

[Guest blog on Eric Schliesser's [Digressions and Impressions](#)]

### Quine's dissatisfaction with "Two Dogmas"

I've been addressing myself to the problem of synopsisizing my views on analytic-synthetic for your new department. I am sorry to say that I find it's no go.

[...]

Now the point is that my rather tentative negative strictures on analytic-synthetic have had plenty of attention, disproportionate attention. I don't want to issue a public recapitulation now, even in outline; in fact I feel it would be in bad taste.

I might feel differently if the doctrine concerned were a positive philosophy. But what is it? (a) The observation that the analytic-synthetic distinction has never been adequately defined, though all too widely taken for granted. (b) The tentative conjecture that epistemology might develop more fruitfully under some very different sort of conceptualization, which I do not provide. (c) The suggestion that the analytic-synthetic idea is engendered by an untenably reductionistic phenomenalism. (Quine to Weiss, June 18, 1951)

“Two Dogmas of Empiricism” is perhaps the most influential philosophical article of the twentieth century. The above letter to Paul Weiss, however, suggests that Quine himself was dissatisfied with the paper. In this blog post, I reconstruct the nature of Quine’s discontent.

Quine wrote “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” for the 1950 APA Eastern Division Meeting in Toronto. He received an invitation from Max Black (the chairman of the Program Committee) after he had taken up the vice-presidency of the Division in January 1950. Black was planning to organize a symposium at which representatives of the three main branches of philosophy—i.e. speculative philosophy, critical philosophy, and moral philosophy—would give an overview of “the questions and issues [that] remain still to be settled in the light of the programs and achievements of the previous half century’s work” (APA to Quine, January 17, 1950). The other two invited speakers were Grace De Laguna (speculative philosophy) and William Frankena (moral philosophy) (Black to Quine, March 2, 1950).

From the very beginning, Quine hesitated (“I am not at my best in historical surveys, and can well conceive that, as the committee’s plans evolve, better alternatives emerge”, January 20, 1950), but he eventually accepted the invitation after Black downplayed the historical component of the assignment (APA to Quine, February 6, 1950). Perhaps Quine’s reluctance to accept the invitation is a first indication that he did not feel ready to share his worries about some of the empiricists’ most central commitments.

“Two Dogmas of Empiricism” was an immediate success. Within six months after the APA meeting, Stanford, Chicago, and the Institute for Unified Science organized conferences and symposia to discuss the paper. In his letter to Weiss, however, Quine claims that the attention is unwarranted.\* His main complaint seems to be that “Two Dogmas” is too ‘negative’ to

make a significant contribution to contemporary philosophy (“I might feel differently if the doctrine concerned were a positive philosophy”). There is much evidence that supports this interpretation. At one of the symposia on “Two Dogmas”, for instance, Quine opens his lecture with the claim that “I do not flatter myself that [“Two Dogmas”] contributes a new idea to philosophy. The paper is negative: an expression of distrust of two doctrines” (“The Present State of Empiricism”, May 26, 1951). Also in a letter to Joseph Clark, Quine claims that he feels “much less content at criticism than at construction” and that this explains “why the ideas of ‘Two Dogmas’, reiterated for years in my course on the Philosophy of Language and in private disputation, were so slow in getting into print” (Quine to Clark, April 17, 1951).

From a contemporary perspective, Quine’s assessment seems pretty odd. For “Two Dogmas” is perhaps best known for its sixth section (“Empiricism without the Dogmas”) in which he introduces his holistic picture of inquiry, his philosophy of logic, and his notorious claim that “no statement is immune to revision” (1951, 43). How could Quine have believed that “Two Dogmas” does not contribute ‘a new idea to philosophy’?

Again, Quine’s letter to Weiss suggests an answer. In the last paragraph of the above-cited fragment, Quine summarizes the sixth section by claiming that it only contains ‘the tentative conjecture that epistemology might develop more fruitfully under some very different sort of conceptualization’ and, most importantly, that he *does not provide any such conceptualization himself*. When we reconsider the core of Quine’s *negative* argument in “Two Dogmas”—the claim that the empiricists had failed to come up with a strict, empirically satisfying definition of analyticity—it becomes clear that he is simply using the very same standards to evaluate his own proposal. Quine was dissatisfied with “Two

Dogmas” because he did not practice what he preached; if Carnap’s epistemology was in need of empirical clarification, so was his own holistic alternative. Indeed, in the above-mentioned letter to Joseph Clark, Quine admits that the key concepts of his holistic account are still very much unclear: “there is [...] much more to be said” about notions like “a ‘convenient conceptual scheme’ and a ‘recalcitrant experience’, and much that I am not yet able to say” (Quine to Clark, April 17, 1951).

In the end, Quine *did* manage to clarify his epistemology. In the 1950s and 1960s, he developed a complex genetic account that satisfied his own empiricist strictures (e.g. in *Word and Object*). Quine’s evaluation of “Two Dogmas”, however, largely remained the same. Even in 1968, seventeen years after the paper’s first publication in *The Philosophical Review*, Quine refused to discuss the paper in response to a question from a fellow philosopher; he argues that his account in “Two Dogmas” is too “metaphorical” and that “it is a waste of time” to further debate the view as it is outlined in the famous sixth section (Quine to Schwartzmann, November 21, 1968). Quine’s last word on “Two Dogmas” is from 1991, when he published “Two Dogmas in Retrospect”. Yet even 40 years after he first presented the paper in Toronto, Quine still seems to believe that the paper did not make a positive contribution: he recalls that he “had not thought to look on [his] strictures over analyticity as the stuff of revolution. It was mere criticism, a negative point with no suggestion of a bright replacement” (1991, 267).

\* It is possible, of course, that Quine was just trying to be humble; or that he did not want to offend his empiricist friends (i.e. Carnap). Any such interpretation, however, ignores the fact that Quine’s assessment of “Two Dogmas” has always been quite negative (as we shall see). Furthermore, in his letters, Quine is always much more confident about the quality of his

other papers (both before and after “Two Dogmas”), even when he is criticizing his friends.

## Literature

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