Quine's famous essay, 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism', is probably the most important philosophical article written in the last half-century. That it is important has been generally recognised; but it is Quine's own fault that there have been repeated misapprehensions about where its importance lies. For two-thirds of its length, the article appears to be propounding the thesis that the concepts of analyticity and syntheticity are spurious, on the ground that it is impossible to give non-circular definitions of the related terms. Accordingly, much time has been wasted over arguments about whether the challenge to explain a problematic notion in terms of less problematic ones is always legitimate, whether inability to meet it compels abandonment of the suspect notion, and the like. It is to be presumed that those who engaged Quine in controversy of this kind had not read on to the end of the article, because, when one does, one discovers that the original impression is quite misleading. In the last third of the article, Quine employs notions in terms of which it is quite straightforward to define 'analytic' and 'synthetic': in these terms, an analytic sentence is one such that no recalcitrant experience would lead us to withdraw our assignment to it of the value true, while a synthetic one is one such that any adequate revision prompted by certain recalcitrant experiences would involve our withdrawing an assignment to it of the value true. The position arrived at the conclusion of the article is not in the least that there would be anything incorrect about such a characterisation of the notions of an analytic and a synthetic sentence, but simply, that these notions have no application: as thus defined, there are no analytic sentences, and there are no synthetic ones.

But even in the concluding third of Quine's article, which is the important part, there are distinguishable theses, between which there is considerable tension; and discussion of these theses has suffered from a failure to distinguish between them. First, Quine presents a certain model
of language: language forms an articulated structure, with some sentences lying at the periphery and others at varying levels within the interior. Experience impinges, in the first place, only at the periphery; but, since the sentences which form the structure are connected with their neighbours by links, the impact of experience is transmitted from the periphery some distance inwards to the interior.

It is the presentation of this model of language which constitutes the principal contribution of 'Two Dogmas' to the philosophy of language. The model is presented, however, with such economy of expression that many readers have failed to notice the independence of this view of language from the two theses whose formulation immediately follows. Especially is this so since the article is overtly about the analytic/synthetic distinction, and the model of language as an articulated structure in itself tells us little about this distinction, although, as already noted, it does, if accepted, provide a means whereby the distinction can be formulated, a means whose existence the earlier two-thirds of the article appeared to deny. The two supplementary theses, on the other hand, do relate directly to the analytic/synthetic distinction: they are, in fact, the two theses already mentioned, asserting, respectively, the non-existence of synthetic and of analytic sentences. The theses are, namely, (i) that there is no sentence (and hence a fortiori no peripheral sentence) the assignment to which of the value true we cannot, if we wish, maintain in the face of any recalcitrant experience whatever, and (ii) that there is no sentence the withdrawal from which of the assignment of the value true might not form part of a revision made in response to some recalcitrant experience.

Not only have these two bold theses diverted attention from the intrinsic interest of the model of language as an articulated structure, but they have obscured its significance: for they do not merely supplement that model, but actually stand in some tension with it. In accordance with the first thesis, the revision of truth-assignments to the sentences of the language which is elicited in response to a recalcitrant experience may not affect any of the peripheral sentences, but only those lying below the periphery. But, if this is so, then, it seems, experience does not impinge particularly at the periphery; rather, it impinges on the articulated structure of our language as a whole, not at any one particular point. In that case, it becomes difficult to see how we can any longer maintain a distinction between periphery and interior: the periphery was introduced