VERIFICATIONISM | Lent 2019 | Maarten Steenhagen (ms2416@cam.ac.uk)
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Lecture 3: **Dogmas of empiricism**

W.V.O. Quine (1951) 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism', *The Philosophical Review* 60 (1951): 20-43. (Reprinted in Quine, *From a Logical Point of View*)

W.V.O Quine

W.V.O. Quine (1908-2000) was a self-proclaimed *naturalist*. Quine describes this as "the recognition that it is within science itself, and not in some prior philosophy, that reality is to be identified and described" (*Theories and Things* 1981, 21). Spent 1932-33 in Europe, including a visit to Vienna and the Vienna Circle. Quine's naturalistic take on philosophy is clearly visible in 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism' (1951) and the later *Word and Object* (1960).

Modern empiricism has been conditioned in large part by two dogmas. One is a belief in some fundamental cleavage between truths which are *analytic*, or grounded in meanings independently of matters of fact, and truths which are *synthetic*, or grounded in fact. The other dogma is *reductionism*: the belief that each meaningful statement is equivalent to some logical construct upon terms which refer to immediate experience. Both dogmas, I shall argue, are ill-founded. One effect of abandoning them is, as we shall see, a blurring of the supposed boundary between speculative metaphysics and natural science. Another effect is a shift toward pragmatism.

The argument against the analytic/synthetic distinction

Recall, we said that some statements are analytically true. They are true simply because of what they mean. But we find two classes of analytic truths:

(i) logical truths: those that have their truth guaranteed by the logical form of the statement itself ('Demeter is Demeter', 'The meeting is cancelled or not')

(ii) conceptual truths: those that have their truth guaranteed by the logical form *and the meanings* of the terms used ('A vixen is a female fox', 'If Demeter killed Hades, then Hades died')

Meanings. What are meanings? Mysterious entities living in the shadows of your words? No. Without an understanding of how to make sense of meanings, the distinction between analytic and synthetic is obscure and ill-founded. That's the main challenge Quine poses.

But here's an idea: you can turn any conceptual truth into a logical truth by putting *synonyms* for synonyms. If you put 'female fox' for 'vixen' in 'A vixen is a female fox', you get the logical truth 'a female fox is a female fox'. So instead of relying on meanings, we can say that S is an analytic truth iff S is a logical truth or S can be turned into a logical truth by putting synonyms for synonyms.

But now we should ask: What are synonyms? The answer may seem simple. Synonyms are terms with the same definition. Fine. But then what are definitions? We cannot appeal to what we find in the dictionaries, because these books are compiled by people (lexicographers) who describe the relation between terms in the language. Lexicography is a branch of linguistics and it is an empirical fact that 'vixen' is in everyday English defined as 'female fox'. It's just that the terms are synonymous in everyday contexts. Definition presupposes synonymy.

Sameness of meaning

We see that the notion of sameness of meaning or synonymy is actually quite puzzling. For over and above the terms we use, we don't see or hear their meanings.

Consider this analogy: the idea of *same colour*. One could assume that two items have the same red colour iff both participate in the same Platonic form, say the form Crimson Red. But this is obscure. What are these forms? And how do we know that both items 'partake' in this form? It's much more straightforward to explicate sameness of colour in terms of some kind of matching task. Just compare the two items. If you can sometimes distinguish their colours then they do not have the same colour. If you cannot ever distinguish their colours then they have the same colour. (This is what Nelson Goodman proposed and defended in the philosophy of colour.)

Meaning is not exactly like colour, because we cannot 'read off' sameness of meaning in the way we can tell which jumpers have the same colour. But Quine suggests that a similar matching test may help us understand synonymy. Let's say that two terms 'match' in meaning if they can be substituted without altering the truth of the statements in which they occur—substitution *salva veritate*. The idea is that in practice you cannot distinguish the semantic contribution of synonymous terms, such as 'vixen' and 'female fox', because whatever the context, a sentence using the one term is just as true as a sentence using the other.

Failures of substitution

The substitution test won't work. First of all, what about the following true sentence:

> 'the term "vixen" has 5 letters'

If we replace 'vixen' here for its alleged synonym, is this a case of substitution *salva veritate*? No.

> 'the term "female fox" has 5 letters'

This is false. We have not preserved truth. Something goes wrong, because it is clear that we are here not saying something about vixens or female foxes, but about specific *words*. Perhaps 'vixen' and 'female fox' are synonymous, but that doesn't mean that the phrases denoting these words, "vixen" and "female fox", are synonymous.

But even if we manage to overcome this problem, consider the following obstacle. It happens to be the case that all creatures with a heart also have kidneys. So in all situations where we actually talk about creatures with a heart we are talking about creatures with kidneys, and the terms are substitutable without affecting the truth of the sentences.

> 'Creatures with a heart evolved millions of years ago.'
> 'No plant is a creature with a heart.'
> 'Darwin discovered that creatures with a heart evolved through natural selection.'

> 'Creatures with kidneys evolved millions of years ago.'
> 'No plant is a creature with kidneys.'
> 'Darwin discovered that creatures with kidneys evolved through natural selection.'

Yet it is obvious that 'creature with a heart' and 'creature with a kidney' have different meanings—they are not synonymous. Why is this? Because we know that there could have been creatures with a heart that do not have kidneys.

In order to rule out such merely apparent synonyms we require something stronger: two terms are synonymous just in case substituting the one for the other *necessarily* preserves truth. Replacing 'vixen' for 'female fox' necessarily preserves truth, whereas replacing 'creature with a heart' with 'creature with a kidney' merely happens to preserve truth.

But what does it mean to say that something is necessarily true? Quine suggests that this boils down to the following. That 'vixen' and 'female fox' are synonymous is not because all female foxes happen to be vixens, but because it is an analytic truth that a vixen is a female fox. This is disastrous: the notion of an analytic truth was what we were trying to define!

(Notice, this is why Kripke's later arguments are so significant: Kripke suggests that necessity need not be understood in terms of analyticity. Does he do so in terms acceptable to Quine?)

Argument against the verificationist

What about the second dogma? Quine calls this the dogma of reductionism: "the belief that every meaningful statement is equivalent to some logical construct upon terms which refer to immediate experience". As a theory of meaning this tells us that, apart from a special class of statements that are true regardless of what observations we make, all statements are meaningful only because their truth can be confirmed or disconfirmed in experience.

> As urged in §1, we can as well pass over the question of meanings as entities and move straight to sameness of meaning, or synonymy. Then what the verification theory says is that statements are synonymous if and only if they are alike in point of method of empirical confirmation or infirmation.

So doesn't the verification theory have the resources to offer an account of synonymy? Statements S_1 and S_2 are synonymous if and only if they have the same methods of verification, i.e. if exactly the same observations would confirm or disconfirm the statement. So if the verification theory of meaning is clear and well-founded, then we can offer an account of synonymy, and hence analyticity. Quine accepts the conditional. But he rejects the antecedent.

Recall, at the heart of the verification theory of meaning (both in its strong and in its weak form) is the observation sentence. It is crucial that the truth of these observation sentences does not depend on the truth of any other sentences or background theories. An observation sentence is immediately confirmable: you can see immediately whether the thing you're pointing to is red or not, and so see immediately whether the sentence "This is red" is true or not. Quine argues that this is something the verificationist must assume.

But this assumption boils down to the first dogma. The verificationist assumes that for some special class of sentences, truth turns exclusively on a 'factual component' (i.e. some experience or observable fact) and not on any 'linguistic component' (i.e. some facts about meanings). As the experiential bedrock, the observation sentence can be confirmed independent of theory or hypothesis. Similarly, the verificationist will accept that there is a special class of sentences that are true exclusively in virtue of their linguistic component. These are the truths of logic. As the logical bedrock, the truths of logic allow us to find between sentences connections that do not depend on experience or observation. The vast majority of meaningful sentences and hypotheses, of course, will have a bit of both: their truth turns both on observable fact and on the meanings of the terms.

> The two dogmas are, indeed, at root identical. We lately reflected that in general the truth of statements does obviously depend both upon language and upon extralinguistic fact; and we noted that this obvious circumstance carries in its train, not logically but all too naturally, a feeling that the truth of a statement is somehow analyzable into a linguistic component and a factual component. The factual component must, if we are empiricists, boil down to a range of confirmatory experiences. In the extreme case where the linguistic component is all that matters, a true statement is analytic. But I hope we are now impressed with how stubbornly the distinction between analytic and synthetic has resisted any straightforward drawing.

What do we lose when we lose analyticity? In their paper 'In Defence of a Dogma' Strawson and Grice argue that Quine's argument, when sound, implies that there is no such thing as linguistic meaning. That is absurd, they think. But compare this with the colour case. Perhaps there is no such thing as Colour, if this means anything over and above the overall visual appearance of an object and the way that appearance visually resembles and contrasts with other objects. Perhaps the facts about which objects match others is all there is to an item's being coloured. Similarly, one could think of linguistic meaning as nothing over and above the legitimate patterns of translation between sentences or regularities in language use.