeterminate in the sense that it is meaningless to talk of the unique reference a given expression, say, “rabbit”, really has, independent of a background language. Putting it interlinguistically, on the other hand, translation is indeterminate in the sense that we can talk meaningfully of what we mean only relative to a background language. Let’s call the former the transcendent level, and call the latter the immanent level. With these two different levels in mind, I believe that Quine’s indeterminacy thesis will still remain tenable even if we actually know what we mean. Also, on this suggestion, to say that translation is indeterminate is simply to say that, as Quine puts it in *Word and Object*, it makes no sense to speak of rejecting our present language or conceptual scheme and choosing one of the alternatives to it, since we can give no content to the notion of a conceptual scheme or language which is a genuine alternative to our present one. There is simply no such “cosmic exile”—the position of someone who would stand outside the conceptual scheme of science and common sense and somehow philosophize about existence or the possibility of language without any serious views of his own about reality.

As speakers, we are prone to suppose that the sequences of noises we produce must stand for definite meanings. Were this not the case, then the ability to produce sequences of noises would be all there is to the mastery of a language. Surely this is absurd, so there seem to be two conclusions we cannot avoid:

1. A sequence of noises cannot by itself constitute an utterance of a language. Something must be added to a sequence of noises for it to become an utterance of a language, and that something is what we call meaning.

2. The sequences of noises we utter must stand...
for definite meanings, and we must know the meanings they stand for. If we don’t know the definite meanings, then we cannot say that we really have mastery of a language.

Quine’s thesis of the indeterminacy of translation is undoubtedly one of the most controversial theses in contemporary analytic philosophy. According to Quine’s indeterminacy thesis, if one wore behaviorist spectacles (which, on Quine’s view, are the only equipment we could possess), then one would find that the sequences of noises that serve as the physical vehicles of an utterance could be assigned various mutually inconsistent meanings, and more than one of these assignments of meaning could be equally “correct”. If Quine’s thesis were true, then a given sequence of noises could stand for various meanings, and different people could assign different meanings to a given sequence. But this contradicts (2) in the preceding paragraph. Many philosophers therefore conclude that Quine’s indeterminacy thesis must be false. For according to our common-sense intuitions, the sequences of noises are indeed assigned definite meanings. Therefore, these authors argue, it is just the behaviorist spectacles rather than our common-sense intuitions that we must cast away (See, for example [2] and [1], ch. 2 and ch. 8]).

Searle argues further that it is an undeniable fact that we, as speakers, know what we mean, and the basic assumption of Quine’s thesis (that is, according to Searle’s interpretation, behaviorism) must be abandoned. Searle therefore concludes that Quine’s indeterminacy thesis must be false (see [11] and [10, p. 31-34]). These philosophers all believe that a refutation of behaviorism is a fortiori a refutation of Quine’s indeterminacy thesis. They believe that if we have good reason to reject behaviorism, then we might also have good reason to rid ourselves of the haunting tunes of the indeterminacy of translation.

In this paper, I aim to examine Searle’s criticism of Quine’s thesis of the indeterminacy of translation mentioned above. I will divide my discussion of Searle’s criticism into two parts. First, I will argue that Quine’s indeterminacy thesis still remains tenable even if, as Searle contends, we actually know what we mean. Second, I will consider the relations between behaviorism and Quine’s indeterminacy thesis. I will argue that Quine’s thesis could be plausible even if behaviorism were false. If my refutation is successful, then there will be two further conclusions we are forced to accept:

(1) We may contend on the one hand that we actually know what we mean, while on the other hand contend that Quine’s indeterminacy thesis is true.

(2) The refutation of behaviorism is insufficient to refute Quine’s indeterminacy thesis.

I. Quine’s Indeterminacy Thesis

Let us begin by stating Quine’s thesis of the indeterminacy of translation. Quine argues that there can be two or more different ways of translating one language into another, each of which is equally consistent with all of a speaker’s speech dispositions. Quine’s famous example concerns a linguist’s interpreting the language of an imaginary alien tribe: suppose that the natives shouted “Gavagai” whenever a rabbit ran past, and the linguist tried to interpret “Gavagai” in English. Quine points out that it is equally appropriate for the linguist to translate “Gavagai” as “Rabbit”, “Rabbit stage” or “Undetached part of a rabbit”, for each way of translation is consistent with the behavior the natives exhibit, and what the linguist can do, Quine argues, is merely observe the natives’ external behavior so as to collect the behavioral evidence he or she needs. Quine therefore concludes that there is no “semantic fact” that determines the “correct” translation of a language. If each way of translation is equally consistent with a speaker’s behavioral speech dispositions, then each is equally appropriate and “correct”.

In order to deepen our understanding of Quine’s indeterminacy thesis, let us take an example from arithmetic and call it indeterminacy-in-arithmetic. Consider the following sequence of numbers:

\[ P: 1, 2, 3, 3, 3, 3, 3, \]
Now consider the following two functions, both of which may be used to generate sequence \( P \):

(i) \( n \) is natural number, and \( P_n \) stands for the \( n^{\text{th}} \) number of the sequence

\[
P_n = f(n) = n, \text{ whenever } n < 3 \text{ or } n = 3
\]

\[
P_n = f(n) = 3, \text{ when } n > 3
\]

(ii) \( n \) is natural number, and \( P_n \) stands for the \( n^{\text{th}} \) number of the sequence

\[
P_n = g(n) = 2^{n-1}, \text{ whenever } n < 2 \text{ or } n = 2
\]

\[
P_n = g(n) = 3^{1+(n-3)(n-4)(n-5)(n-6)(n-7)\ldots}, \text{ when } n > 3
\]

Undoubtedly, we are forced to accept the following results:

\[
P_1 = f(1) = g(1) = 1
\]

\[
P_2 = f(2) = g(2) = 2
\]

\[
P_3 = f(3) = g(3) = 3
\]

\[
P_4 = f(4) = g(4) = 3
\]

\[
P_5 = f(5) = g(5) = 3
\]

And so on.

Now let us compare Quine’s thesis (which we may call indeterminacy-in-general) with indeterminacy-in-arithmetic. By applying \( f(n) \), one can identify correctly what the \( n^{\text{th}} \) number in the sequence is. By applying \( g(n) \), one can also identify correctly what the \( n^{\text{th}} \) number would be. It is equally appropriate and correct to identify the \( n^{\text{th}} \) number in the sequence following \( f(n) \) or \( g(n) \), for no “arithmetic fact” in the sequence determines what the “correct” function is. Hence indeterminacy-in-arithmetic obtains. This kind of indeterminacy holds, Quine argues, for indeterminacy-in-general: no “semantic fact” about a speaker’s external behavior determines the “correct” translation of his or her language, so each method of translation is equally appropriate and correct, provided that each is completely consistent with the speaker’s speech dispositions.

Here it should be noted that it is hard to imagine or recognize an example for Quine’s indeterminacy thesis merely from facts of the matter about the language used by us. So perhaps indeterminacy-in-arithmetic cannot exhaust or make clear what Quine wants to say about indeterminacy-in-general. Perhaps Robert Nozick’s parable of the two brands of English will be appropriate if we want to imagine a case for indeterminacy-in-general.\(^1\) In order to see why this is so, let’s go on to say something about Nozick’s story about this two brands of English.

In order to refute the view that within neurology lies determinacy of translation, Nozick designs a thought experiment. Now let’s summarize this thought experiment as follows: Imagine that there are two ships sailing in opposite directions, each of which containing infant children and teachers. One group of teachers teach the children English, while the other group of teachers teach stage-English, which is the stage-language of English. Now suppose that for each sentence heard on an occasion on the English speaking ship, there will be a corresponding sentence heard on the stage-English ship on the parallel occasion. So the children on the first ship will learn to speak English, and the children on the second will learn to speak the counterpart of English, that is, stage-English. Nozick thinks that the only neurological differences between a child on the first ship and a corresponding child on the other ship will be trivial phonetic differences. In order to eliminate these trivial phonetic differences, Nozick urges us to suppose that the children on the stage-English ship are taught abbreviations of stage-English so that these abbreviations are phonetically identical to English. In this case, Nozick argues that the neurology of the children on both ships would be identical to each other: whatever neurological configuration realizes one of the languages will also realize the other. Now imagine that the children on the two ships were settled on the same island and fluently spoke together. Would the differences between them, Nozick asks, be linguistically important? Do these children speak English or stage-English? Is there a fact of the matter about which they speak? Nozick believes that this parable produces an example of “no fact of the matter” about which language they speak: whatever differences there would be are bound to be trivial [6, p. 346-347].

\(^1\) In fact, this reading of Quine has been approved by Quine himself, who says that he is pleased by Nozick’s parable of the two brands of English. See [9, p. 365].
Hence it seems unlikely that any interesting conclusion about the determinacy of translation will emerge from considerations about neurology. But might something interesting about the determinacy of translation emerge from considerations about psychological states? One might think to use the way in which these psychological states fix meaning to resolve Quine’s indeterminacies. But, as a Quinean will argue, how can they be so certain about what they mean? How can they be so sure that they speak English or stage-English? So we have a Quinean who emphasizes introspective thought experiments in the way Nozick and Quine do, who do not think of views that posit a private inner world as in need of elaborate refutation: this *enlarged edition* of Nozick’s parable of the two brands of English shows that no determinacy lurks in psychological considerations and neurological facts. Unlike Nozick’s tale, the way this enlarged edition is presented is not behavioristic. It is presented from the “inside”. So if Nozick is right in thinking that no amount of access to my neurological states can reveal whether I speak English or stage-English, then the same will hold for this enlarged edition.

Let us now consider Searle’s criticism of Quine’s indeterminacy thesis.

II. Must We Know What We Mean?

Searle’s criticism of Quine’s indeterminacy thesis mentioned above can be divided into two parts. First, Searle believes that if Quine’s thesis were tenable, then it would entail that it is impossible for speakers to discriminate between the meanings of different words. But Searle argues that we, as speakers, actually know what we mean. This implies that the meanings of different words are in fact distinguishable for speakers. Searle therefore concludes that Quine’s indeterminacy thesis must be false. Second, Searle argues that Quine’s argument could serve as a *reductio ad absurdum* of extreme linguistic behaviorism. Searle believes that it is just these behaviorist assumptions that must be responsible for the absurdity of the indeterminacy thesis.

Let’s now consider the first part of Searle’s criticism. Searle believes that if Quine’s indeterminacy thesis were true, then

“It must have the result that there isn’t any difference for me between meaning rabbit or rabbit stage, and that has the further result that there isn’t any difference for me between referring to a rabbit and referring to a rabbit stage, and there isn’t any difference for me between something’s being a rabbit and its being a rabbit stage.” [11, p. 130]

Searle argues that this is absurd, for

“We know from our own case that we do mean by “rabbit” something different from “rabbit stage” or “undetached rabbit part”. When I saw a rabbit recently, as I did in fact, and I call it a rabbit, I mean rabbit. If somebody has a theory according to which there isn’t any difference between my meaning rabbit and my meaning rabbit part, then I know that his theory is simply mistaken.” [11, p. 126-127]

According to Searle’s argument, speakers do have the ability to discern the differences between “rabbit”, “rabbit stage” and “undetached rabbit part”; therefore, on Searle’s view, Quine’s indeterminacy thesis must be false. Indeed, many who object to Quine’s indeterminacy thesis in this way think that it’s perfectly certain what we mean, treating this as an incorrigible psychological fact about ourselves. As Searle puts it, we all know that, when a speaker utters an expression, there is a distinction between his meaning rabbit and his meaning rabbit stage; but, if Quine’s indeterminacy thesis were true, we would find there was no way of making these distinctions as plain facts of the matter about the language used by us. To put it crudely: if Quine’s indeterminacy thesis were true, then “there’s a rabbit” and “there’s a rabbit stage” would just mean the same thing. Surely this is an intolerable consequence.2 Here it seems

2The thesis of the inscrutability of reference can be regarded as a special case of Quine’s indeterminacy thesis, so in the following I will focus mostly on the topic of the thesis of the inscrutability of reference, without worrying very much about the indeterminacy thesis.
that Quine has a theory according to which there isn’t any difference between our meaning rabbit and our meaning rabbit stage. But we do know from our own case that we do mean by “rabbit” something different from “rabbit stage”. Here it is crucial to this argument to see that, even if it is often regarded as somehow against the rules in these discussions to raise the first-person case, so far Quine’s theory still would not enable us to make the discriminations between our meaning rabbit and our meaning rabbit stage we need to make.

With this preliminary conclusion in mind, Searle argues further that the indeterminacy arises when we accept the behaviorist assumptions Quine adopts, which, on Searle’s view, are false. Searle says:

“We know that our own mental phenomena are not equivalent to dispositions to behavior. Having the pain is one thing, being disposed to exhibit pain behavior is another. Pain behavior is insufficient to account for pain, because one might exhibit the behavior and not have the pain, and one might have the pain and not exhibit it. Analogously, on Quine’s argument, dispositions to verbal behavior are not sufficient to account for meanings, because one might exhibit behavior as if one understood a language and still not understand a word of that language. Therefore, Searle argues, the extreme linguistic behaviorism Quine assumes must be false, and hence Quine’s indeterminacy thesis is refuted.

Let us now evaluate Searle’s criticism of Quine’s indeterminacy thesis and see why it breaks down.

III. No Fact of the Matter?

We need to consider three theses:

(A) From the point of view of an outside observer, there is no “semantic fact” in a speaker’s external behavior that determines the “correct” translation of a speaker’s expressions, say, “rabbit”. Therefore, if each way of translating a speaker’s expressions, say, “rabbit” is equally consistent with his or her behavioral speech dispositions, then each is equally appropriate.

(B) From the point of view of a speaker, there is no empirical difference between meaning something by an expression, say, “rabbit”, and meaning something by another expression, say, “rabbit stage”.

See [10, p. 31-34] and [11, p. 124]. Here one might argue that the aim of Searle’s Chinese room argument is to refute strong AI rather than behaviorism. But, as Searle puts it, on one construal, his Chinese room argument can also be interpreted as a refutation of behaviorism [11, p. 124].

In the following, I will use the expression “mean by a word” to indicate that a speaker is using a word to convey a distinct meaning, as opposed to just making a noise.
According to our interpretation, thesis (A) is Quine’s indeterminacy thesis and thesis (C) is Searle’s argument. On Searle’s view, thesis (B) is the absurd consequence of thesis (A). So far, however, it is unclear why (B) should follow from (A). Moreover, the real crux of the issue, as we will see in this section, is the relation between (B) and (C). In this section, let’s first investigate the relations between (B) and (C), and then try to say more about what is really going on here. In the next section, we will concentrate on the relations between (A) and (B), and then proceed to see if Searle’s criticism of Quine’s indeterminacy thesis is sound.

At first sight, if thesis (C) were true, then thesis (B) would seem to be false. For if there were a plain fact of the matter about what a speaker really means, then there would seem to be some empirical difference for a speaker between meaning something by “rabbit” and “rabbit stage”. But is there really an empirical difference? What is the “plain fact”, in Searle’s terminology, about what a speaker really means by “rabbit” and “rabbit stage”? What are the “empirical differences”, again in Searle’s terminology, between a speaker’s meaning something by “rabbit” and “rabbit stage”? 

In order to investigate these points further, let us consider again Searle’s argument we summarized earlier. Searle argues that if Quine’s indeterminacy thesis is true, then it must have the following result:

1. There is no difference for a speaker between meaning “rabbit” and “rabbit stage”.

Searle proceeds to argue that Quine’s thesis entails the following further result:

2. There is no difference for a speaker between something’s being a rabbit and its being a rabbit stage.

Searle believes that (2) must be absurd, for we, as speakers, actually know that there is a difference between something’s being a rabbit and something’s being a rabbit stage. But Searle doesn’t tell us how (1) entails (2). This seems to be the crux of the whole story. Moreover, Searle doesn’t tell us why (2) is more absurd than (1). However, let’s put this question aside and go on to ask the following question: What are the assumptions Searle must make if he views (2) as being a consequence of (1)?

It is crucial to understanding Searle’s argument to note his use of the word “something.” this word is the key to Searle’s picture of the whole story: Since we, as speakers, know that there is indeed a difference between something’s being a rabbit and something’s being a rabbit stage, therefore we know that there is a difference between meaning “rabbit” and meaning “rabbit stage”. If this is really Searle’s picture, then the premise needed in Searle’s argument is this:

(C1) There must be something that a speaker is actually referring to when he or she utters an expression such as “rabbit” or “rabbit stage”, and a speaker must actually know what he or she is referring to.

Let’s call this something that a speaker is actually referring to the unique reference of the expression “rabbit” or “rabbit stage”. Then we can restate (C1) as follows:

(C1’) There must be a corresponding unique reference when a speaker means something by an expression such as “rabbit” or “rabbit stage”, and a speaker must actually know what this corresponding unique reference is.

So on Searle’s view, if a speaker uses “rabbit” or “rabbit stage” to convey meaning, then he or she certainly knows that what he or she is referring to is just something’s being a rabbit or something’s being a rabbit stage, respectively. According to Searle’s story, expressions such as “rabbit” and “rabbit stage” have their own corresponding unique references, and therefore, as Searle argues, a competent speaker must know independently that there are differences between
the meaning of “rabbit” and “rabbit stage”. If this is Searle’s story, then we can construe what Searle means by “empirical differences” as follows: There are differences between the corresponding unique references of expressions such as “rabbit” and “rabbit stage”, and hence there are empirical differences between the meaning of “rabbit” and “rabbit stage”. The empirical differences between the meaning of “rabbit” and “rabbit stage” are just the differences between the respective corresponding unique references of “rabbit” and “rabbit stage”.

If this is an accurate gloss of what Searle means by “empirical difference”, then we can restate thesis (A), (B), and (C) as follows:

\( (A') \) From the point of view of an outside observer, there is no corresponding unique reference in a speaker’s external behavior that determines the “correct” translation of a speaker’s expression, say, “rabbit”. Therefore, if several ways of translating a speaker’s expression “rabbit” are equally consistent with his or her behavioral speech dispositions, then each is equally correct.

\( (B') \) From the point of view of a speaker, there is no corresponding unique reference when he or she means something by an expression, say, “rabbit” or “rabbit stage”. Therefore, there is no empirical difference for a speaker between the meaning of “rabbit” and “rabbit stage”.

\( (C') \) Expressions such as “rabbit” and “rabbit stage” have their own corresponding unique references. Therefore, there are in fact empirical differences for a speaker between the meaning of “rabbit” and “rabbit stage”.

Thesis \( (B') \) is stronger than thesis \( (A') \), for it is the claim that there is no corresponding unique reference for a speaker when he or she means by expressions such as “rabbit” and “rabbit stage”, whereas thesis \( (A') \) is the claim that there is no corresponding unique reference by which an observer can determine the “correct” translation of a speaker’s expression “rabbit” or “rabbit stage”. Thesis \( (B') \) is also at odds with thesis \( (C') \). Now the issue is whether there is really a corresponding unique reference for a speaker when he or she means something by expression “rabbit” or “rabbit stage”. Which of \( (B') \) or \( (C') \) must we give up? Let us now turn to these questions.

IV. Transcendent vs. Immanent

We need to account for the common-sense intuition that, for example, when we use the word “rabbit”, we refer to a rabbit, and there is indeed a difference for us between meaning “rabbit” and meaning “rabbit stage”. This is just a plain fact about ourselves. If there is no corresponding unique reference when we mean “rabbit”, how can we account for this common-sense intuition? Quine has an argument to answer this question. Quine says:

“I have urged in defense of the behavioral philosophy of language, Dewey’s, that the inscrutability of reference is not the inscrutability of a fact; there is no fact of the matter. But if there is really no fact of the matter, then the inscrutability of reference can be brought even closer to home than the neighbor’s case; we can apply it to ourselves. If it is to make sense to say even of oneself that one is referring to rabbits and formulas and not to rabbit stages and Gödel numbers, then it should make sense equally to say it of someone else. After all, as Dewey stressed, there is no private language.” [8, p. 47]
Quine thinks that the inscrutability of reference is not the inscrutability of a fact, for “there is no fact of the matter”. Now the question is whether Quine denies that there is any “fact” of the matter at all. To this question, we may offer at least two different answers: (a) Quine admits that there are “facts”, but denies that there is such a “fact” by which we can determine the “correct” translation of a given expression. (b) Quine denies that there is any “fact” at all. Following (a), we may still offer at least two different answers: (a.1) we may admit that there are empirical differences between the meaning of different expressions. (a.2) we may still deny that there are empirical differences between the meaning of different expressions. Following (b), we must refuse to admit that there is any empirical difference between the meaning of different expressions. Which of (a), (a.1), (a.2) or (b) would Quine choose?

I think Quine would choose (a) and (a.1) rather than (a.2) or (b). Quine thinks that if we accept his indeterminacy thesis, then

“We seem to be maneuvering ourselves into the absurd position that there is no difference on any terms between referring to rabbits and referring to rabbit parts or stages; or between referring to formulas and referring to their Gödel numbers. Surely this is absurd, for it would imply that there is no difference between the rabbit and each of its parts or stages, and no difference between a formula and its Gödel number.” [8, p. 47-48, my italics]

Clearly, Quine admits in this passage that there is indeed a difference between the meaning of different expressions such as “rabbit” and “rabbit stage”. Were this not the case, then, as Quine points out, it would be absurd. This seems at first sight puzzling. For according to Quine’s indeterminacy thesis, there is no corresponding unique reference that determines the “correct” translation of speakers’ expressions such as “rabbit” and “rabbit stage”. If this is really Quine’s view, then how can he account for the differences between the meaning of “rabbit” and “rabbit stage”? I think it is crucial to this question to see what it is Quine really admits to be absurd and what he does not admit to be absurd. What Quine really admits to be absurd, as we see in this passage, is the claim that there is no difference between referring to rabbits and referring to rabbit parts, together with the claim that there is no difference between something’s being a rabbit and something’s being a rabbit part. What he does not admit to be absurd is the claim that there are no empirical differences between the meaning of “rabbit” and “rabbit part”. But problems still remain. The questions we need to answer are these: How can Quine account for the differences between the meaning of “rabbit” and “rabbit part”? What are the differences, on Quine’s view, for a speaker between the meaning of “rabbit” and “rabbit stage”?

Quine points out that

“Toward resolving this quandary, begin by picturing us at home in our language, with all its predicates and auxiliary devices. This vocabulary includes “rabbit”, “rabbit part”, “rabbit stage”, “formula”, “number”, “ox”, “cattle”; also the two-place predicates of identity and difference, and other logical particles. In these terms we can say in so many words that this is a formula and that a number, this a rabbit and that a rabbit part, this and that the same rabbit, and this and that different part. In just those words. This network of terms and predicates and auxiliary devices is, in relativity jargon, our frame of reference, or coordinate system. Relative to it we can and do talk meaningfully and distinctively of rabbits and parts, numbers and formulas. Fair enough; reference is nonsense except relative to a coordinate system.” [8, p. 48]

Quine argues further that

“It is meaningless to ask whether, in general, our terms “rabbit”, “rabbit part”, “number”, etc., really refer respectively to rabbits, rabbit parts, numbers, etc., rather than to some ingeniously permuted denotations. It is meaningless to ask this absolutely; we can meaningfully ask it only relative to some background
language. When we ask, “Does ‘rabbit’ really refer to rabbits?” someone can counter with the question: “Refer to rabbits in what sense of ‘rabbits’?” thus launching a regress; and we need the background language to regress into.” [8, p. 48-49]

Quine argues that we can and do talk meaningfully of the reference of a given expression only relative to a coordinate system which is provided by a background language. We can and do talk of it only in words. That is, we can talk meaningfully of the reference of “rabbit” only in a background language. It is meaningless to ask this free from any background language. This is Quine’s thesis of the relativity of reference. I believe that with the thesis of relativity we can account for the differences between the meaning of different expressions such as “rabbit” and “rabbit stage”. According to the thesis of relativity, we can and do say meaningfully that, for example, “rabbit” and “rabbit part” refer, respectively, to rabbits and rabbit parts, relative to some background language. This implies that only relative to some background language can we talk meaningfully of the differences between the meaning of different expressions. It also implies that it is meaningless to talk of the unique reference a given expression, say, “rabbit”, “really” has.

But what of reference in the background language itself? If it is meaningful to question the reference of “rabbit” only relative to some background language, then to question meaningfully the reference of an expression of the background language itself would seem to require some further background language. So we seem to be involved in an infinite regress. In order to end the regress, Quine advises us to acquiesce in our mother tongue and take its words at face value [8, p. 49]. Taking the words of our mother tongue at face value, on Quine’s view, is to revert to homophonic translation [8, p. 55]. I think we have reached the crux of the issue. In order to elucidate what Quine means by “taking its words at face value” and “homophonic translation”, consider the following example:

“Rabbit” refers to rabbits.

The word “rabbit” appears twice in this sentence. Let’s call the first instance the target word and the second the background word and call the relation between these two words their matching. When Quine advises us to take the words of our mother tongue at their face value, he is urging us to matching up target words with their respective homophones as background words so that “no question of a manual of translation arises”. [8, p. 55]. Now the points we are making are these:

(1) Relative to a background language, we can talk meaningfully of matching up target words with background words.

(2) It is meaningless to talk of the unique reference a given expression, say, “rabbit”, “really” has, independent of a background language.

Let’s call (1) the immanent level, and call (2) the transcendent level. On Quine’s view, except when communication demands an occasional departure, the rule of translation on the immanent level is often the homophonic one, which is a “degenerate case of translation” [8, p. 55]. With these two different levels in mind, I believe that we have reached the crucial thesis Quine is advancing:

On the immanent level, we can and do talk meaningfully of the reference of a given expression, such as “rabbit” or “rabbit stage”, by talking about its homophone. Therefore, there are indeed differences between the meaning of “rabbit” and “rabbit stage”. On the other hand, it is meaningless to talk of the unique reference of “rabbit” and “rabbit stage” on the transcendent level. Therefore, there is no difference between the meaning of these different expressions.

What are the differences, then, for a speaker between the meaning of “rabbit” and “rabbit stage”? I think that the resolution of this question lies in perceiving the different ways of matching up target words with background words. As target words, different expressions such as “rabbit” and “rabbit stage” are matched up with different background words on the immanent level. The

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6This distinction is similar to Harman’s distinction of “immanent approach” and “transcendent approach” [5].
differences between the meaning of “rabbit” and “rabbit stage” emerge sharply when they, as target words, are matched up with different respective homophones as background words. There might be corresponding psychological or physiological states when we match up target words with background words, and hence there might be “psychological” or “physiological” differences when we match up different target words with different background words. But that, on Quine’s view, is not the point at issue here. What is at issue is whether it is necessary to assume the existence of a corresponding unique reference “rabbit” or “rabbit stage” “really” has. Without assuming the existence of the respective unique reference of “rabbit” and “rabbit stage”, as we have pointed out, we can still account for the differences between the meaning of “rabbit” and “rabbit stage”.

V. Targets Missed

So far we have reached the following conclusions:

First, there can indeed be differences between the meaning of different expressions such as “rabbit” and “rabbit stage” on the immanent level. On the other hand, there is no difference between the meaning of “rabbit” and “rabbit stage” on the transcendent level.

Second, we can account for the differences between the meaning of “rabbit” and “rabbit stage” without assuming that each expression has a unique reference.

Now let us see what’s wrong with Searle’s criticism of Quine’s indeterminacy thesis. First, Searle argues that

(a) As speakers, we actually know what we mean.

If our interpretation in the third section was fair to Searle, then we might interpret (a) by way of (C1'):

(C1') There must be a corresponding unique reference when a speaker means something by an expression such as “rabbit” or “rabbit stage”, and a speaker must actually know what this corresponding unique reference is.

Hence we can construe (a) as follows:

(a') As speakers, we actually know what the corresponding unique reference of an expression such as “rabbit” or “rabbit stage” is.

Therefore, Searle concludes that Quine’s indeterminacy thesis must be false. Second, Searle argues that if Quine’s indeterminacy thesis were true, then it must have the following result:

(b) There is no difference for me between meaning rabbit or rabbit stage.

Searle argues that it also must have the further result that

(c) There is no difference for me between something’s being a rabbit and its being a rabbit stage.

Searle argues that (c) must be absurd. Therefore Searle believes that Quine’s indeterminacy thesis must be false.

We can now see the mistakes Searle has made in his argument. According to our interpretation of Searle’s argument, (a') follows immediately from (a). But this need not be the case. As we mentioned in the last section, we can and do talk meaningfully of the reference of an expression such as “rabbit” or “rabbit stage” on the immanent level by talking about its homophones. This implies that we may actually know what we mean on the immanent level. But it doesn’t imply that “rabbit” and “rabbit stage” have their respective unique references. The crucial point here is that we can admit on the one hand that we actually know what we mean on the immanent level, but on the other hand deny that there is any unique reference “rabbit” or “rabbit stage” “really” has. To put it crudely: we can accept (a) and deny (a’). Therefore, it is a mistake to suppose that (a) entails (a’), and it is also a mistake to suppose that Quine’s indeterminacy thesis must be false if (a) is true.

The second mistake Searle has made is to suppose that (b) must follow immediately if Quine’s indeterminacy thesis is true. As we pointed out in the last section, there can indeed be differences between the meaning of “rabbit” and “rabbit stage” on the immanent level. The differences between
the meaning of these expressions can be explained perfectly well in terms of different ways of matching up target words with background words. This suggests that we may accept Quine’s indeterminacy thesis but refuse to accept (b). Therefore, it is a mistake to suppose that (b) is an absurd consequence of Quine’s indeterminacy thesis.

The third mistake in Searle’s argument is to suppose that Quine’s indeterminacy thesis must be false if (c) is absurd. However, this is not the case. As we mentioned in the last section, Quine also recognizes that (c) is absurd, together with the claim that there is no difference between referring to rabbits and referring to rabbit parts. I think that the origin of Searle’s misunderstanding of Quine’s thesis lies in his confusing the immanent level with the transcendent level. It is indeed absurd to suppose that there is no difference between the meaning of “rabbit” and “rabbit stage” on the immanent level. But it is not absurd at all to suppose that there is no difference between the meaning of “rabbit” and “rabbit stage” on the transcendent level. Therefore, Searle’s argument is not a reductio ad absurdum. We may accept Quine’s indeterminacy thesis and reject (c).

VI. Is the Indeterminacy Thesis a Reductio Ad Absurdum of Behaviorism?

So far we have argued that Quine’s indeterminacy thesis will still remain tenable even if we actually know what we mean. In this section, I will explain why the refutation of behaviorism is insufficient to refute Quine’s indeterminacy thesis.

According to Searle’s “Chinese room argument”, summarized in the second section, speakers’ behavior is insufficient to account for meaning. For we might exhibit behavior appropriate for a certain meaning, but that still might not show that we really mean something by this behavior or that we know what meaning this behavior represents. Therefore, as Searle argues, the extreme linguistic behaviorism Quine assumes must be false, and hence Quine’s indeterminacy thesis is untenable.

But can Searle refute Quine’s indeterminacy thesis by means of this argument alone? There seems to be an extra premise Searle must add if he wants to refute Quine’s indeterminacy thesis. Here is Searle’s argument against behaviorism:

(a) Observing a speaker’s external behavior is insufficient to determine what, if anything, the speaker means by an expression, say, “rabbit”.

If (a) were true, then behaviorism would be false. But so far it is unclear why Quine’s indeterminacy thesis would be false if (a) were true. What is the further premise needed in this argument if Searle wants to refute Quine’s indeterminacy thesis? I believe that it is the following:

(b) When a speaker means something by an expression, say, “rabbit”, he or she is referring to the corresponding unique reference of “rabbit”.

From (a) and (b), I believe that (c) follows immediately:

(c) Observing a speaker’s external behavior is insufficient to determine what the unique reference of “rabbit” is.
Under the assumption that the unique reference of “rabbit” determines its meaning, (c) would refute Quine’s indeterminacy thesis.

Let us now identify the mistake in this argument. As we pointed out in the fourth section, Quine would simply point out that (b) is false. Therefore, Quine would say that it is a mistake to suppose that we can derive (c) from (a). That is, it is a mistake to suppose that Quine’s indeterminacy thesis would be false if behaviorism were false. Why, on Quine’s view, is (b) false? It is crucial to this point to distinguish the true thesis that a speaker actually knows what he means by “rabbit” from the false thesis that there must be a corresponding unique reference “rabbit” “really” has. As we argued in the fourth section, a speaker may actually know what he means on the immanent level. But this doesn’t imply that there must be a unique referent he is referring to. What is involved in a speaker’s meaning something by expressions such as “rabbit” or “rabbit stage” can be explained in terms of matching up target words with background words. It is unnecessary to assume the existence of a unique reference of “rabbit” or “rabbit stage”. Therefore, it is a mistake to suppose that Quine’s indeterminacy thesis would be false if (a) were true. We could on the one hand accept Quine’s indeterminacy thesis, while on the other hand reject behaviorism.7

I conclude that our reaction to Searle’s “Chinese room argument” should be the same as our reaction to Searle’s criticism mentioned before. In each case Searle’s argument can be construed as resting on the assumption that there is a corresponding unique reference an expression such as “rabbit” or “rabbit stage” “really” has. And I believe that the origin of this assumption lies in Searle’s confusing the transcendent level with the immanent level. Certainly there is no way to tell what a speaker means merely by observing his or her external behavior. But this is insufficient to show that Quine’s indeterminacy thesis must be false.8

VII. Concluding Remarks

Many philosophers who reject behaviorism believe that Quine’s indeterminacy thesis must depend on the special assumptions of behaviorism, and hence Quine’s indeterminacy thesis can be taken as a reductio ad absurdum of behaviorism. But our discussion suggests that this view seems to miss the mark. This should not surprise us, because Quine’s indeterminacy thesis can be construed as the claim that there is no “semantic fact” on the transcendent level. That is, Quine might argue that the indeterminacy arises on the transcendent level rather than on the immanent level. If so, then we seem to be able to say that Quine’s indeterminacy thesis will break down on the immanent level. Also, a further problem that needs to be resolved is the status of the psycho-physiological states that obtain when we match up target words with background words. We might be tempted to suppose that these psycho-physiological states that arise on the immanent level can eliminate the indeterminacy that arises on the transcendent level. But these recommendations Quine also wants to resist. It’s interesting to ask why he can do this. Here it seems that there is a difficulty for the indeterminacy thesis from another direction. The trouble is that Quine says that indeterminacy begins at home. That is, behind the appeal to the indeterminacy on the transcendent level is another project which Quine saw through from the beginning. That is the indeterminacy on the immanent level. It would seem then that the differences be-

7So, as we have shown at the end of the fifth section, Searle’s argument will be question-begging if the further premise (b) is added, for (b) can be construed as resting on the assumption that Quine’s indeterminacy thesis is false, which is just the desired conclusion in Searle’s argument of the reductio ad absurdum of behaviorism. But to show that Searle’s argument fails is one thing, whereas to show that Quine’s thesis is not a reductio ad absurdum of behaviorism is another. It remains to be shown why behaviorism should not be responsible for the absurdity of the indeterminacy thesis.

8I said at the end of the fourth section that there might be some corresponding psycho-physiological states when we match up target words with background words, hence there might be some “psychological differences” or “physiological differences” when we match up different target words with different background words. This implies that one may on the one hand admit the existence of inner mental states, while on the other hand contend that Quine’s indeterminacy thesis is true. This view is also held by Dagfinn Føllesdal [3].
tween the meaning of different expressions such as “rabbit” and “rabbit stage” on the immanent level, which can be explained perfectly in terms of the differences between their respective homophones, are merely ones that emerge from different ways of speaking. But appealing only to different ways of speaking is not enough to explain the differences between the meanings of different expressions on the immanent level in an acceptable way. Also, knowing what an expression means cannot simply be knowledge of the relation between certain mentioned expressions. How then is the indeterminacy on the immanent level to be stated, and what exactly is it meant to imply about the differences between the meaning of different expressions on the immanent level? These deserve to be the appropriate subjects for future study.

References


