Dumitrescu Bogdan Andrei - The incompatibility of analytic statements with Quine’s universal revisability

Abstract: This very brief essay is concerned with Grice and Strawson’s article “In Defense of a Dogma” which was a response to Quine’s influential paper “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”. The two authors argue that the analytic/synthetic distinction is compatible with Quine’s revisability thesis. I will attempt to criticize their argument for the compatibility between the two doctrines and show that they are indeed incompatible as Quine argued.

1. Introduction

One can argue that Quine’s most important idea expounded in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” (1951) is, what I shall call, the revisability thesis. It is the idea that any statement can be revised if we make sufficient changes in our system of beliefs or, rather, if we make drastic enough changes in our body of knowledge (which includes all the established sciences). We can give up any statement or belief in the face of contradictory experiences. However, Quine maintains that the revisability thesis is incompatible with the analytic/synthetic distinction. Any analytic statement being true by definition is not consistent with his holistic view of knowledge.

But the authors Grice and Strawson disagree with this contention. In their article, “In Defense of a Dogma” (1956), they maintain that Quine’s doctrine that no statement is unrevisable is not incompatible, but quite consistent with the analytic/synthetic distinction. They argue that if we can “make sense” of the idea that the same form of words (having a certain meaning) can be true at one time and at another time (having a different meaning) they can be false, then we can understand what “conceptual revision” means. If this kind of conceptual revision is intelligible, then even analytic statements can be revised and thus, Quine’s views can be compatible with the analytic/synthetic distinction.
My aim in this short essay is to analyze and criticize this argument from Grice and Strawson with the help of some of the works of Charles Pigden (1987) and Hilary Putnam (1985). However, I do not intend to defend Quine’s view or argue against the existence of analytic statements. My goal is to show that Grice and Strawson’s argument for the compatibility between Quine’s views and the analytic/synthetic distinction is not satisfactory.

2. The revisability of analytic statements

The final part of Quine’s article is what concerns Grice and Strawson. It is, of course, the section where he expounds his holistic view of knowledge, an empiricist theory without the use of the analytic/synthetic distinction and reductionism. “Total science”, as he calls it, is like a field whose center is comprised of pure mathematics and logic. From then on, the empirical sciences comprise the rest of the field and, finally, at the periphery lay the statements of experience. Changes in the interior of the field are thus caused by the conflicts with the observation statements at the periphery. Having established this, he states:

“Furthermore it becomes folly to seek a boundary between synthetic statements, which hold contingently on experience, and analytic statements which hold come what may. [...] Conversely, by the same token, no statement is immune to revision. Revision even of the logical law of the excluded middle has been proposed as a means of simplifying quantum mechanics [...]” (Quine 1951, pp.460)

From this, one can argue that a statement such as “A bachelor is an unmarried man.” is not in fact an analytic statement, but a synthetic one. A sufficient number of experiences, such as the changing of the meaning of “bachelor” in dictionaries could change the truth value of the above statement. If I were to experience such a change of meaning occurring in a dictionary, then I could say that I have acquired new knowledge based on experience alone.

But Grice and Strawson say that analyticity is quite compatible with there being no statement immune to revision. If the meaning of “bachelor” would be changed to mean “overweight man” instead of “unmarried man”, then the statement “A bachelor is an overweight man.” would become an analytic statement. They state:

“Acceptance of this doctrine (revisability of all statements) is quite consistent with adherence to the distinction between analytic and synthetic statements. [...] Any form of
words at one time held to express something true may, no doubt, at another time, come to be held to express something false. [...] And if we can make sense of this idea, then we can perfectly well preserve the distinction between the analytic and the synthetic, while conceding to Quine the revisability-in-principle of everything we say.” (Grice, Strawson 1956, pp. 471)

Now, of course, all of this depends on how we define analyticity. I shall make use of the idea that an analytic statement is a statement that is true by definition or true in virtue of the meanings of its terms. In the following section, I will attempt to criticize the argument given by Grice and Strawson and refer to the works of Charles Pigden and Hilary Putnam.

3. Against Grice and Strawson

3.1. The compatibility

Why can’t analytic statements be true at one time and false at another? After all, if we understand analyticity as being true by definition, then the truth value of an analytic statement must depend solely on the definition in use. But definitions may change and what was true at one time will be false at another. If we don’t deny this, then why can’t we accept that the revisability-in-principle thesis is compatible with analytic statements?

Charles Pigden in “Two Dogmatists” (1987) argues that if we accept this compatibility then we would obtain a very different version of revisability than Quine advocated for. He states the following:

“To maintain the distinction in the face of universal revisability, it is necessary to maintain (a) that there is a difference between rejecting a proposition as false and dropping the concepts involved; (b) that whenever a supposed analyticity is rejected, this is because it has either metamorphosed into a synthetic falsehood or because we have ceased to use the concepts in question (it is not so much false as unspoken) and (c) that if the concepts are revived (perhaps embodied in different words) the statement (or its equivalent) would again be true. But this is to deny revisability in Quine’s sense.” (Pigden 1987, pp.189)

Pigden goes on to say that there are statements which, given their meanings, can only be true, even if nobody actually utters them. The revisability thesis that Grice and Strawson
maintain would be uncontroversial and distinct from the radical version that Quine was advocating.

However, I find their contentions to be problematic. I shall take the three hypotheses laid out by Pigden as true and attempt to show the inconveniences they produce together. Let’s take the example of the analytic statement “A bachelor is an unmarried man.” We’ll suppose two cases following the (a) hypothesis: A case where we reject the statement as being false and a case where we drop the concept of bachelor. In my view, both cases should be results of certain experiences.

We might reject the statement as false when the meaning of the term “bachelor” is changed in the dictionaries. As for the second case, we might drop the concept if, over generations, marriages would disappear out of tradition so as to make the use of “bachelor” obsolete.

Hypothesis (b) offers two reasons for the rejection of an analytic statement: if the statement has turned into a false synthetic statement or if we have stopped using the concepts. As Pigden points out, if we have stopped using the concept of “bachelor” due to the disappearance of marriages, let’s say, then the statement “A bachelor is an unmarried man.” doesn’t become false, it becomes rather useless and it would not make sense to integrate it into our system of beliefs. But nonetheless, it does not cease to be an analytic statement.

What I find peculiar is the first case: the one in which the statement has “metamorphosed” into a false synthetic statement. Grice and Strawson would say that after a new meaning is established to the term “bachelor”, the statement “A bachelor is an unmarried man.” would cease to be analytic and turn into a false synthetic statement. I suppose then, if the meaning of “bachelor” would be “overweight man”, the statement “A bachelor is an overweight man.” would become analytic.

Here, in my opinion, is where Grice and Strawson are mistaken. Usually, when we think of analytic statements we believe that no knowledge can be produced by them. If someone were to tell me that all matter is extended I would not be compelled to say that I have learned something new. I’d know by the very definition of “matter” that it is extended in space. I’d know it is true in virtue of the meaning of the term. The term would be reasserting its own meaning. And having this in mind, we can say that a characteristic of analytic
statements (as Kant once said) is that they do not produce new knowledge. New knowledge can be produced by synthetic statements.

Thus, if I were walking down a street perfectly used to the idea that the meaning of “bachelor” is “unmarried man” and somebody would come up to me to inform me that the meaning of “bachelor” had changed to “overweight man”, then I’d acquire new knowledge. The statement “A bachelor is an overweight man.” would appear to me to be a true synthetic statement. And if this was so, then the statement “A bachelor is an unmarried man.” would not cease to be an analytic statement, because, arguably, it was never one to begin with if we accept that these changes in meanings can provide us with new knowledge.

Grice and Strawson’s argument was that if we could make sense of the idea that a statement taken with a certain meaning can be true at one time and the same statement with a different meaning at another time can be false, then we can make sense of the idea of “conceptual revision”. And then, if we make sense of conceptual revision we can reconcile Quine’s view with the analytic/synthetic distinction. I agree that we can understand conceptual revision and I believe that it is a common occurrence. However, this conceptual revision betrays the fact that the statements that we commonly think of as analytic are in fact, synthetic, due to the realization that a revised “analytic statement” produces new knowledge.

Therefore, we cannot maintain the analytic/synthetic distinction along with universal revisability using Grice and Strawson’s hypotheses, because the process of revising analytic statements turns them into synthetic ones, in light of the fact that “revised analytic statements” produce new knowledge.

Lastly, concerning hypothesis (c), I maintain that (in the case of the discontinuation of marriages) if the concept of “bachelor” would be revived, then the statement “A bachelor is an unmarried man.” would indeed still be true. But as I said above, it would have never become false in the first place. The terms would have only been unused, unspoken as Pigden suggested.

3.2 Moderate revisability

As a closing remark, I will refer to a position maintained by Hilary Putnam that Pigden brought into discussion. A supporter of Grice and Strawson could argue that universal
revisability in Quine’s sense is false to begin with. Putnam argued in his book “Realism and Reason” (1983) that we cannot accept an extreme revisability thesis, because there is one statement that is unrevisable: “Not every proposition is both true and false.” He states:

“If every statement is such that under some circumstances it might be rational to revise it, then under some circumstances it might be rational to accept that every statement is both true and false. Is this the case? Well, it certainly doesn’t seem to be the case.” (Putnam 1983, pp. 101)

But as Pigden remarks, this does not help Grice and Strawson. Furthermore, their claim was that Quine’s views could be reconciled with the analytic/synthetic distinction and not necessarily other weaker forms of revisability. While Grice and Strawson refer mostly to meanings of terms, Putnam seems to be concerned more with aprioricity and necessity than with analyticity.

4. Conclusion

In this essay I attempted to criticize Grice and Strawson’s argument for the compatibility of Quine’s universal revisability thesis and the analytic/synthetic distinction. My intention was not to defend Quine’s view or maintain the non-existence of analytic statements, only to show that Grice and Strawson’s argument was unsatisfactory.

Their argument went as follows: We can accept that no statement is in principle immune from revision and the analytic/synthetic distinction if we can make sense of the idea of “conceptual revision”. Conceptual revision meant that one form of words with a certain meaning can be true at one time and the same form of words with a different meaning can be false at another time.

I argued that this conceptual revision is flawed, because, contrary to what Grice and Strawson believe, it “turns” analytic statements into synthetic statements. If the meaning of “bachelor” is changed from “unmarried man” to “overweight man”, then upon an utterance of the statement “A bachelor is an overweight man.” one can argue that this statement produces new knowledge much like any synthetic statement does. Therefore, Grice and Strawson have only succeeded in blurring the lines between analytic and synthetic statements much like Quine intended to in the first place.
References

Quine, W. V. (1951) Two Dogmas of Empiricism. Cornell University. Philosophical Review 60, pp. 450-462

