

### *37. The Analytic/Synthetic Distinction*

*– There's a danger in not saying anything conclusive about these matters. Your hero, despite all his talk about having the courage to question presuppositions, doesn't set himself up as a veritable challenge to others and, as a consequence, cannot be thought interesting to them.*

*– Perhaps we should spell out who these others are because I think there would be some interested.*

*– I'm speaking about those willing to take up a position on the playing field and both challenge and be challenged by others.*

*– Who are willing to scrimmage a bit then. Rough it up. Make interesting moves and so on.*

*– Who are willing to engage each other and that's not a bad thing.*

*– Who are willing to hoist some of their peers in the air while roughing up others.*

*– Why not something that might be less crude and more consensual?*

*– Nothing in his discourse denies this.*

*– But his discourse is denying it in the sense of trying to stay outside it.*

*– So in your opinion a position must be taken up on the field to warrant any serious consideration.*

*– It certainly doesn't warrant any sympathy if it doesn't.*

*– You're right, Professor Chalmers. I can't argue there. Except to say that truth-telling should go beyond all such considerations.*

I said I wanted to parade out my essays and, as it seems to me now, this doesn't go without a wish to be considered by all and sundry a great philosopher. It is the illusion that comes from working things out on one's own, from not having to confront other works and egos on a regular and hard-hitting basis. From relegating all that one doesn't *quite* understand (and this is often quite a bit) to some solipsistic sinkhole. It has been years since I read Kant and so, when I reproduce the essay on causality I wrote for Professor Shimizu, I'm aware of how much I have forgotten and how much I never read.

*– Where's his thesis? Where's it laid out so everyone can understand it? You can't expect others to be interested in a discourse that doesn't want to be right on some point and, if it errs, to be straightened out.*

This is where I stand along with the belief – what other can I have? – that I have said what I had to as best as I could. My plan of telling the truth to myself is always pressured to be a telling of the truth to others, an investing of myself with an authority for such a role by laying the basis of what constitutes such an authority. Or, to say it more concretely, here I am virtually proclaiming my modest university essays to be the credentials – *the only credentials* – for what I have undertaken. They trace out a long struggle to get to the bottom of a matter that, even though I have glorified it as *my* struggle, I didn't want to counterfeit or play false with. Perhaps this explains my swinging back and forth from an exalting and condemning of myself that are equally suspect, equally poses to ward off or disguise mediocrity. Always pushing at the door that I thought was the right one and never walking away from it for fear of what might lie behind it – this is, when it comes right down to it, my one and only consolation. Or if there be another, it is my awareness that I have always been riddled by doubts and uncertainties. Even now when I prepare to bring up the matter of another course and another essay, I'm not sure how squarely they suit the situation. How much they dig into my subject as opposed to being a mere incrustation of related thoughts. No doubt there is the connection to causality and to a whole space of thought that, as well as being an abyss, is an arena. One where I saw Quine contending for a certain mastery or authority and Grice and Strawson challenging his presumption and audacity.

*– Does this interest you, Professor Chalmers?*

*– Of course.*

*– It's about the analytic-synthetic distinction.*

*– I gathered as much.*

*– About Quine wanting to do away with it and Grice and Strawson defending it.*

*– Yes, yes. Stop treating me like I was your student.*

## **"Summary of Grice and Strawson's 'In Defence of a Dogma'"**

"The Grice and Strawson essay opens by stating that W. V. O. Quine, in his article entitled 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism,' advances a number of criticisms of the analytic/synthetic distinction. They also state that he rejects this distinction. The purpose of their essay is to 'show that his criticisms of the distinction do not justify his rejection of it.'

"They begin by pointing out that a distinction can be criticized for being framed or drawn up in a loose, ambiguous, or unclear way. But all of this, they contend, would not be sufficient grounds for rejecting it. Rather, it would simply imply a call for clarification.

"Again, a distinction may serve no useful purpose. However, this would not ordinarily involve claiming that the distinction did not exist. Such a state of affairs, thus understood, must fall short of Quine's radical rejection of the analytic/synthetic distinction.

"The authors then point out that a distinction may be criticized for the weakness of the explanations which support or justify it. They state that Quine certainly makes a good part of his case upon this basis. Yet, as they maintain, it is a weak one since it does not justify a fundamental rejection of the distinction or a claim that it is illusory."

*– Yes, I suppose there's nothing that couldn't be accused of being illusory if one demanded it be absolutely clear.*

"Again, the authors state that the problems involved in explaining a distinction are not sufficient to justify its being rejected as an illusion. Therefore Quine must prove convincing in the second part of his article. This second part briefly outlines a doctrine of knowledge and truth (i.e., his celebrated view of all knowledge and knowledge-seeking as being a thorough, comprehensive, and continuous process of observing, experimenting, and theorizing) which Quine claims is incompatible with the analytic/synthetic distinction.

"The authors note a strong, historical 'presumption in favour of the distinction's existence.' The philosophical tradition, they point out, has maintained this distinction with no small degree of confidence. Moreover, the distinction functions well and has a practical use in the present determination of contrasting statements of a certain kind.

"In other words, the authors stress the *radicality* of Quine's attack. It is not merely a superficial grievance with respect to the use of the particular terms 'analytic' and 'synthetic.' Rather, it challenges both a traditional and present understanding of the distinction which these opposing terms represent.

"The authors then hold up for consideration the possibility that Quine's attack is not as extreme as it appears. Rather than holding the position that the terms 'analytic' and 'synthetic' mark no distinction whatsoever, his meaning might very well be simply that this distinction has been misunderstood (i.e., that its *real* nature has not been recognized).

"The authors then state that the second way of understanding Quine's attack admits a way of responding to it. The point they are most concerned to make is that a distinction consistently made in practice can still be one even if it is in fact misconceived. In other words, a distinction made on the basis of differing appearances renders an account of this differing factor even though the account in question is based on some mistaken assumptions. The authors claim that, if the above way of understanding Quine's attack on the analytic/synthetic distinction is the right one, then he must do more than show 'that certain explanations of a term do not measure up to certain requirements of adequacy in philosophical clarification . . .' He must employ entirely different arguments, in other words, in order to put into serious question the traditional understanding.

"However, the authors nonetheless take time to weigh the adequacy of Quine's case as it itself is a question of adequacy in philosophical clarification. They state that the traditional presumption which favours the use of the analytic/synthetic distinction rests not only on a theoretical or philosophical basis, but also on a primary or popular understanding. This comes through with such expressions as 'means the same as' and 'does not mean the same as.' The criticism they now put forward follows by virtue of the fact that Quine allows that the analytic/synthetic distinction can be formally explained in terms of what he calls *cognitive synonymy*. However, given that he claims that 'the notion of cognitive synonymy is just as unclear as that of analyticity,' it would appear that, as the authors contend, he is equally committed to pronouncing that the former is illusory or nonsensical. The authors then hold that Quine's position runs into difficulty since it ultimately denies meaning to the ordinary distinctions and explanations surrounding the word 'meaning' itself. The authors call this a philosopher's paradox and claim that it results from declaring a notion illusory merely because it falls short of 'some perhaps inappropriate standard of . . . clarifiability.'"

– *We have to get along with a certain amount of indeterminateness in our thinking because this thinking itself is determined in ways hidden from us. But let's not forget we always have a chance to shine a light on this.*

“The authors reiterate that there is a strong presumption in favour of the analytic/synthetic distinction which rests on both philosophical and ordinary usage. They also state that this presumption ‘is not in the least shaken by the fact, if it is a fact, that the distinction . . . in question [has] not been, in some sense, adequately clarified.’ They then set their sights on trying to determine what Quine precisely means by adequate clarification.

“The authors summarize Quine’s position as follows: he speaks in his article of a ‘certain circle or family of expressions, of which analytic is one,’ whose various members can be explained in terms of one another but in no other way. Quine’s position therefore seems to be that an adequate explanation must exemplify the precision and universality of this circle of expressions while at the same time reaching outside it. Since he finds that this condition does not obtain with the analytic/synthetic distinction, he holds that it must therefore be meaningless.

“The authors then take issue with this seemingly straitjacketed notion of adequate explanation. First of all, they maintain that it is patently absurd to assert it as a general principle. Secondly, they maintain that there is no compelling reason to assert it as a *special* principle, that is, one specifically meant for and applicable to the analytic/synthetic distinction. The above holds true even if one claims that the distinction is of a highly philosophical sort and so requires exceptionally well-grounded explanations. Thirdly, there are informal ways of explaining the distinction which, at the same time, are compatible with its philosophical use. The authors cite the example of how one can explain the notion of *logical impossibility*. That is, an explanation of it can be based on a primary or informal distinction between *something not understood* and *something not believed*. Something not understood correlates with the notion of logical impossibility whereas something not believed correlates with the notion of causal or natural impossibility.”

– *We can't understand a triangle with four angles, that's pretty clear. But how about a triangle giving birth to a fourth angle?*

– *What kind of triangle, pray tell, would that be?*

– *Well, not a geometrician's but maybe a marine biologist's.*

- *But then you're changing the normal reference.*
- *So it's only a logical impossibility with a normal reference?*
- *I would say so.*
- *And so what happens if the normal reference changes? If it becomes the marine biologist's instead of the geometrician's?*
- *Then the logical impossibility would apply to the word that takes its place as referring to the geometrician's.*
- *So the logical impossibility is provisional and depends on how words are used.*
- *Well —*
- *So then it's all linguistic.*
- *Conceptual and linguistic.*
- *Meaning?*
- *That meaning is out there in some sense.*
- *But we don't know in what sense or where. If words can change their meanings, then the logically impossible is dependent on the causally or naturally possible such that the logically impossible could become its opposite.*
- *But that's only wordplay.*
- *So you think the three-angled triangle remains no matter what?*
- *I'm happy to have it so.*

"The authors point out that, with respect to their example of an informal way of explaining the distinction, it does appear that one of the two conditions which Quine 'seems to require of a satisfactory explanation' is met. That is, such an explanation breaks out of the circle of interdefinable expressions such as 'self-contradictory,' 'synonymous,' 'necessary,' 'semantic rule,' and the like. The distinction between belief and understanding, although itself in

need of clarification, is one which they, as they claim, is entirely reasonable and valid.”

– *I’m happy to have this distinction between belief and understanding.*

“There follows in the Grice and Strawson article a critique of two points made by Quine, the intent of which (that is, the intent of these points) is undoubtedly to weaken the case for the analytic/synthetic distinction. The first involves Quine’s claim that the explanation of synonymy by means of definition is bogus. He makes this claim while at the same time seeming to allow that a definition with a newly created term as *definiendum* provides a unique case of transparent or irreducibly arrived at synonymy. The authors contend that Quine is inconsistent here. They point out that such a definition no less than others must refer to a prior understanding and practise vis-a-vis the notion of synonymy.

“The second point with which they take issue arises from Quine’s attempt to illustrate that a statement which is obscure or problematic vis-a-vis the analytic/synthetic distinction is essentially one not suffering from any lack of clarity with respect to the individual terms but only with respect to its characterization by means of the term ‘analytic.’ (Quine’s example is the following: ‘Everything green is extended.’) The authors note that it would be better to state that it is the relationship between the individual terms which is at the heart of whatever obscurity or problem exists. Presumably a clarification of this relationship would therefore entail a clarification of its analytic character.

“The last part of the Grice and Strawson article deals with what they call Quine’s *positive theory*. This theory in brief is concerned with the relationship between the experience of things and statements which assert knowledge and understanding. Specifically, the authors take issue with two important points Quine makes. The first, arguing as it does for a continuity between observation statements and theoretical ones, ends up denying the very basis on which analytic statements have been traditionally distinguished from synthetic ones. That is, it denies that there are statements immune to revision in light of experience (that is, new observational developments). The second rules out the possibility of explaining the distinction in terms of synonymy based on some infallible standard of empirical verification and description. Quine’s claim here is essentially that the truth or falsity of one statement is inextricably bound up with the truth or falsity of others. In short, they are part of an immense conceptual web with theory concentrated more at the centre and observation and experiment occupying the outer

areas. The authors argue that both claims, while having some merit, do not undermine the analytic/synthetic distinction insofar as expressions may always be conceptually revised.

“In the first case, they argue that, while changing conceptual schemes may upset and reverse the classification of certain analytic and synthetic statements, the act of so classifying them is nonetheless both relevant and meaningful in any one particular conceptual scheme. In the second case, they argue for a simple accommodation by which the explanation of analyticity in terms of a synonymy which is grounded on empirical confirmation or disconfirmation embraces its essentially relative character by acknowledging its connection with ‘certain assumptions about the truth-values of other statements.’”

– *They seem here to be more in line with Quine than they might like to be.*

“The authors conclude the above argument by stating that cases in which the analytic/synthetic distinction is problematic do not ‘entail the nonexistence of statements which are clearly classifiable in one or other of these ways and of statements our hesitation over which has different sources, such as the possibility of alternative interpretation of the linguistic forms in which they are expressed.’”

– *The meaning of the distinction is caught up in its practicality but from Quine’s standpoint this is not the case. With his extension of the theoretical to everything under the sun, Quine can’t see the usefulness of these statements whereas Grice and Strawson, being less sceptical about the ontological status of the world, take the more traditional view that the distinction has already proven itself.*

“Finally, the authors conclude their article by characterizing it as a rejection of Quine’s two-part argument. Once again, the first part attacks the analytic/synthetic distinction on the basis of insurmountable problems of explanation or elucidation. The second part makes the same attack on the basis of an epistemological doctrine which stresses change and movement in the matter of truth-valuing and truth-determination.”

– *One point he didn’t mention is that Grice and Strawson think it’s incumbent upon Quine to come up with his own theory of meaning. But since Quine is committed to letting experimentation rule right up to the very limits of language, it’s not really possible for him. So what I think is behind their demand is really a protest of sorts to the effect that Quine can’t make*



*sense or, let's say, can't make complete sense of his very own talk about it.*

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