

Quine – Study Guide

PHIL410

W.V.O. Quine. Two Dogmas of Empiricism. *From a Logical Point of View*, Harvard University Press, 1953/1980, 21-45

Summary:

In this important essay, Quine challenges two generally accepted propositions fundamental to much work in epistemology. He identifies these “dogmas” at the outset of his discussion as, first, the analytic/synthetic distinction among statements, and, second, the notion that the meaning of a synthetic statement reduces to certain elements of sense experience. The essay is organized generally as follows: Quine considers a number of attempts to define a distinction between analytic and synthetic statements, which attempts all fail, in his judgment: see §§1-4. The discussion in these sections focuses on the meaning of ‘analytic’; the several attempts to specify what an analytic proposition (statement) is are found by Quine to be defective, because they are either circular or empty.

In §5, Quine turns his attention to the second “dogma”, the idea that the meaning of a statement “reduces” to certain sense impressions that might either confirm or disconfirm (his “infirm”) it. Quine argues that this notion is mistaken, and then tells us how the two dogmas are related. In the final section, §6, Quine explains in broader terms what this means for epistemology and science generally.

With the above in mind, consider the following questions, as you read:

1. How does the analytic/synthetic distinction become a question concerning the synonymy of meaning?
2. What distinction does Quine draw between two kinds of analytic statement? Which class occupies his primary attention, and why?
3. What three kinds of definition does Quine identify, and why does none of them help in providing an analysis of synonymy or, thus, analyticity?
4. Why does the “extensional language” tactic fail to provide a satisfactory account of analyticity? Why does Quine ultimately turn away from synonymy in the attempt to understand analyticity?
5. Why are formal languages of no particular help in identifying the analytical statement?
6. Under the verification theory of meaning, what is it for two statements to mean the same thing?
7. Why does Quine think that the “radical reductionist” project of Carnap ultimately fails? What role does the meaning of ‘is at’ play, in this failure?
8. Why does Quine think that no single statement is meaningful – considered, that is, in isolation from all others? What alternative does Quine propose to treating the given statement as the ultimate object of meaning in a language?

9. What does it mean for a statement to be subject to “revision”, for Quine? What does it mean to say that “no statement is immune to revision”?
10. What significance does Quine’s view hold for empirical knowledge? for metaphysics?
11. What is pragmatism, as Quine understands it?