

PHIL 4233: Philosophy of Language
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Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”

- The 2 dogmas:
 1. The analytic/synthetic distinction
 2. Reductionism: every meaningful statement can be reduced to a construct of immediate experience.
- Quine thinks that each dogma is false. When we come to recognize that they are false, Quine thinks that we should then see metaphysics as continuous with science and should also be inclined toward pragmatism.

The First Dogma

- Hume, Kant, the Logical Positivists, and most of those we have read this semester accepted something like the analytic/synthetic distinction. The distinction is supposed to be captured by saying that analytic statements are true in virtue of the *meanings* of their constituent words alone, while synthetic statements are not — they require a contribution from “the world.”

- Here’s a picture:

True statements have two components: a purely conventional meaning and a corresponding fact in the world. “The statement ‘Brutus killed Caesar’ would be false if the world had been different in certain ways, but it would also be false if the word ‘killed’ happened rather to have the sense of ‘be-gat’.” (55) Those who uphold the analytic/synthetic distinction take the analytic truths to be the special cases in which the world’s contribution is null. This seems like a possibility.

- Aside: Check out what Quine says on p. 48 about the essence/meaning parallel. The paragraph beginning with “The Aristotelian notion of essence . . .” is a statement of Quine’s attack on *de re* modality.

- There are two alleged classes of analytic truths:

1. The logical truths
E.g. ‘No unmarried man is married.’
 2. The synonym truths (my label)
E.g. ‘No bachelor is married.’
- Carnap’s apparatus of state-descriptions (48–49) cannot account for analyticity.
 - Quine attacks the second class. Synonymy needs to be accounted for just as much as does analyticity. What accounts of synonymy can be offered?
 - Candidate 1: Definition
‘Bachelor’, for example, is defined as ‘unmarried man.’ (49) That is why they are synonymous.
 - But dictionaries do not *make* words synonyms, they *report* synonymy. We can distinguish three sorts of definition:
 - a) definition proper: a direct reporting of prior usage
 - b) explication: definition which respects, but improves on (by clarification) prior usage, and
 - c) stipulation: novel definition (i.e., definition that does not correspond to any prior usage).
 - Quine notes that only definitions of sort c) do not already assume “prior relations of synonymy.” (50) So, we have to find a different account of synonymy.
 - Candidate 2: Interchangeability *salva veritate*
Words are synonymous if we can substitute between them in all contexts without ever changing the truth of the statements in which they appear.
 - Complication over “wordhood” and use/mention distinction. (51)
 - Is such interchangeability sufficient for synonymy, though? Let’s be clear that we are talking about *cognitive synonymy* (as opposed to, say, sameness of poetic connotations). Whether such interchangeability is sufficient for synonymy depends on the richness of the language. Quine considers two types of languages: extensional and intensional languages. What is an extensional language?

“Now a language of this type is extensional, in this sense: any two predicates which agree extensionally (that is, are true of the same objects) are interchangeable *salva veritate*.” (52)

○ But, in extensional languages, predicates can be *accidentally* interchangeable — e.g., ‘creature with heart’ and ‘creature with kidney.’ (52) Surely these predicates are not cognitively synonymous!

○ Interchangeability *salva veritate* is sufficient for synonymy, however, in languages with intensional adverbs like ‘necessarily.’ But: “such a language is intelligible only in so far as the notion of analyticity is already understood in advance.” (52)

● Lesson: Quine concludes that we cannot explain analyticity in terms of synonymy.

● The final proposal: semantical rules.

“It is often hinted that the difficulty in separating analytic statements from synthetic ones in ordinary language is due to the vagueness of ordinary language and that the distinction is clear when we have a precise artificial language with explicit “semantical rules.” This, however, as I shall now attempt to show, is a confusion.” (53)

○ Quine: The move to artificial languages does not help matters.

○ There could be rules for artificial languages that say “Such-and-such statements are analytic.” Then we would know the analytic statements, but this does not help us understand what analyticity is. (53)

“Semantical rules determining the analytic statements of an artificial language are of interest only in so far as we already understand the notion of analyticity; they are of no help in gaining this understanding.” (54)

The Second Dogma

● Recall the verificationist’s theory of meaning. Maybe synonymous statements are statements that have the same verification conditions. Maybe the analytic truths are confirmed by any observation (or none?). But:

“Just what are these methods which are to be compared for likeness? What, in other words, is the nature of the relation between a statement and the experiences which contribute to or detract from its confirmation?” (55)

Radical reductionism: Every meaningful statement is translatable into a statement about immediate experience.

○ Quine cites Locke and Hume as old advocates of radical reductionism. Locke and Hume talked about the meaningfulness of individual ideas (or terms), but it is better to think of the meaningfulness of entire statements as requiring such a reduction. So interpreted (as in our definition), radical reductionism requires the translatability of each meaningful statement (one at a time) into talk of immediate sensory states.

○ There are problems with radical reductionism (e.g., the *immediacy* of the sensory states), and it has been abandoned (Quine notes, at the time of writing) in favor of more conservative reductions. Still:

“The notion lingers that to each statement, or each synthetic statement, there is associated a unique range of possible sensory events such that the occurrence of any of them would add to the likelihood of truth of the statement, and there is associated also another unique range of possible sensory events whose occurrence would detract from that likelihood.” (56–57)

○ Quine’s big objection: statements are not confirmed in such a one-by-one, isolated manner.

“... our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body.”
(57)

Not individual terms, not even individual statements are confirmed by our experiences. Instead, whole networks of beliefs are confirmed.

● Obviously, many of our beliefs have logical connections such that a change in one belief rationally requires modifications in others. Belief change often leads to this ripple effect. Most dramatically, think of a detective who finds one clue from which she deduces a series of beliefs about a person she previously did not think of as a suspect.

Let's say we make a new observation. We can alter our previous beliefs to accord with this new evidence in a variety of ways. You used to think that Nancy prefers Pepsi to Coke. You observe her reaching for the Coke bottle instead of the Pepsi bottle, though. What to do? Maybe you should change your original belief: Nancy really prefers Coke to Pepsi. Or maybe you keep our original belief. But how? Oh, Nancy must be mistaken — she *accidentally* reached for the Coke. New observations always allow us various ways of modifying our beliefs, Quine holds.

Further, any statement can be preserved regardless of what observations are made, so long as we are willing to make drastic revisions in our other beliefs. (Conspiracy theorists are keen on doing this.) Conversely, any statement can be thrown out. No statement, not even the alleged analytic truths, is immune from revision. Even the law of the excluded middle might have to go, given enough tension with one's other beliefs. We see that there is a *holism* to confirmation. (Re-read the first paragraph on p. 58 where Quine makes these points.) Obviously, some statements are closer to the "periphery" than others. These can be tossed out more readily because they are not as intimately connected to a large body of other beliefs.

These observations hold for all alleged analytic and logical truths, the statements of ontology, and scientific statements. These are all hypotheses that are confirmed in the same holistic manner. In deciding which beliefs to keep given a certain observation, we should be guided by the traditional norms of conservatism and simplicity. In all these areas we should take a pragmatic approach. (59)