

# On Quine, Grice and Strawson, and the Analytic-Synthetic Distinction

by Christian Green

*Evidently such a position of extreme skepticism about a distinction is not in general justified merely by criticisms, however just in themselves, of philosophical attempts to clarify it.*

~ Grice and Strawson, "In Defense of a Dogma"

## Introduction

The extreme skepticism to which Grice and Strawson are responding is the argument put forward by Quine that questions the reality of the analytic-synthetic distinction in philosophy. In "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," Quine claims that the analytic-synthetic distinction so widely used by philosophers disappears under closer scrutiny. As Quine describes the terms, *analytic* refers to truths that are grounded in something independent of facts (ex. independent meanings of words / ideas) while *synthetic* refers to truths that are grounded in matters of fact. In brief, Quine's article is split into two parts: a negative argument against the unclear basis of synonymy upon which analyticity rests, and his positive argument for holism and its implications for the analytic-synthetic distinction. Grice and Strawson critique both of Quine's arguments and claim that Quine provides only reasons to revise the distinction, not to reject it.

I argue that Grice and Strawson's critiques are ineffective, but do illuminate how to respond to Quine. First, I demonstrate that Grice and Strawson's attempt to meld holism and the analytic-synthetic distinction fails because they do not provide a reason to believe that the two categories differ in kind rather than merely in degree. Second, I propose two approaches on how to properly combine holism and the analytic-synthetic distinction utilizing the works of Pakize Sandıkçioğlu and Paul Horwich. Sandıkçioğlu gives reason to doubt that the only difference between revisions of analytic and synthetic statements is merely one of degree while Horwich gives us reason to allow for a distinction within holism even if Quine is correct<sup>1</sup>.

## Summary

First, Quine critiqued the concept of meaning and synonymy as a basis for analyticity. One might claim that truths are analytic if they are true purely by meaning. Quine points out that meaning is clearly different from naming or denoting. For instance, while the names 'Morning Star' and 'Evening Star' name / denote the object Venus, the meaning of the words remains separate from the denotation because the referent of the names was a matter of *discovery* (or of fact). Thus, meaning is *not* some sort of object or entity and seems to be something much more elusive.

---

<sup>1</sup> Pakize Sandıkçioğlu, "Holism and the Analytic-Synthetic Distinction," *ETHOS: Dialogues in Philosophy and Social Sciences* 4, no. 1 (2011): 1 - 13; Paul Horwich, "Chomsky versus Quine on the Analytic-Synthetic Distinction," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 92 (1992): 95 – 108.

Without some 'meaning entity' to provide a basis for analyticity, one might offer that *definitions* provide a basis utilizing synonymy between words. For instance, 'bachelor' and 'unmarried man' are synonymous in virtue of having similar / identical definitions. However, Quine points out that in order to create those definitions one needs to *presuppose* synonymy in the first place. If one starts with 'bachelor' and tries to think of a new term that would have the same definition, one must consider what terms would be synonymous. In fact, Quine argues that the *only* definitions that do not presuppose synonymy are abbreviations. For instance, one might use 'B2' to refer to 'swan,' in which case B2 is synonymous with swan by pure *convention*.

Quine considers a couple more options in an attempt to preserve analyticity, but all prove insufficient or circular. First, Quine considers using interchangeability in linguistic contexts, other than within quotations, that does not change the truth-value as the standard for analyticity. The problem with this sort of interchangeability, as Quine points out, is that it is insufficient for what is required with analyticity. Mere interchangeability is not enough; what one really wants is something that fulfills 'cognitive synonymy' such that any replacement of term X with term Y carries the same *relevant* meaning. However, Quine once more claims that this still requires a presupposition of synonymy. Second, Quine tries to use semantical rules to bypass meaning and synonymy altogether. Without getting into the fine details, Quine argues that analyticity can only get into a language through semantical rules if the rules presuppose analyticity itself. Quine, after exhausting all the options presented thus far, concludes that there is no basis in meaning, synonymy, or semantical rules for analyticity.

Quine then moves on to what he considers the second dogma of empiricism, reductionism, and instead supports a holistic view of truth. Rather than take individual terms or statements as the fundamental 'unit' of empirical testing for truth, as reductionists do, Quine claims that one should consider whole theories of science as the fundamental unit. Quine's holism makes two claims: every statement can be revised, and no statement can be confirmed to be true individually but only as part of a whole. By the first claim, Quine means that any statement can be made true within a theory if certain parts of the theory are revised. For instance, a revision of the 'law of excluded middle' allows theories of quantum mechanics to be true. By the second claim, Quine means that statements such as 'atoms are composed of quarks' can only be confirmed as true or false if one considers most of the whole of science. Does the relevant theory posit physical objects? What about matter? Only by also confirming all other relevant statements as true can one confirm or deny the truth of the claims about atoms and quarks. Importantly, this holistic approach to truth-values in statements makes the difference between analytic and synthetic statements a matter of degree rather than a clear distinction. Analytic statements are typically statements one is less willing to revise whereas synthetic statements are more liable to be revised when confronted with new empirical data. Thus, given the lack of a basis for analyticity and his own view involving holism of truth, Quine concludes that the analytic-synthetic distinction is an illusion created by philosophers.

Grice and Strawson claim that Quine's reasoning does not give him the basis to reject the analytic-synthetic distinction as a complete fiction. First, Grice and Strawson point out that just because the basis for analyticity is vague and unclear that does *not* mean that the distinction itself is illusory. In fact, Grice and Strawson claim that there are many distinctions in philosophy that lack clear bases and would be silly to reject. For instance, 'means the same as' and 'does not

mean the same as' would also have to be rejected under Quine's view even though many philosophers, and non-philosophers for that matter, see a clear use for the distinction. Rather than require necessary and sufficient conditions, as Quine seems to suggest, Grice and Strawson claim that the philosophical use of the terms is sufficient so long as there are cases where the distinction clearly applies (ex The bachelor and unmarried man). The analytic-synthetic distinction does not have to apply to nor exhaust all cases where one may think it applies in order to still exist and be useful. Thus, the lack of clear necessary and sufficient conditions for analyticity does not call for the complete rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction, though it may call for some revision of it.

Grice and Strawson also claim that Quine's holism is compatible with the analytic-synthetic distinction rather than ruling it out. Since statements can be revised in a holistic system, Grice and Strawson argue that Quine's view need not reject analyticity all together but instead calls for its *revision*. In order to make analyticity compatible with holism, Grice and Strawson redefine the notion of synonymy as the following: given certain assumptions about the truth values of other statements, two statements are synonymous if sense data confirms and disconfirms both statements the same way. In other words, statement A and statement B are synonymous when, under some assumed background information X, both A and B are confirmed or disconfirmed by the same sense data Y. Importantly, Grice and Strawson point out that this is not *giving up* on analyticity so much as it is responding to Quine's arguments about the lack of a clear basis for it. By defining synonymy in such a way, Grice and Strawson claim that the analytic-synthetic distinction can be maintained even in a holistic system.

## Critique

I argue that Grice and Strawson's response to Quine is insufficient for preserving the analytic-synthetic distinction. First, Grice and Strawson's response to Quine's critique of the analytic-synthetic distinction fails to mark a difference in kind. Grice and Strawson both claim that the distinction is, in some sense, real purely because of its widespread use in philosophical tradition. Supposedly, it is because some cases have been clearly marked as either analytic or synthetic that the distinction exists and proves useful. Pakize Sandıkçioğlu claims that Quine's holism already provides Quine with a response. According to Quine, the only real difference between analytic and synthetic statements is one's willingness to revise the statement. Analytic statements are those that would require vast changes in other statements within a theory and so tend to not be revised. Sandıkçioğlu claims that this allows Quine to respond to Grice and Strawson by simply replying, "Of course philosophers have noted this difference and use it in certain cases. But the difference between analytic and synthetic distinctions is just a matter of how willing one is to give them up, *not* whether or not a statement is true independent of external fact." <sup>2</sup> In effect, Quine does not disagree that there is some difference between analytic and synthetic statements, only that the difference is *not* what the distinction is commonly claimed to mark out and that the difference is only one of degree and not of kind.

Grice and Strawson's attempt to redefine synonymy in order to make analyticity compatible with holism fails because it does not actually preserve synonymy. Sandıkçioğlu

---

<sup>2</sup> Pakize Sandıkçioğlu, "Holism and the Analytic-Synthetic Distinction," 9.

claims that Quine can still make the argument that the new definition Grice and Strawson provide is insufficient. Just because two statements are confirmed or disconfirmed in relation to the same sense data does *not* mean that they are synonymous. For instance, a statement about bricks on Elm Street may need to be revised in order to fit with new sense data. In doing so, other statements about Elm Street may also need to be revised in order to be compatible with the new statement about bricks on Elm Street. Or other statements about Elm Street may need to be revised according to the *same* evidence that required the statement about bricks to be revised. Sandıkçioğlu points out that Quine's point here is that the fact that some sense data results in the revision of multiple statements does *not* mean that the statements are synonymous with one another. What Grice and Strawson's definition picks out is how willing one is to revise two statements, not how synonymous they are.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Grice and Strawson's attacks on both of Quine's arguments fail to save the analytic-synthetic distinction as philosophers use it.

Despite the insufficiency of Grice and Strawson, their approach of melding holism and the analytic-synthetic distinction is still viable. Paul Horwich makes the argument that an understanding of the analytic-synthetic distinction can be retained in Quine's holism so long as it is *general*. Horwich draws on the ideas of *public language* (an understanding of certain sounds that are related to certain ideas) and Chomsky's *I-Language* (the hidden linguistic mechanisms that govern a language and require scientific investigation).<sup>4</sup> In order to see the difference between the two languages, consider the statement, "The sky is blue." Understanding this statement in terms of public language requires knowing that the words 'sky' and 'blue' require certain sounds that connect to certain ideas about the sky and the color blue. Understanding the same statement in regards to an I-language requires certain brain structures or subconscious connections that can decode the statement into its parts and connect them to concepts. Another example Horwich offers is the difference between English speakers on Earth and Twin Earth. On both Earth and Twin Earth, English speakers make the same sounds that refer to the same concepts. On closer inspection, one discovers that the brain structures and workings of language between those on Earth and Twin Earth are actually completely different. While they both seem to speak English (and can even understand one another), those on Earth speak English while those on Twin Earth speak 'Twenglish'. In other words, public language is a *folk* concept of language whereas the I-language is the *scientific* or *actual* working of the language in the mind.

Horwich claims that Quine's skepticism of the analytic-synthetic distinction is reasonable in terms of public language because the 'rules of language,' the hidden I-language rules, are unknown mysteries. In particular, Horwich clarifies that Quine's goal is not to argue that there is *no* objective analytic category, but rather that the traditional distinction made by it is not objective.<sup>5</sup> Since there is no way to verify or confirm the traditional distinction (i.e. whether or not a statement relies on external facts for its truth value) and because all arguments for its basis fail, one can only hold the traditional distinction as a dogma. But Horwich claims this only applies to public language and does not rule out the possibility that an objective category for analyticity exists within a possible I-Language. Horwich does not mean this to be *proof* of an analytic-synthetic distinction, but a possibility for one in a holistic system.

---

<sup>3</sup> Pakize Sandıkçioğlu, "Holism and the Analytic-Synthetic Distinction," 9.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Horwich, "Chomsky versus Quine on the Analytic-Synthetic Distinction," 96 – 97.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Horwich, "Chomsky versus Quine on the Analytic-Synthetic Distinction," 107.

Sandıkçioğlu gives a stronger argument for an analytic-synthetic distinction within Quine's holistic system. Quine insists that the only difference between analytic and synthetic claims is of degree – how much of the theory would have to be changed in order to account for a revised statement. However, Sandıkçioğlu, utilizing Carnap, claims that there is an epistemological difference between the two that can be put in terms of *external* and *internal* revision. Revising an analytic statement requires a change of language and thus an external change of the system (i.e. the theory is changed from the outside by an agent). Revising a synthetic statement only requires a change in belief and so is an internal change within the system (i.e. the basic theory does not have to be changed and only adapts to external facts). If this difference holds, then there is a real epistemological difference between analytic and synthetic statements.<sup>6</sup> In addition, this refined distinction is in line with the traditional use since analytic statements are true in terms of meaning *in so far as the language itself remains the same*. Sandıkçioğlu's argument also provides a stronger argument than Horwich's by proposing a possible distinction within public language rather than within a possible I-Language.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, there are at least two ways to fit an analytic-synthetic distinction into Quine's holistic view of truth. First, even if Quine is correct that there is no definite basis for analyticity within public language, Horwich suggests that there may still be room for the distinction in a possible I-Language. Second, Sandıkçioğlu provides a strong argument that the traditional distinction can still be held within Quine's holism due to the epistemological differences between revising analytic statements (external changes) and synthetic statements (internal changes). While Grice and Strawson's critiques were not sufficient, they were along the right track in attempting to meld holism and the analytic-synthetic distinction.

## Bibliography

- Horwich, Paul. "Chomsky versus Quine on the Analytic-Synthetic Distinction," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 92 (1992): 95 – 108.
- Sandıkçioğlu, Pakize. "Holism and the Analytic-Synthetic Distinction," *ETHOS: Dialogues in Philosophy and Social Sciences* 4, no. 1 (2011): 1 – 13.

---

<sup>6</sup> Pakize Sandıkçioğlu, "Holism and the Analytic-Synthetic Distinction," 9 – 11.