

Quine's Critique of Analytic Statements and Holism

One common distinction throughout the history of epistemology is between analytic and synthetic truths. These terms are more contemporary, but lines up with Hume's distinction between "relations of ideas" and "matters of fact" (Enquiry, §4). Some truths, like those of mathematics and definitions, are considered true in virtue of the meanings of the component terms; it is argued that these are necessarily true and are known solely through reason, not through sense experience. They are necessarily true, since their negation implies a contradiction. Others are considered empirical, which are only known through experience in the world. These have no certainty, as their negation is still possible. Below are some interconnections between these two terms:

	Analytic	Synthetic
Are known	<i>A priori</i> (without the benefit of experience)	<i>A Posteriori</i> (through experience)
Quality	Certain	Probable (at best)
Examples	"The ball is round." "All bachelors are unmarried men." "2 + 2 = 4"	"The ball is red." "Joe is a bachelor." "Every morning the sun will rise."

These terms are central to Hume's argument for the "problem of induction" (the argument that inductive generalizations are at best probable) and Descartes' foundationalism. Likewise, the denial of this distinction is central to Quine's holism.

Quine begins his argument in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" specifying that there are two "classes" of analytic statements: those that are true by logic, and those that are true by definition. An example of the former would be "No unmarried man is married," and one of the latter is "No bachelor is married." Any truth of the latter class, it is believed, can be turned into one of the former class by substituting identical synonyms. By replacing "bachelor" in the above with "unmarried man" (both of which mean the same thing) both statements will then be thought to mean the exact same thing. In this way, definitions are analytic since they merely restate the same thing that the logical truth does in different words. Since the one is certain, so must be the other. But in each case, the definition must rely upon prior usages of words. There must then be a set of terms which go undefined, and by which all other terms are defined. One then cannot rely upon definition as a criteria for analyticity.

Next he examines the notion of interchangability. If two words can be substituted in the same place while the sentence means the same thing, then the two words mean the same thing. "Tom is happy" and "Tom is content" in this way mean the same thing, since wherever it would be true to say "Tom is happy," it is also true to say "Tom is content." But consider the expression "Happy' is five letters long." It is not true that we could substitute "content" here for "happy" and the sentence still be true. Thus, not every occurrence of synonyms are replaceable in all contexts. However, a more pressing concern is visible here, since the above statements are true in virtue of the objects mentioned, not the meanings of the words. It is not necessarily true that, although two words may be true of two sets of objects that they mean the same thing for us. And further, we cannot rely upon substitution to be true of the objects mentioned in the subject term, and then explain that two sentences likewise true for all objects as a criteria for analyticity. That would be circular. What is synonymous relies upon the notion

of analyticity, so we cannot explain analyticity in terms of interchangeable synonyms. Quine also searches for an answer in terms of 'semantic rules.' This is a very technical notion, so I will not survey it here.

Lastly, we can say that two statements mean the same thing when our experience confirms them in the same way (that is, they have the same method of verification). In this way, we can say that analytic statements are those which are never disconfirmed by sense experience. Quine denies this reductionism as a viable candidate, since the process of reduction to sense-data presupposes the distinction in question, between analytic and synthetic truths. These 'two dogmas,' analyticity and reductionism, are "at root identical" (p. 41). The conclusion which follows from this investigation is that there is no non-circular way to tell which truths are analytic. This is an important lead-up to his holism, since it requires that all truths be of the same class, and that no one truth occupies a superior position, either outside or underlying our system of knowledge. One cannot isolate and test our statements one-by-one, but rather "our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body" (p. 41)

Quine's Holism

If Quine is right that there is no distinction between what is true through experience and what is true independent of experience, then it seems that everything is possibly confirmed or disconfirmed through experience. He likens knowledge to "a fabric, which impinges upon experience only along the edges" (p. 42). No truth occupies a unique place, only some truths (like mathematics and science) are more central to the system than others. Rather than to suppose an external criteria of correspondence for the truth of a given statement, instead he relies upon an internal criteria of consistency. Contradictions of our system of knowledge with sense experience is likely to make us to abandon certain trivial truths around the edges. Some more central truths we are less likely to revise, but "no statement is immune from revision" (p. 43). No statement is necessarily true. Certain hypotheses, our belief in the existence of objects for example, are of the same type as Homer's gods—they are postulated to explain things about the world. "Both sorts of entities enter our conception only as cultural posits" (p. 44). That does not mean that they are true, but merely are a presupposition that we make to engage in to make contemporary science possible. However, if we were to believe in Zeus and Hera, that would not be a different kind of belief, but merely a different degree. Our science relies upon the central hypothesis of the existence of objects, not based upon the supposition that angry gods cause lightening or storms. We could just as well give up our belief in the external world, but that would require much more revision in the entire system (and would need to be the result of a much more compelling reason or set of experiences) than jettisoning the Greek gods. As long as our beliefs are maximally internally consistent and agree with sense experience, then our knowledge is maximally secure—although never completely certain.

Discussion Questions

1. In light of Quine's critique, what is the status of Descartes' *cogito* as an indubitable starting point? Is that necessarily true? If not, does Descartes have a proverbial leg upon which to stand? Why or why not?
2. If Quine is right, then all of our knowledge is synthetic, not analytic. Consider this according to Hume's "problem of induction." If all of our knowledge is at best probable, then is there any possibility of certainty? Why or why not? What would Quine say to this?
3. Quine gives a plausible account of knowledge, but is he right? Why or why not?