

Defending A Dogma: Between Grice, Strawson and Quine

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Abstract

One of Quine's most important legacies is the theorization of two dogmas of empiricism and these dogmas have served as the most severe challenge to the empiricist/positivist tradition. In fact, if not replied to, the dogmas could threaten the very foundation of any meaningful discourse in the sciences. For this reason, Grice and Strawson in "In Defence of a Dogma" attempt a reply to the charge of dogmatism in the analytic-synthetic distinction, showing that the charge does not hold. This essay pays attention to the arguments raised by Grice and Strawson in justifying their stance showing that although it is not foolproof, it provides reasonable grounds for not entirely rejecting the analytic-synthetic distinction.

Keywords: Analytic-synthetic distinction, Quine, Grice, Strawson, empiricism

Introduction

The analytic/synthetic distinction brought to prominence by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, in his distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments, occupies an essential place in the empiricist view of knowledge as lucidly reflected in the views of the logical positivists. Before Kant, Leibniz and Hume had made similar distinction between "truth of reason/truth of fact" and "'relations of ideas/matters of fact" respectively¹ W. V. O. Quine in his paper; "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" has subjected this distinction to criticisms by identifying two dogmas in it which, he says, are not justifiable.

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The first of these dogmas insists on a “fundamental cleavage between truth which are *analytic* or grounded in meaning independently of matters of fact, and truth which are *synthetic*, or grounded in fact. The other dogma is *reductionism*; the belief that each meaningful statement is equivalent to some logical experience?² One major reason for supposing this distinction right is that: “A statement is analytic if it can be shown to be ultimately reducible to a form governed by the logical law of identity. ‘A is A’ (and) a statement is synthetic if it cannot be shown to be reducible to a statement that is basically of the form of an identity statement.”³ Quine, on examining this distinction, says it cannot be justified since it is not a clear one and therefore seems unwarranted and useless. He therefore outrightly rejects it.

In their paper “In Defence of a Dogma” H. P. Grice and P. F. Strawson attack Quine’s position by arguing that the criticisms raised by Quine do not, at all “justify the rejection, as illusory, of the analytic synthetic distinction and the notions which belong to the same family.”⁴ Put differently, Grice and Strawson opines that the criticisms given by Quine against the distinction, or simply because the distinction falls short of Quine’s expectations does not justify the rejection of the distinction neither does it imply that the distinction does not exist. They also contend that even the criticisms and points raised by Quine for the rejection of the distinction tend to allow for or accommodate the distinction itself.

It is important at this point that we examine more vividly the reason(s) for Quine’s rejection of the distinction, and also to see if Grice and Strawson are right to say that they are not enough for the rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction.

Quine’s Reasons for Rejection of the Analytic/Synthetic Distinction

The major reason why Quine rejects the distinction is due to the nature of analyticity. He distinguishes: between two types of analytic statements, that of logical truths and those believed to be convertible to logical truths.⁵ The former are statements that are true under all reinterpretation of their components with the exception of the logical particles, which should be left unuttered. e.g. “no married man is unmarried” or “A triangle has three angles.” The later are those that depend on synonymy; e.g., “no married man is a bachelor” which could be turned into a logically true statement by substituting “unmarried man” for its synonym “bachelor.”

Quine contends that the major difficulty with analyticity lies with this second clarification of analytic statements and not with the first because it depends on synonymy which itself cannot be clarified.

He says thus that, We still lack a proper characterization of the second class of analytic statements and therewith of analyticity generally inasmuch as we have ... to learn on a notion of "synonymy" which is no less in need of clarification than analyticity itself.⁶

In other words, it is not clear what is meant when two expressions are said to be synonymous. This is because whenever an attempt is made to explain synonymy, it is done with the concept of analyticity which is in turn in need of clarification, and whatever clarification that is sought for analyticity is again based on synonymy. This therefore tends to lead to a circular form of reasoning. Hence, there is no adequate clarification of synonymy and analyticity. The problem Quine is trying to bring out here, says Grice and Strawson, is this; "There is a certain circle or family of expressions of which "analyticity" is one of such that if any one member of the circle could be taken to be satisfactorily understood or explained, then other members of the circle could be verbally, and hence satisfactorily explain in terms of it.

Other members of the family include "self-contradictory," (in a broad sense), "necessary," "synonymous," "semantical rule" and perhaps definition (but again in a broad sense). Unfortunately, each member of the family is in as great need of explanation as any other... To make "satisfactory sense" of one of these expressions would seem to involve two things: (1) it would seem to involve providing an explanation which does not incorporate any expression belonging to the family circle (2) it would seem that the explanation provided must be of the same general character as those rejected explanations which do incorporate members of the family-circle (i.e., it must specify some features common and peculiar to all cases to which, for example, the word "analytic" is to be applied; it must have the same general form as an explanation beginning "a statement is analytic if and only if ..." ... if we take these two conditions together and generalize the results, it would seem that Quine requires of a satisfactory explanation of an expression that it should take the form of a pretty strict definition but should not make use of any member of a group of interdefinable terms to which the expression belongs."⁷ Since this seems impossible to come by in the case of the analytic/synthetic distinction, Quine feels justified to reject it.

Quine says, for instance, that though “definition” seems to solve the problem of synonymy faced by the second class of analytic statements, it, on a very careful examination, doesn’t but rather reaffirms it. He remarks that definition does not, as some have supposed, hold the key to synonymy and analyticity since definition—except in the extreme case of the explicitly conventional introduction of new notations—hinges on prior relations of synonymy.⁸ He also attempts to see how cognitive synonymy not presupposing analyticity can help reduce the problem.⁹ He however, sees this as difficult to achieve since there can be no adequate explanation of cognitive synonymy that would not incorporate directly or indirectly the notion of analyticity.¹⁰ This is because interchangeability without change in the truth value of the resultant statements is meaningless until it is relativised to a language whose extent is specified in relevant respects.¹¹

The reason being that it is easy to construct truths which become false under substitution, say of “unmarried ,man” for “bachelor” for example with the aid of phrases like “bachelor of arts” etc., and with the aid of single quotes to mention either of both of such pairs of words or expressions, e.g., “bachelor has four letters.”¹² By specifying an extensional language with one and many place predicates, truth functions, and quantifications as its primitives, we could, according to Quine, obtain such interchangeability. But then, the best that such interchangeability (*salva veritate*) in such an extensional language can guarantee for us is the truth of the resultant statements, not their analyticity. In other words it would not guarantee the necessity of their truth because all that such interchangeability entails in such a language is extensional isomorphism. And, as Quine is quick to point out, mere extensional agreement falls short of cognitive synonymy. On the other hand, language that contains intentional adverbs like “necessarily” guarantee cognitive synonymy. However, the interchangeability in such a language presupposes the understanding of the concept of analyticity. So we are back to where we started.¹³

Quine also makes an attempt to explain analyticity by drawing on the resources of the verification theory of meaning. On this theory, two statements would supposedly be held synonymous if they are susceptible to identical mode of empirical confirmation or disconfirmation. If that supposition is true, it seems that the notion of analyticity is saved after all. For then we could explain the notion of analyticity in terms of synonymy of statements together with logical truths.

But Quine holds that the verification principle is fundamentally wrong; its supposed validity rests on a defective conception of meaning which regards individual statements as independent or primary units of meaning. Quine maintains that it is this defective conception of meaning which in turn produces the two problematic results, the two dogmas of empiricism.¹⁴

For the above reasons, Quine insists that the distinction made between analyticity and synthetic statements and the reason given for such, are not clear and are totally misunderstood by those who use the expressions; that the stories they tell themselves about the distinction are full of illusions.¹⁵ Hence he says it is a distinction which he rejects as insensible, useless and illusory. But, how plausible are these criticisms against the distinction and, even if plausible, do they amount to such a rejection of it?

Replies from Grice and Strawson

The reason why Quine sees the analytic/synthetic distinction as inadequately clarified, hence useless and although illusory, the reason why he says the belief in the existence of such a distinction is a philosophical mistake, an unempirical dogma of empiricism, a metaphysical article of faith,¹⁶ as we have seen above, is the circular nature of explaining analyticity, synonymy and other members of the circle of interdefinable concepts. To make satisfactory sense of analyticity or any other member of the family, Quine has insisted above, involves two conditions which are: providing an explanation which does not incorporate any expression belonging to the family circle, and that the explanation provided must specify some features common and peculiar to all cases to which the expression is to be applied. According to Grice and Strawson, we may begin to feel that such a satisfactory explanation is hard to come by. But how does it follow that not having a satisfactory explanation of *X* is enough reason to say *X* doesn't make sense?¹⁷ It would seem fairly clearly unreasonable to insist in *general* that the availability of a satisfactory explanation in the sense sketched above is a necessary condition of an expression making sense. It is perhaps dubious whether any such explanation can *ever* be given (the hope that there can be is, or was, the hope of reductive analysis in general). Even if such explanation can be given in some cases, it would be pretty generally agreed that there are other cases in which they cannot.

One might think, for example, of the group of expressions which include "morally wrong," "blameworthy," "breach of moral rules," etc., or of a group which include the propositional connections and the words "true," and "false," "statement," "fact," "denial," "assertion." Few people would want to say that the expression belonging to either of these groups were senseless on the ground that they have not been formally defined (or even on the ground that it was impossible formally to define them) except in terms of members of the same group.¹⁸

Besides, according to Grice and Strawson, simply because the expression cannot be explained in Quine's terms does not mean that they cannot be explained at all. They can be, and are explained, though in other and less formal ways than that required by Quine, which implies that, though there is no one way of explaining them, there is a generally agreed philosophical (and ordinary usage for them).¹⁹ To illustrate this point, they (Grice and Strawson) use a member of the analyticity family namely *logical impossibility* which Quine regards as not clearer than the others, by bringing out the contrast between logical and natural impossibility. They use the instance of the logical impossibility of a child of three's being an adult, and the natural impossibility of a child of three's understanding Russell's theory of types.²⁰ Ultimately, the distinction between such statements, they claim, will amount to the distinction between not believing something and not understanding something.

In other words, the distinction is between lack of belief and lack of understanding,²¹ or between incredulity yielding to conviction and incomprehension yielding to comprehension. It would be rash to maintain that this distinction does not need clarification, but it would be absurd to maintain that it does not exist. In the face of the availability of this informal type of explanation for the notions of the analyticity group, the fact that they have not received another type of explanation seem a wholly inadequate grounds for conclusion that the notions are pseudo-notions, that the expressions which purport to express them have no sense. Hence, Quine's argument that the notions of the analyticity group have not been satisfactorily explained does not justify his extreme position for their rejection.²² This is because even though the distinction demands for better clarification, there is a strong presumption in favour of the existence of the distinction which he challenges, a presumption resting both on philosophical and ordinary usage.²³

Another point of criticism raised by Grice and Strawson against Quine is on his notion of definition and synonyms. As noted earlier, in criticizing definition as depending on synonymy, he, however, excluded what he calls extreme cases of explicitly conventional introduction of new notations. In the extreme case, the *definiendum* becomes synonymous with the *definiens* simply because it has been expressly created for the purpose of being synonymous with the *definiens*. This is, however, incoherent according to Grice and Strawson. As they say, it is like the position of a man to whom you are trying to explain, say, an idea of one thing fitting into another thing, or two things fitting together, and who says, "I can understand what it means to say that one thing fits into another, or that two things fit together, in the case where one was specifically made to fit to the other but I cannot understand what it means to say this in any other case."²⁴ This is because Quine's extreme cases are in reality indifferent from those he condemns and hence, it will be improper for him to accept one and reject the others. For these and other reasons, they conclude that Quine's case against the analytic/synthetic distinction is not well made out, it is incoherent and unjustified. This is seen once more in their attack on Quine's positive theory or scientific holism as affirming, rather than refuting the distinction, though Quine insists that it is incompatible with the distinction.

Quine's Positive Theory and the Affirmation of the Analytic/Synthetic Distinction

Having rejected the analytic/synthetic distinction, Quine boldly sketches his own positive theory that will aid in determining the relation between the statements we accept as true or reject as false on the one hand, and the experiences in the light of which we do so, on the other. His positive theory can be summarized in these five propositions.

- (1) Taken collectively, science has its double dependence upon language and experience; (though) ... this duality is not significantly traceable into the statement of science.
- (2) (our) statements about the eternal world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body
- (3) thus, the unit of empirical significance is the whole of science
- (4) consequently, any statement can be held true, come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustment elsewhere in the system.

- (5) And conversely, by the same token, no statement is immune to revision.²⁵

These five propositions are what constitute Quine's positive theory or scientific holism which advocates a new theory of meaning not predicated on individual words or statements, but on science as a whole. It can be summarized as follows. Whatever our experiences maybe, it is in principle possible to hold on to, or reject any statement we like, so long as we are prepared to make extensive enough revisions elsewhere in our system of beliefs. In practice, our choices are governed largely by consideration of convenience. We wish our system to be as simple as possible, but we also wish disturbances to it as it exists to be as small as possible.

Quine maintains that his positive theory is in no way compatible with the analytic/synthetic distinction. Grice and Strawson, however, contends that Quine's position is compatible with, and gives room for the kind of explanation that he rejects of analytic/synthetic distinction. Grice and Strawson say, for instance, concerning Quine's supposition that "no statement is immune to revision" that;

Since it is an illusion to suppose that the characteristics of immunity in principle from revision, come what may, belongs or could belong to any statement, it is an illusion to suppose that there is a distinction to be drawn between statements which posses this characteristics and statement which lacks it . Yet Quine suggest, this is precisely the distinction which those who use the terms "analytic" and "synthetic" suppose themselves to be drawing. Quine's view would perhaps be... that those who believe in the distinction are inclined, at least sometimes to mistake the characteristics of strongly resisting revision (which belongs to beliefs very centrally situated in the system) for the mythical characteristics of total immunity from revision.²⁷

Therefore, Quine, while positing his own dogma of revisability, endorses the distinction in contention in the sense that even though this implies that there is no absolute necessity about the adoption or use of any conceptual scheme whatever or more narrowly in terms that he would reject, that there is analytic proposition such that we must gave linguistic forms bearing just the sense required to express that proposition, it is not possible to deny the existence of necessities within any conceptual scheme we adopt or use or, more narrowly again, that there are no linguistic forms which do express analytic propositions.

It is therefore the conclusion of Grice and Strawson that Quine's rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction is not justified by his criticism of the distinction. Hence, the distinction still remains, even in the light of not being able to satisfy Quine's ideals.

Conclusion

The analytic/synthetic distinction has been an essential one used in both philosophical and ordinary discourse. Though Quine's criticisms and positive theory draws our attention to the revisability of expression based on the conceptual scheme or linguistic form being used at the point in time, or the context-based nature of expressions rather than thinking that such (analytic) expressions are universal, hence immune from revision, it is not enough to reject the distinction. This is the point Grice and Strawson raise; that even in different conceptual schemes or linguistic forms, the distinction still exist within them and understanding such distinction will be based on understanding the semantic rules of such a linguistic form though, such may be revised when viewed from a different conceptual scheme.

Also, Quine stated that the difficulty of analyticity is with the second class of analytic statement (those depending on synonymy) not with the first (logical truths). So it is really out of place for him to at the long-run, reject the whole distinction after opining that he has no problems with part of it (the logical truth).²⁸ It is one thing to epistemologically trivialize analytic statements and another to completely condemn and reject it as non-existent. It is the latter that Grice and Strawson contend against while endorsing the possibility of the former. The main problem with Grice and Strawson, however, is that they base most of their criticisms on the example they give on logical impossibility with the conclusion that some sort of explanation is possible for analyticity which may be different from Quine's requirement but, they do not as well give any adequate explanation of it. However they draw our attention to the usefulness of the distinction which Quine rejects in discourses, at least, within a conceptual framework.

Notes

J. Oladosu, "Quine on the Analytic/Synthetic Distinction," *The Nigerian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 21, Nos. 1 & 2, (2004/2005), pp. 91-11

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M. K. Munitz, *Contemporary Analytic Philosophy*, (New York: Macmillan Pub. Comp. Inc., 1981), p. 358.

H. P. Grice, P. F. Strawson, "In Defence of a Dogma," *Philosophical Review*, LXV (1959), pp. 141-58.

See W. V. O. Quine, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-23.

Ibid., p. 23

H. P. Grice, P. F. Strawson, *op. cit.*, pp. 147-48

W. V. O. Quine, *op. cit.*, p. 27

Ibid., p. 29

Ibid., p. 24

Ibid., p. 30

See J. Oladosu, *op. cit.*, p. 97

Ibid., p. 97-8

Ibid., p. 98-9

H. P. Grice, P. F. Strawson, *op. cit.*, p. 143

Ibid., p. 142

Ibid., p. 148

Ibid.

Ibid., p. 149

Ibid., p. 150

J. Oladosu, *op. cit.*, p. 103

H. P. Grice, P. F. Strawson, *Op. cit.*, pp. 151-52

Ibid., p. 147

Ibid., p. 152-53

This concise summary is given by J. Oladosu, *op. cit.*, p. 100. For a detailed explanation see W. V. O. Quine, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-46

H. P. Grice, P. F. Strawson, *Op. cit.*, p. 155

Ibid

See J. Oladosu, *op. cit.*, p. 105