

**HOLISM AND THE ANALYTIC-SYNTHETIC DISTINCTION****[Bütüncülük ve Analitik-Sentetik Ayrımı]**

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**ABSTRACT**

In his famous work “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” Quine offers a strong and influential argument against the widely accepted epistemological distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions. Quine states that a non-circular and satisfactory definition of analyticity cannot be given, and therefore claims that the distinction is untenable. Additionally, Quine also supports his denial of the analytic-synthetic distinction by his holistic epistemology. However, it is debatable whether Quine’s rejection is successful. Philosophers such as Grice and Strawson claim that Quine’s arguments are not strong enough to reject the analytic-synthetic distinction and that holism is perfectly compatible with it. It seems that although Quine’s argument vitiates the analytic-synthetic distinction to a certain extent, it does not show that such a distinction is totally groundless.

**Key words:** analytic- synthetic distinction, synonymy, holism, internal revision, external revision.

**BÜTÜNCÜLÜK VE ANALİTİK-SENTETİK AYRIMI****ÖZET**

Quine ünlü yapıtı “Deneyciliğin İki Dogması” nda analitik ve sentetik önermeler arasındaki ayrımı karşı güçlü argümanlar sunmaktadır. Quine’a göre bu ayrım makul değildir, çünkü analitik oluşun döngüsel olmayan yeterli bir açıklaması verilemez. Bununla beraber, Quine analitik-sentetik ayrımının reddini bütüncül epistemolojisiyle de destekler. Ancak, Quine’ın reddinin başarılı olup olmadığı tartışmaya açıktır. Örneğin, Grice ve Strawson gibi düşünürler Quine’ın sunduğu

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argümanların yeterince güçlü olmadığını ve bütüncülüğün de bu ayrımla tamamen bağdaştığını ileri sürerler. Quine'in sunduğu argümanlar her ne kadar analitik ve sentetik arasındaki farkı bir ölçüde azaltsa da bu ayrımın tamamen temelsiz olduğunu göstermemektedir.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** analitik-sentetik ayrımı, eşanlamlılık, bütüncülük, içsel düzeltme, dışsal düzeltme.

One of the most important distinctions that were made in epistemology is the analytic-synthetic distinction between statements that are true in virtue of meanings and statements that are true in virtue of facts. This distinction is very central to many philosophers' epistemology, however; Quine aims to show that the distinction is a mere illusion of them. Quine's main argument against analyticity is primarily based upon and follows from his holistic epistemology. However, according to H. P. Grice and P. F. Strawson holism does not support Quine's denial of analyticity; on the contrary, it is perfectly compatible with its existence. It seems that although Quine's argument vitiates the analytic-synthetic distinction to a certain extent, it does not show that such a distinction is totally groundless. The aim of this paper is to investigate whether holism contradicts analyticity in order to see the force and the deficiencies of Quine's argument. To this aim, Quine's rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction, his holism and Grice-Strawson argument against him will be presented and evaluated.

In his well known article "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" Quine attempts to reject the widely accepted analytic-synthetic distinction of propositions that was specifically formalized by Kant and that constitutes an important subject of debate in extant philosophy. Quine initially considers Kant's explanation of analytic proposition which is "one that attributes to its subject no more than is already conceptually contained in the subject". (Quine, 1964, p. 20) Quine restates analyticity as a property of propositions that are true only in virtue of meanings independent of facts, while synthetic propositions are those that are true in virtue of facts. Quine's rejection of analytic-synthetic distinction is firstly based on his strong claim that no satisfactory and non-circular explanation of analyticity can be given.

In "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" Quine considers two groups of analytic statements. The first group consists of propositions that are logically true, that remains true under all interpretations such as "No unmarried man is married." The second group consists of propositions that can be turned to logical truths by substituting synonyms such as "no bachelor is married." That proposition can be turned into a logical truth by replacing the word "bachelor" with the term "unmarried man." According to Quine, it is the second class of proposition, the class that depends on synonymy, that is most problematic and that stands in need of clarification. However, Quine claims that no such

clarification is available and therefore, the distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions is groundless and illusory. (Ibid, p. 22-24)

Quine argues that any explanation of synonymy is circular and therefore, unable to shed light on ‘analyticity’. He first proposes a possible explanation of synonymy in terms of ‘definition’. So, two words can be said to be synonymous if and only if one is defined in terms of the other. However, according to Quine such an explanation will not do the job, since what ‘definition’ is is another notion that needs further clarification as analyticity itself. The definition of a word that we can find out in every glossary however, depends on the notion of ‘synonymy’ rather than explaining it. A possible account of ‘definition’ that Quine considers is ‘explication’ by which a word’s meaning is refined or supplemented. (Ibid, p. 25) However, as Quine notes, explication, as such, rests also on pre-existing synonyms, and therefore, cannot be a satisfactory account of synonymy either.

Quine considers another suggestion to examine synonymy in terms of interchangeability. According to this account two terms are synonymous if and only if they are interchangeable in all contexts. However, Quine finds out that interchangeability is neither necessary nor sufficient for synonymy. It is not necessary because two terms can still be synonymous while they are not interchangeable. For instance, even though ‘bachelor’ and ‘unmarried man’ are synonymous we cannot substitute the latter for the former in the sentence “Bachelor has less than ten letters”. (Ibid, p. 28) On the other hand, interchangeability is not sufficient for synonymy for the following reason: In an extensional language (containing only predicate logic) two predicates that have the same extension can be interchanged though they are not synonyms. This is why, interchangeability does not guarantee synonymy. For instance, in such a language the terms ‘creature with a heart’ and ‘creature with kidneys’ would be interchangeable while they are not synonymous. (Ibid, p. 30-31)

Quine finally considers an explanation of analyticity in terms of semantic rules of a language. However, he claims that even though such a criterion would tell which statements are analytic, it would not tell what ‘analyticity’ is, since semantic rules also need further clarifications as analyticity itself. What we understand from such an explanation is only the fact that the rules attribute the expression ‘analytic’ to some statements, but we do not understand what kind of property these rules attribute to those statements. (Ibid, p. 33-36)

The above arguments against the analytic-synthetic distinction are merely based on the fact that one cannot give an intelligible and satisfactory definition of analyticity. Quine rejects analyticity on the ground that such a distinction cannot be drawn at all. However, it is debatable whether such a rejection is justified merely by the fact that we cannot find a clear explanation of the distinction. Grice and Strawson claim that Quine's criticism does not provide solid grounds for rejecting analyticity altogether. In the essay "In Defense of a Dogma" they claim that there are lots of distinctions in philosophy that do not have adequate explanation but which we would not deny. According to Grice and Strawson there are many indicators that favors the existence of such a distinction. First of all it is commonly agreed upon the applications of 'analytic' and 'synthetic'. That is to say, almost every one applies these notions to the same 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". ( Grice and Strawson, 1956, p.143) However, as Grice and Strawson themselves note, Quine does not deny that there is a difference between analytic and synthetic statements, rather he claims that this difference is misunderstood and ill-founded and that it is not due to a significant epistemological difference as usually supposed. Quine also gives some positive arguments to show why people are so inclined to take some statements superior over others. The reason why we take some statements such as analytic or logical ones as significantly different from others is based on Quine's holism and therefore, will be presented in the following lines.

Quine's criticism concerning the inadequacy in explaining analyticity is not the sole reason for his rejection of the analytic-synthetic distinction. In the second part of the "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" Quine gives a more general and, I believe, a more fundamental argument against analyticity: holism. When examining Quine's rejection of analyticity, it is essential to roughly present his theory of meaning. Quine does not believe that meanings are entities in our minds neither that they are some kind of Platonic forms. According to Quine, words do not have meanings on their own; rather they have significance within the theory of which they are part. So, terms or statements of a theory taken one by one and in isolation do not have meanings unless theories are taken as a whole. That is according to Quine, the smallest units of meaning are neither words nor statements but rather whole theories. Similarly, though being an empiricist, Quine claims that sentence cannot be confirmed by experience in isolation since sentences do not have their own empirical consequences in isolation. As he puts:

... the typical statements about bodies has no fund of experiential implications it can call its own. A substantial mass of theory, taken together, will commonly have experiential implications; this is how we make verifiable predictions. (Quine, 1969, p. 79)

For instance, we cannot talk about the meaning of a statement of the Theory of Relativity in isolation and look at its empirical confirmation independently from the theory. The statement can be confirmed and can have significance only within the theory it occurs.

Quine's holism has two important upshots for the supposed analytic-synthetic distinction. Firstly, according to Quine, no statement is immune to revision. That is, every sentence can be revised and changed when a new experience entails to do so. In that sense, in a system of belief no proposition is superior to another. Therefore, analytic statements are not essentially more resistant to alteration or rejection than synthetic statements are. Two types of statements are equally revisable in principle. Secondly, no statement can admit confirmation in isolation, that is to say we cannot decide whether a statement is true or false independently of our attitudes towards other statements in our web of belief. Quine claims that if it can be shown that two statements having the same empirical confirmation are synonymous, it would be possible to define analyticity. (Quine, 1964, p. 38) However, holism disallows the confirmation of isolated statements; therefore the analytic-synthetic distinction cannot be drawn in a holistic epistemology. So, Quine's holism refutes the analytic-synthetic distinction since it entails that whatever our experience is, it is possible to reject any statement when we make a revision or change elsewhere in our system of belief. Shortly, the analytic-synthetic distinction is an illusion, because, given Quine's holism, there is no epistemological differences between them.

As a reply to Grice and Strawson's objection that there is a presumption that the analytic-synthetic distinction exists, Quine offers the following argument: We have a system of belief in which none of our beliefs can be evaluated independently of the system itself. Our beliefs are confirmed or disconfirmed by experience not one by one, but taken as a whole. When a proposition in our web of belief is disconfirmed, we can make a revision not necessarily in that particular proposition, but rather somewhere else in our belief system, since the disconfirmation of that proposition may be

due to another deficiency in the system. Certainly, this system also contains so called analytic and a priori propositions as well as mathematical propositions. Therefore, these propositions are also potential candidates of revision. In that sense, they are not different from any other empirical propositions. However, when we are confronted with an experience that disconfirms our belief it is true that, according to Quine, we tend to preserve our analytic and a priori propositions. However, Quine believes that this tendency is not due to some special epistemological property those propositions possess. We simply tend to preserve such propositions because they are more central to our belief systems, whereas synthetic statements are more on the periphery. That is to say, our choices are pragmatic; we prefer to revise the statement of which the revision is more convenient to us. In his *Philosophy of Logic*, Quine argues why logical truths are considered as different from other empirical statements, and the same point can be made about analytical statements too. Quine states that we rarely revise logical truths merely because of ‘the maxim of minimum mutilation’, and the case is similar for the revision of analytic statements. (Quine, 1970, p. 100) That is, revising and changing them would require a bigger change in our whole system, since making changes in them would require evaluating some other statements. (Quine, 1964, p. 43)

The most substantial objection that is raised by Grice and Strawson is that Quine’s holism does not necessarily invalidate the analytic synthetic distinction. Grice and Strawson claim the two upshots of confirmation holism, which are mentioned previously, do not necessarily refute the notion of ‘synonymy’; rather they only compel us to revise it. To say that a statement cannot be confirmed by experience in isolation does not mean that it cannot be confirmed at all. In a holistic framework, an individual statement in a belief system or theory can be confirmed only when we make certain assumptions about the truth or falsity of other statements. For instance, experience can confirm or disconfirm a single statement of Einstein’s theory when we assume that the rest of the theory is true. When we are faced with an experience that disconfirms our theory we can choose which statements we will preserve as true and which statements we will change. Grice and Strawson propose a modified definition of synonymy to save analyticity from Quine’s objection:

...two statements are synonymous if and only if any experiences which, *on certain assumptions about the truth-values of other statements*, confirm or disconfirm one of the pair, also, *on the same assumptions*, confirm or disconfirm the other to the same degree. (Grice and Strawson, 1956, p. 156)



However, according to Quine, the fact that two statements are confirmed or disconfirmed by the same experiences and on the same truth assumptions only indicates the fact that we choose to revise statements that are related and that are on the same topic. For instance, when we reevaluate the statement that there are brick houses on Elm Street we may also reevaluate some related statements on the same topic. However, this would not entail that those statements are synonymous. That is, two statements that are confirmed by the same experiences does not have to be synonymous, rather they are only related (germane) to the same experience. (Quine, 1964, p. 43)

Grice and Strawson go on to argue that, contrary to what Quine believes, the fact that every statement can be revised in principle is not incompatible with the analytic-synthetic distinction. Their argument is based on the claim that the revision of analytic statements is radically different from the revision of synthetic ones. When one revises and gives up an analytic statement, she does not simply admit the falsity of the statement; rather she changes a concept or a set of concepts. In giving up a synthetic statement on the other hand, one simply admits its falsity. It is possible that one holds the statement “all bachelors are unmarried men” as true at one time, and false at another time. However, this happens not as a result of change of opinions or belief but as a result change in our concept ‘bachelor’ or ‘unmarried man’. So, according to Grice and Strawson giving up an analytic statement requires a change or shift in the meaning of concepts, whereas giving up a synthetic statement does not. This difference between conceptual revision and empirical revision can serve to draw a clear cut distinction between analytic and synthetic statements. Even though Quine is correct in claiming that no statement is immune to revision, there is a sharp differences between the kinds of revision we make and thus between analytic and synthetic statements. (Grice and Strawson, 1956, p. 157)

As Peter Hylton also notes, Carnap too makes the very similar point. He agrees with Quine on that “no statement is immune to revision”. However, he still holds that the analytic-synthetic distinction is legitimate on the basis of the way through which they are revised. According to Carnap, any revision of analytic statement is a change of language and hence a change of concepts. When language is changed it is possible that an analytic statement comes out to be false since the meanings of words will change. So, according to Carnap, an analytic statement differs from a

synthetic statement in the sense that it is immune to revision provided that there is no change of language. That is to say, the analytic-synthetic distinction can be accounted for on the basis of a significant epistemological difference between the two. Hylton characterizes the change of language as *external revision*, and change of belief within the language as *internal revision*. According to Carnap, in internal revision (revision of a synthetic statement) one needs to make a justification. For instance, in order to assert the falsity of the statement ‘the sun evolves around the earth’ we need some positive evidences to support our claim. For Carnap, in order to make justification we have to presuppose a language. However, in making an external revision we are merely shifting from one language to another one, from one framework of justification to another one. This is why; in revising analytical statements no justification is required. External revision is merely a pragmatic matter. We prefer to choose one language over another for pragmatic reasons only; therefore we need no further justification other than the language’s being fruitful, simple etc.. On the other hand, in making internal revision we attempt to achieve truth. (Hylton, 2002, p. 17-20) In short, according to both Carnap and, Grice and Strawson; there is a radical epistemological difference between analytic and synthetic statements; therefore, Quine holism is perfectly compatible with the analytic-synthetic distinction.

Quine does not disagree that language or theory change is due to some pragmatic considerations. On the contrary he sees theories as tools to make future predictions. For instance, he states that the law of excluded middle has been revised to simplify quantum mechanics. (Quine, 1964, p. 43) However, he takes a pragmatic standing not only towards language change but towards the change of synthetic statements too. That is to say, he believes that there is no clear cut distinction between internal revision and external revision. For Quine, the revision of analytic statements and the revision of synthetic statements are not different in kind; they are different only in degree. The decision of choosing between the revision of an analytic statement and the revision of a synthetic statement is due to our pragmatic intuitions. The fact that we are more inclined to preserves analytic and logical statements is because of convenience. He believes that Carnap’s distinction of internal and external question is plausible only if he assumes that there is an analytic-synthetic distinction beforehand. Therefore, his appeal to external and internal revision to explain analyticity is unjustified and circular. As he puts:

The issue over there being classes seems more a question of convenient conceptual scheme; the issue over there being centaurs, or brick houses on Elm Street, seems more a question of fact. But I have been urging that this difference is only one of degree, and that it turns upon our vaguely pragmatic inclination to adjust one strand of fabric of science rather than another in accommodating some particular recalcitrant experience. Conservatism figures in such choices, and so does the quest for simplicity. (Ibid, p. 45-46)

Do revision of language and revision of beliefs are of the same class as Quine states? Even though Quine offers a very strong argument that they are, there is a sense that there should be a qualitative difference between them. As written previously, analyticity is defined as being true in terms of meanings. So, analytic statements wholly depend on what words mean in each context. In order to classify a statement as analytic we have to fix the language and the context in which the statement is uttered. That is, the statement “all bachelors are unmarried men” is analytic only within the framework of a particular language. On the other hand, the truth of a synthetic statement within a language depends on further considerations such as empirical facts. Carnap’s suggestion that analytic statements cannot be revised when language is fixed, whereas synthetic statements can, I believe, is an important difference that should not be underestimated. Even though we take a pragmatic account for the revision of synthetic statements too (as Quine claims) the difference between external and internal revision does not seem to be merely in degree. On the one hand the revision leads us to shift our whole theory, on the other; it leads us to change one small part of it. That is to say, even though internal and external revisions are both done in terms of pragmatic considerations, nevertheless they are quite different in other respects. Revising an analytic statement does not merely alter a big part of a theory, it rather alters the whole theory itself. Analytic and synthetic statements may be confirmed or disconfirmed on pragmatic grounds but making change in the former necessarily alters a whole system of belief while making change in the latter does not. I think this difference can be seen as a sufficient tool to draw the analytic-synthetic distinction.

We have seen that in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” Quine offers two arguments in order to show that the analytic-synthetic distinction is ill founded. His first argument is based on the fact that analyticity presupposes synonymy of which no satisfactory and clear explanation can be given. His second argument is based on his holism where he claims that every statement is revisable in

principle and cannot be revised in isolation. Grice and Strawson oppose Quine by claiming that his first argument is not strong enough to refute analyticity and that his second argument does not threaten the analytic-synthetic distinction at all. Grice and Strawson's argument indicates that holism that Quine uses to solidify his rejection of analyticity is in fact compatible with the analytic-synthetic distinction. It seems that, although Quine minimizes the differences between analytic and synthetic statements there is still a fundamental difference that should not be overlooked so easily. That is, synthetic statements are usually revised within a language or theory, whereas analytic statements are always externally revised.

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