

## Diversifying Syllabi 2015 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

SECTION ONE: to be completed by presenter

---

**Article/Essay Title:** “The Analytic/Synthetic Distinction”

**Author:** Gillian Russell

**Readability:** Hard

- There are individual sections of the paper that will be accessible for undergraduate audiences, while others may require too much background or may be too technical for an introductory course in philosophy of language.
- Here are some excerpts instructors may find especially useful:
  - o Page 712-714: Good overview of the different issues at stake in the analytic/synthetic distinction and the early philosophical history of this distinction.
  - o Page 715-716: Clear and helpful overview of Carnap’s “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology”.
  - o Pages 716-720: Summaries of Quine’s famous objections to analyticity (with helpful references throughout the paper to the relevant corresponding texts).
  - o Pages 720-721: Helpful discussion of non-Quinean, traditional reservations about analyticity.

### Overview:

Russell provides an overview of the history of the analytic-synthetic distinction. She begins with discussions of Kant and Frege and then discusses the logical empiricist’s treatment of the distinction. She provides a list of the ten central challenges to the notion of analyticity. She then looks at how analyticity and related notions have started to return to prominence in more contemporary philosophy and concludes by considering five central challenges for any contemporary treatment of the analytic-synthetic distinction.

### Key Definitions:

“On its simplest and strongest conception then, analyticity is a semantic property of truth-bearers which explains their truth, necessity and a priority” (712).

- Truth-bearers: synthetic truths are true in virtue of the way the world is; analytic truths are true in virtue of the meaning of the terms/concepts alone.
- Modality/Necessity: what synthetic truths claim are contingent, whereas analytic truths seem to be necessary
- A priority: synthetic truths are known through experience, analytic truths are known independent of experience.

- Epistemic differences: to know synthetic truths we need access to the relevant empirical data; we only need to reflect on what the meanings of the concepts are to know analytic truths.

### **Brief Summary:**

- After laying out a provisional account of what we might take the analytic/distinction to consist in (see 'Key Definitions' above), Russell begins with Kant's distinctions in the *Jäsche Logic*, first *Critique*, and *Prolegomena* and explains that, for Kant, the negation of an analytic judgment is self-contradictory – which, he thinks, will mean that analytic judgments are both in turn necessary and a priori. (Kant is also of course defends the idea that we have plenty of synthetic a priori knowledge.)
- Frege in the *Grundlagen* criticizes Kant's definition of analyticity for restricting itself to claims of universal affirmative subject-predicate form and employing too simplistic a conception of meaning. Frege replaces Kant's psychologistic use of concepts to make sense of analyticity with an account that links analyticity to proof based on definitions and general logical laws. Frege's account, however, doesn't establish the assumption that the general laws of logic are a priori.
- Many logical empiricists were sympathetic to Frege's project of showing that arithmetic was analytic and were equally suspicious of Kant's notion of synthetic a priori truths. Above all, the "the logical empiricists wanted an explanation for necessity and a priority in general, one which would account for the mysterious epistemology and modal status of the truths of mathematics, logic and philosophy" (715).
- In "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology," Carnap famously argues that which sentences are analytic is a matter of convention (but this still gives us the needed explanation for the necessity/a priority of truths of mathematics/logic and justifies our talk of abstract objects). We have to get clear on whether we are asking questions internal to a given linguistic framework or external to a given framework.
- The logic empiricist's analysis of analyticity precipitated a serious skeptical backlash. 10 key arguments against these notions of analyticity:
  - o 1.) Quine's "Truth by Convention" questions whether definitions can explain truth and necessity/a priority. They seem to end up assuming, rather than explaining analyticity.
  - o 2.) Quine's 'Regress Argument' questions whether we can say that the basic truths of logic are true because they provide implicit definitions of the logical constants contained within them. These definitions themselves, however, rely on the truth of logic.
  - o 3.) Quine's "Carnap and Logical Truth" sets up a dilemma for the idea of 'truth in virtue of meaning': either this means truth is partially determined by meaning (which is trivially true) or it means truth is entirely determined by meaning (but paradigm cases of apparent analytic truths are still world-

- involving).
  - 4.) Quine's 'Circularity Argument' argues that the notion of 'analyticity' cannot be satisfactorily clarified/defined without relying on the concept of analyticity and so should be abandoned.
  - 5.) Quine's 'Argument from Confirmation Holism,' which argues that sentences in general are not meaning-bearers.
  - 6.) Quinean arguments against the idea that sentences can be made analytic by stipulative definition, given that analyticity often appears to be ephemeral.
  - 7.) Putnam's 'Robot Cat' challenges the apparent modal properties of analyticity.
  - 8.) Ordinary speakers often dissent from supposedly analytic sentences.
  - 9.) Considerations relating to semantic externalism, where speakers can use an expression competently without knowing how the reference/denotation would be determined.
  - 10.) Widespread vagueness in natural language undermines analyticity.
  
- Despite differences, Quine/Carnap were united in respect for empirical and formal sciences and suspicious of metaphysical obscurity relating to value, de re/de dicto necessity, numbers, sets, universals, and intensional meanings. Recent work, however, has pushed back somewhat against this line:
  - Katz has argued, following certain developments in linguistics, that our best scientific theories actually postulate intensional meanings.
  - Probabilistic theories in physics have made philosophers more sympathetic to the idea of modality, sound/complete semantics for first order modal logic has contributed to the clarity of modal claims, and Lewis' arguments for acceptance of possible worlds (by demonstrating their utility in analyzing notions such as meaning and causation) has also made philosophical room for analyticity.
  - Fine's arguments for realism about essential properties (as distinct from realism about necessary properties).
  
- 5 challenges for any contemporary account of analyticity:
  - 1.) Such an account should make clear what kinds of things can be analytic (propositions, sentence-types, utterances, etc.).
  - 2.) Such an account must contend with the Quinean dilemma that truth in virtue of meaning is either trivial or empty.
  - 3.) Such an account must get clear on precisely what the explanatory role is of analytic judgments, i.e., what precise modal and epistemic properties analyticity will explain.
  - 4.) Such an account must make sense of Kaplan's observation that there are sentences which are analytic, but also express contingent propositions.
  - 5.) Such an account must make sense of sentences that seem to be true in virtue of their meaning, but do not also seem to be analytic.

SECTION TWO: to be completed by note taker during discussion

---

**Possible Applications:**

- Philosophy of Language
- Epistemology
- Kant's Epistemology
- History of Analytic Philosophy
- Philosophy of Race

**Complementary Texts/Resources:**

- Excerpts from Kant's *Jäsche Logic*, *Critique of Pure Reason*, and *Prolegomena*
- Excerpts from Frege's *Grundlagen*
- Quine's "Two Dogmas of Empiricism"
- Carnap's "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology"
- Patricia Smith Churchland's "Forward" to *Word & Object*
- David Papineau's *Philosophical Devices*

**Possible Class Activities:**

- YouTube videos on Analytic/Synthetic Distinction
- Group work presenting each argument against analyticity

**What traditional texts might this text replace?**

- Depending on how deeply an instructor wants to delve into the details of the analytic/synthetic debate, this piece can serve as an accessible and helpful replacement of classical texts (e.g., Quine's "Two Dogmas" and Carnap's "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology") since it describes their views in what may be sufficient detail for undergraduates to get a good sense of what the relevant controversies are – again, depending on the instructors and course's aims.