I. THE PHILOSOPHY OF FUZZINESS

The last decade has produced a long series of articles criticizing a variety of precise definitions in philosophy on the grounds that they do not correspond to distinctions made in ordinary usage. We are told that all distinctions in ordinary languages are fuzzy. There are no sharp borderlines to be found in nature, and all attempts to impose them by the analytical philosopher are bound to lead to violations of ordinary usage. These points have been made, most eloquently, by a number of distinguished philosophers.

Though it is readily admitted that an adequate philosophy must account for the fuzziness found in every-day discourse, there are two key questions that may be asked: Can philosophy gain by proposing precise distinctions to replace the fuzzy concepts found in every-day discourse? Is it methodologically sound to formulate these definitions in terms of a formalized language? The purpose of this paper is to answer both of these questions in the affirmative. I shall try to maintain that such definitions, even in artificial languages, may lead to fruitful philosophical speculation; and that more insight can be gained about ordinary languages from this point of view than by an approach that stops at the level of fuzziness.

The raging debate of the last decade concerning the analytic-synthetic classification is perhaps the outstanding example of the great fight just mentioned. It will therefore serve as the principal illustration in terms of which I shall make my methodological points. It gives me special pleasure to dedicate this discussion to Professor Woodger, who has contributed much to the philosophy of precision.

II. THE GRAND DEBATE

During the years 1950–1956, at least twelve major books and articles

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were devoted to pros and cons on the analytic-synthetic debate. Since that time even more articles have appeared, but it seems fair to say that the major points on both sides are already contained in the earlier articles. Without a doubt Quine and White performed a major service in launching what may prove to be the most important losing battle in the history of modern philosophy. Perhaps now, after the passage of a few years, we are in a position to evaluate the merits of disputants on both sides unemotionally. I shall attempt to do this in the present section, as far as Quine’s views are concerned. I shall take up White’s position in the next section.

Quine, in [2], denounced what he considered two unjustifiable dogmas in empiricist philosophy. These views of his were reinforced in his book [8]. The two works together created a major stir amongst philosophers all over the world.

Specifically, Quine argued that the sharp distinction between analytic and synthetic statements is indefensible. He also stated that the belief that individual statements, especially in science, can be verified or falsified in isolation is a closely related indefensible dogma. His method of argument was to show, to his own satisfaction, that a variety of proposed definitions were unacceptable in principle, and to argue that any other type of definition of the term ‘analytic’ was doomed to failure.

His major effort was to demonstrate that there is a class of interdefinable terms such as ‘analytic’, ‘synonym’, ‘intentional language’, and ‘semantic rule’, which cannot be defined in terms of concepts outside the set. Since Quine feels that all of these concepts are too nebulous to have a precise meaning to him, he thought that an empiricist had no way of defining any of these terms to Quine’s satisfaction, without involving himself in a vicious circle. He therefore concluded that all these terms should be deleted from the language of philosophy.

His second dogma is related to the first one, if one is willing to accept the verifiability theory of meaning. If the meaning of a statement is to be found in terms of the method of verification, then presumably an analytically true statement is one that will be verified no matter what the facts turn out to be. However, this very definition presupposes that it is possible to verify statements in isolation, a dogma that Quine emphatically rejects.

Quine’s strongest arguments concern actual examples taken from