

**Philosophy 308**  
***The Language Revolution***  
**Russell Marcus**  
**Hamilton College, Fall 2014**

**Class #15: Intro to Quine and Meaning Holism**

# Business

- Paper #2 Assignment
- Quine for the next three classes
  - Spencer on “Two Dogmas...” today
  - John and Ryan on “Ontological Relativity” on Thursday
  - Me on the whole mess next Tuesday
- Then Kripkenstein (Nick and Hal; Brendon and TC)

# Summary

## Logical Empiricism and the Verification Theory of Meaning

# Verification, Meaning, and Foundationalism

- Logical Empiricism:
  - ▶ All of science can be founded on the basis of observation statements in conjunction with the logical and mathematical principles used to regiment and derive those observations.
  - ▶ Philosophy, where legitimate, is a kind of science.
- Observation statements have meaning exactly in so far as they can be verified.
- The core idea of the principle of verification is that all our legitimate claims are traceable to a core set of claims which refer only to things or events that we can experience.
- Individual claims about sense experience are verifiable atomically and conclusively.
  - ▶ “There is a class of empirical propositions of which it is permissible to say that they can be verified conclusively. It is characteristic of these propositions, which I have elsewhere called “basic propositions,” that they refer solely to the content of a single experience, and what may be said to verify them conclusively is the occurrence of the experience to which they uniquely refer... Propositions of this kind are “incorrigible,” ...[in that] it is impossible to be mistaken about them except in a verbal sense” (Ayer, 10).
- Empiricist foundationalism

# Observation Statements and Analytic Ones

- A fundamental presupposition of logical empiricism is that one can make a clear distinction between an observation statement and an analytic one.
  - Wittgenstein's distinction between sensible statements and logical nonsense
- Analytic truths are purely logical.
- Synthetic claims trace back, in some way, to observation.
- The whole of the atomist movement, from Locke and Hume through Wittgenstein and the logical empiricists rests on this distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions.

# Problems with Verificationism

- Difference between nonsense and metaphysics
- The circularity objection
- Difficulties refining the notion of verification
- The even bigger problem: holism

# Holism

- Quine's holism devastated the logical empiricists' project.
- Quine attacks the presupposition that one can make a clear distinction between an observation statement and an analytic one.
- The worries about isolating observation statements are already present in Hempel's article.
  - ▶ "In the language of science, and for similar reasons even in prescientific discourse, a single statement usually has no experiential implications. A single sentence in a scientific theory does not, as a rule, entail any observations sentences; consequences asserting the occurrence of certain observable phenomena can be derived from it only by conjoining it with a set of other, subsidiary, hypotheses" (Hempel, 56).

# Holism and Atomism

- Wittgenstein and the logical empiricists presented a system on which individual sentences, pictures of states of affairs, were verified or not, and connected only by logic into a big theory.
- The holist's claim is that the meaning of a single expression is elliptical, incomplete on its own.
- It requires, for its meaning, reference to an entire linguistic framework, a theoretical context which forms the background to that expression.
- "If...cognitive significance can be attributed to anything, then only to entire theoretical systems formulated in a language with a well-determined structure" (Hempel 57).
- Semantic holism: the unit of empirical significance is not the individual sentence, but the entire theory.



# Spencer on Two Dogmas