

## Quine II

PHIL410

### Holism

- “The unit of empirical significance is the whole of science.” (42)
- “The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs, from the most casual matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even of pure mathematics and logic, is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges. Or, to change the figure, total science is like a field of force whose boundary conditions are experience.” (42)
- That is, as previously, Quine rejects the “second dogma” of empiricism that a given statement may be provided meaning by reference to a given set of sense data. Rather, in order to indicate the meaning of a statement, we must refer to a significant portion of the totality of our knowledge. This is due to the fact that our statements are complex, invoking to some extent sense impressions but also to a large extent ideas “more remote” from our sense “periphery”.
- And this means that the “first dogma”, too, must be rejected. The first dogma asserts a fundamental distinction between one class of statements from another, where this distinction would seem to follow that found between propositions meaningful of sense experience and those not so meaningful. But since all propositions constitutive of human (empirical) knowledge are equally (if variously) informed in part by sensation and in part by more abstract logical associations, there is no such distinction to be drawn, for Quine.
- In other words, for Quine, every statement that forms a part of human knowledge is subject to “revision”. Revision is simply a change in the truth-value assigned to a statement. Typically, the “easiest” to revise are those concerned more specifically with sense data (which fact contributes to the dogmas). Thus, it is a simpler matter to revise the statement, ‘There are brick houses on Elm Street’ than it is to revise a statement such as (e.g.), ‘Houses made of brick appear to be made of brick,’ or ‘There is a correlation between appearance and reality’ (or, even, ‘There is a distinction between appearance and reality’).

### Pragmatism

- Notice that the criteria for “revision” are for Quine *practical*. He speaks of “recalcitrant experiences” and “disturbance in the total system” and, more specifically, of the goal of “simplicity of laws” (45) and “conservatism” (46). This is “pragmatism” (46): accepting as rational, warranted belief the given proposition on the basis of practical concerns.
- Ultimately, the primary goal of science is “predicting future experience in the light of past experience” (44). This is a practical goal, whose practical significance is a function of our interests in building bridges and securing adequate food and water, etc. Quine is willing to accept that what we otherwise think of as metaphysical phenomena are rather “cultural posits” to be evaluated as they do or do not further our practical interests. Elsewhere, he argues that

- experience radically *underdetermines* ontology, so that it is compatible with positing Homeric gods as much as it is with enduring physical objects.
- The rejection of the two dogmas, for Quine, entails a rejection of a solid distinction between the metaphysical and the empirical. More general, more abstract concepts, structural features of the knowledge system are more *resistant* to revision, but not impervious to it.
  - As a radical empiricist, Quine compares interestingly with Nietzsche:

As an empiricist I continue to think of the conceptual scheme of science as a tool, ultimately, for predicting experience in the light of past experience. Physical objects are conceptually imported into the situation as convenient intermediaries – not by definition in terms of experience, but simply as irreducible posits comparable, epistemologically, to the gods of Homer. For my part I do, qua lay physicist, believe in physical objects and not in Homer's gods; and I consider it a scientific error to believe otherwise. But in point of epistemological footing the physical objects and the gods differ only in degree and not in kind. Both sorts of entities enter our conception only as cultural posits. The myth of physical objects is epistemologically superior to most in that it has proved more efficacious than other myths as a device for working a manageable structure into the flux of experience.

(44)