VERIFICATIONISM AND ANALYTICITY LECTURE 4

1. Although ‘nothing is analytic’ captures some of Quine’s undogmatic empiricism there are at least three related aspects that deserve almost as much emphasis. The first is that although indeed nothing is analytic, there is still a scale of which full-blown analyticity constitutes the end-point. We know from Duhem’s thesis that any sentence *might* be dropped in the face of experience: but still, some sentences are much less likely to be dropped than others.

2. These include sentences that are involved in many branches of knowledge: ‘2 + 2 = 4’ for instance – I mean, that sequence of marks, not the ‘proposition’ – would be very hard to drop because doing so would require massive revision to the whole system (the ‘web of belief’). But this is nothing to do with its logical character, such as it is: ‘Dogs bark’ or ‘The earth has existed for many years before my birth’ – these claims also have the same high – not absolute – levels of immunity to revision in the light of experience, but nobody would call *them* analytic, or necessary, or a priori.

3. The second point is that the causes of the demise of analyticity also undermine the first dogma. Reductionism claims that each sentence has its own proprietary conditions of empirical confirmation or disconfirmation. But Duhem’s thesis teaches that this cannot be so; no experience confirms or disconfirms a sentence except relative to what other sentences one accepts at the time. Put another way (Quine’s way) the sentences of our system of the world do not confront experience directly but as a whole. If you are a verificationist then it follows that the unit of meaning isn’t (as Russell thought) a word or even (as per Frege) a sentence: it is the whole theory. This doctrine is Quine’s **semantic holism**. If you want a formula encapsulating his reasons for believing it, it is this: verificationism + confirmational holism (Duhem’s thesis) = semantic holism.

4. The third point is that Quine’s version of empiricism, unlike Ayer’s (or Hume’s) leaves more room for metaphysics. The trouble with metaphysical statements was supposed to be that they place no constraints on the course of experience; but then according to confirmational holism, *no* statement *constrains the course of experience by itself*. Even ‘There is a dog next door’ has no implications for experience except together with other statements (about the path of light rays or sound waves, say, or about what noise dogs make etc.) But then if we *are* allowed to hold fixed other statements then statements of metaphysics or logic (‘There are material objects’, ‘2 + 2 = 4’) can also have empirical consequences; and so they too, like the dog sentence, can be empirically confirmed in the only way that anything can be empirically confirmed i.e. *via* participation in an empirically confirmed theory.

5. Here is how Quine expresses that third point: ‘As an empiricist I continue to think of the conceptual scheme of science as a tool, ultimately, for predicting future 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. Let me interject that 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.'

6. This reading of 'Two Dogmas', which roughly follows the excellent account in Gilbert Harman's papers 'Quine on meaning and existence I, II' (*Review of Metaphysics* 1967) renders some influential objections to Q beside the point. For instance, in their famous paper 'In defence of a dogma' (*Philosophical Review* 1956), Grice and Strawson write: 'We can appeal… to the fact that those who use the terms "analytic" and "synthetic" do to a very considerable extent agree in the applications they make of them. They apply the term 'analytic' to more or less the same cases, withhold it from more or less the same cases, and hesitate over more or less the same cases. This agreement extends not only to cases which they have been *taught* so to characterize, but to new cases. In short, 'analytic' and 'synthetic' have a more or less established philosophical *use*; and this seems to suggest that it is absurd, even senseless, to say that there is no such distinction.' All this may be true, but it is consistent with the claims that (a) the distinction is more a matter of degree than a simple binary (b) there is in fact nothing on the extreme, analytic, end of that scale.

7. Quine's theory does raise a question about the status of logic and mathematics. According to this proposal, they are empirical sciences, like all sciences; but it certainly doesn't *look* as though we test them by appeal to the 'tribunal of the senses': instead we use methods like proof that seem to be a priori if anything is. Quine's own view of this seems to be that the principles of logic give coherence and systematicity to our web of belief and for that reason are justified; 'pure' mathematics is simply a side-effect of this bias rather than some kind of transcendental insight into the world of Platonic forms. But these benefits could in principle be outweighed.

8. But another strand of opposition to this picture is that it is incoherent on its own terms. The whole idea that an experience is inconsistent with a theory implies that we hold fixed, if not any sentence within the theory, then at least the links between a theory and an observation that it implies. For more on this interesting line of thought see C. Wright, 'Inventing logical necessity', in J. Butterfield (ed.), *Language, Mind and Logic*, Cambridge 1986.