

Quine, Willard van Orman 1951 Two Dogmas of Empiricism. Revised version reprinted in his 1961 *From a Logical Point of View*, second edition, Harvard University Press: 20-46.

Structure of the Paper

- Quine will argue against the analytic–synthetic distinction, and against the reductionist view that ‘each meaningful statement is equivalent to some logical construct upon terms which refer to immediate experience’. As a result the distinction between metaphysics and science shall be blurred, and there will be ‘a shift towards pragmatism’.
- 1. *Background for Analyticity*. Rejection of definitions of analytic statements as statements whose negation is self-contradictory, or as true by virtue of meaning. Logical truth is acceptable, but not analyticity by virtue of synonymy.
- 2. *Definition*. Rejection of definitions of analyticity (or synonymy) by reference to definition, or by reference to Carnap’s explication. By contrast, synonymy that relies on stipulation is acceptable.
- 3. *Interchangeability*. Rejection of a definition of analyticity by reference to substitutivity *salva veritate*, for the latter relies on the problematic notion of necessity.
- 4. *Semantical Rules*. An example meant to show that the concept of analyticity is problematic: ‘everything green is extended’. Rejection of a definition of analyticity by reference to semantic rules.
- 5. *The Verification Theory and Reductionism*. Rejection of the verification theory of meaning, according to which ‘the meaning of a statement is the method of empirically confirming or infirming it.’ Confirmation holism: ‘our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body.’
- 6. *Empiricism without the Dogmas*. The continuity between logic and mathematics to science. Pragmatism.

Some Important Ideas

- Confirmation holism.

Comments

Grice and Strawson have argued very powerfully – conclusively, I think – against Quine’s criticism of the analytic–synthetic distinction, so I shall leave that work to their paper and add here only one point before moving on to discuss Quine’s confirmation holism. The comment is an *ad hominem*: Quine cannot maintain logical truth while rejecting synonymy. If we look at his example of a logical truth, ‘No unmarried man is married’, then this does not remain ‘true under all reinterpretations of “man” and “married”’. If we substitute ‘book’ and ‘illuminated’ for the former, we get the sentence, ‘No unilluminated book is illuminated’, which is clearly *false* under some readings. Quine should add to his definition of logical truth, that we substitute (or reinterpret) *synonyms* by synonyms. But having rejected synonymy with analyticity, he cannot do that. (These criticism and example are taken from Strawson’s ‘Propositions, Concepts, and Logical Truth’, reprinted in his 1971, *Logico-Linguistic Papers*, Methuen: London: 116-129.)

Turning to Quine’s confirmation holism, he is in fact by-and-large attacking a straw man. Even Carnap, his primary target, has held some kind of confirmation holism at least as early as 1934:

It is, in general, impossible to test even a single hypothetical sentence. In the case of a single sentence of this kind, there are in general no L-consequences of the form of protocol sentences; hence for the deduction of sentences having the form of protocol-sentences the remaining hypotheses must also be used. Thus the test applies, at bottom, not to a single hypothesis but to the whole system of physics as a system of hypotheses (Duhem, Poincaré). (*The Logical Syntax of Language* § 82, p. 318)

In fact, it is extremely likely that Quine received the idea of confirmation holism from Carnap, with whose work—the 1934 book included—he was very well familiar. So although Quine contributed to the spread of the idea, primarily in the USA, he cannot be credited with its origin. The thesis is *Duhem's* thesis.

Moreover, unlike Duhem, Quine surely exaggerates. When we check a hypothesis in subatomic physics, surely we are not putting biology to the test as well (apart from very special cases). 'The unit of empirical significance' is *not* 'the whole of science.' Moreover, Quine having failed in his criticism of the analytic–synthetic distinction, we don't have good reasons for thinking that mathematics and logic are revisable on the basis of empirical observation. The mitigated confirmation-holism we are justified in holding is the claim that experiment and observation confirm and disconfirm not single theoretical statements but whole bodies of them.

Quine also brings confirmation holism in support of pragmatism about truth, but this additional step does not follow. We can still maintain that what we say is true just in case things are as we say they are—a non-pragmatic conception of truth—and in addition maintain that usually we check in experience bodies of theoretical claims and not single ones. The reasons that bring us, in face of a problematic experience, to first try and change propositions closer to the periphery and only later, if this does not work, those closer to the centre are practical, and do not reflect our notion of truth. Moreover, I am not acquainted with a case in the history of science in which principles of simplicity, parsimony etc. have been used to decide between competing theories: one of the theories could always explain better than its rivals more phenomena. So I think Quine's move to pragmatism is unjustified.

Grice, Paul and Strawson, P.F. 1956 In Defense of a Dogma. Reprinted in P. Grice 1989 *Studies in the Way of Words*, Harvard University Press: 196-212.

Some Important Ideas

- Where there is general application of a concept to an open list of cases, a distinction has been drawn.
- Explanation need not be by means of a general definition, supplying necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of a concept. Examples might also serve this purpose.
- Relating analyticity, and meaning more generally, to understanding.