Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism"

1. The Two Dogmas

(1) the analytic/synthetic distinction
(2) reductionism (of individual meaningful statements to complexes of possible confirmatory experience).

According to Quine, abandoning these dogmas will pave the way for an appropriately pragmatic and "enlightened" philosophy.

2. The First Dogma: The Analytic/Synthetic Distinction

The overall question: How can we make sense of a distinct class of statements that are true (or false) in virtue of meaning?

Foreshadowing: If we can’t make satisfactory sense of analytically true sentences, then the very notion of meaning itself must be called into question.

Preliminary attempts to understand analyticity:

(a) Hume: Analytically true statements are those that are in virtue of a relation of ideas (as opposed to in virtue of matters of fact.)

Quine’s reply: This thought only labels the problem of understanding the analytically true (and analytically false). Little progress has been made on understanding analyticity itself.

(b) Leibniz: Analytic statements are those that are true "in all possible worlds."

Quine’s reply: Apart from the colorful but obscure imagery of possible worlds, this proposal tries to base the notion of analyticity on notions of necessity and possibility. The trouble is that when one tries in turn to explain the notion of a necessary truth (a modal notion), one typically appeals right back to some notion of analyticity. Thus little progress seems to have been made.

(c) Kant: Analytic truths are those whose "predicates contain their subjects."

Quine’s reply: This is unacceptably metaphorical. What does "containment" amount to in this context? Moreover, the analysis is incomplete: many analytic statements don’t even have subject-predicate structure.

Examples (conditionals):
"If LA is to the west of Reno, then Reno is to the East of LA."
"If St. Louis is North of Memphis and Memphis North of New Orleans, then New Orleans is South of St. Louis"

What Kant’s proposal comes down to: analytic truths are those that are true on the basis of meanings alone.

3. Meanings and Synonymy

The general idea: Analytic truths are those which are converted into logical truths when we substitute synonymous terms for one another.

Comments:
This idea presupposes that we can make antecedent sense of the notion of a logical truth, which would seem to require that we are already able to grasp the meanings of logical terms. Quine does not dwell upon this point (unfortunately).

This approach also requires us to have an antecedent grasp of the notion of synonymy—a sense of when two terms or predicates mean the same thing. It is the understanding of this notion to which Quine now turns.

Understanding synonymy: Quine asks: What then is the meaning of ‘meaning’?
When can we say that two terms or predicates have the same or different meanings?

(i) A non-starter (psychologism): Two terms have the same meaning when they are associated with the same idea or mental item (also known as "the myth of the museum").

(ii) Another dead-end: Synonymous terms are those that have the same reference or extension.

Frege-type counterexamples: Cases in which two co-refering terms (e.g. ‘The first Postmaster General’, ‘the inventor of the bifocals’; or ‘the morning Star’ and ‘the evening star’) or co-extensive predicates (e.g. ‘has a heart’, ‘has a kidney’) clearly have different meanings.

Same thing about names: Different names (‘Superman’, ‘Clark Kent’) for the same thing don’t seem synonymous or to have the same "cognitive value". It seems, then, as if there must be something more to the meaning of a name than mere reference. (We’ve met with this before—right?)

(iii) Perhaps synonymous terms are those which are intersubstitutable salva veritate (saving truth-value).
Here Quine asks: in which contexts does this principle apply?
Unlike merely co-referential or co-extensive terms, synonymous terms must then be those that preserve truth-value in certain contexts, such as modal contexts. In other words, one might be tempted to draw the distinction between the genuinely synonymous and merely co-extensive or co-referential in terms of necessity or possibility (i.e., while all bachelors are of necessity unmarried man, it is somehow possible for a creature with a heart not to be a creature with a kidney). But once again, that threaten to rest our account of synonymy upon some notion of necessity or possibility, which itself would seem to rest upon some notion of analyticity. Once more, we seem to have made little genuine progress in our attempt to understand analyticity via synonymy.

4. The Second Dogma: Reductionism

Here’s another try at unpacking the notion of analyticity:

First suppose that all sentences carry with them their own conditions of verification (or confirmation). Then we might understand as analytically true any statement that could be confirmed by any experience whatsoever (or possibly, couldn’t be disconfirmed by any experience).

Synonymous terms might then also be understood as those with equivalent contributions to the verification conditions of the sentences of which they form parts.

The trouble Quine finds with this idea is that individual sentences simply don’t have intrinsic confirmation conditions, independent of the verification conditions we understand other sentences to have. As Quine puts it, sentences face "the tribunal of experience," not one-by-one, but rather as a corporate whole. The minimal unit of meaning is thus not the individual sentence (though it could be a minimal unit of truth), but rather a complete battery or constellation of sentences (perhaps one might follow Quine and call it a "theory"— though I wouldn’t).

Quine’s conception of empirical confirmation or rational theory change ("The Web of Belief"): In the face of recalcitrant experience, ultimately pragmatic choices must be made. Depending upon how many revisions to the web one is willing to tolerate, one can always make changes either at the periphery or in the interior of the web. In principle, no statement is wholly immune to revision, and for any statement, one can in principle decide to hang onto it, by making necessary changes throughout the rest of one’s web of belief.

Comments: This is mostly just a picture of a position, not really an argument for it
5.  
A Quinean Upshot (The Indeterminacy of Translation):

If the notion of synonymy is ultimately suspect, then what of the idea that ‘red’ (in English) is synonymous with ‘rouge’ (in French), or that ‘Schnee ist weiss’ (in German) means that ‘Snow is white’ (in English)?

Quine concludes (in his book, *Word and Object*, 1960) that his failure to find a satisfactory account of synonymy and analytic truth renders suspect the very idea that there are determinate translation schemes between languages. In principle, for any language, one could come up with incompatible, yet empirically equivalent, translation schemes for that language.