

SEMANTIC HOLISM AND FICHTE'S *WISSENSCHAFTSLEHRE*

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It might be trivial to say that Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* is semantically holistic. However it is difficult to prove it strictly. So I would like to do it here.

1 Quine's semantic holism

Quine claimed in his article 'Empiricism and Two Dogmas' that analytic truth and synthetic truth cannot be distinguished. In its fifth section, he examined the approach by arguing that we divide the analytic statement and the synthetic one into statements that can be confirmed in every case and those that cannot be confirmed in some cases, based on the theory of verification.

Reductionism claims that "each statement, taken in isolation from its fellows, can admit of confirmation or infirmation at all."¹ However, this theory does not hold, because "our statements about the external world face the tribunal of sense experience not individually but only as a corporate body."² By this holism of confirmation, the distinction between analytic and synthetic truth becomes impossible.

His semantic holism can be summarized as follows.

verificationist semantics & (negation of distinction between analytic and synthetic \Leftrightarrow) holism of confirmation \Rightarrow semantic holism

I will quote the most famous part, which explicitly claims semantic holism:

"The idea of defining a symbol in use was, as remarked, an advance over the impossible term-by-term empiricism of Locke and Hume. The statement, rather than the term, came with Bentham to be recognized as the unit accountable to an empiricist critique. But what I am now urging is that even in taking the statement as unit we have drawn our grid too finely. The unit of empirical significance is the whole of science."³ (underlined by the author)

A decisive reason behind Quine's claim of the holism of confirmation is the inextricability thesis of a linguistic component and a factual component. We cannot divide a linguistic component and a factual component. However, empiricists think that "the truth of a statement is somehow analyzable into a linguistic component and a factual component," as shown by the following quote:

"The factual component must, if we are empiricists, boil down to a range of confirmatory experiences. In the extreme case where the linguistic component is all that matters, a true statement is analytic. [...] My present suggestion is that it is nonsense, and the root of much nonsense, to speak of a linguistic component and

¹ Quine, *From a Logical Point of View*, Harvard U.P., 1953, p. 41.

² *Ibid.* p. 41.

³ *Ibid.* p. 42.

a factual component in the truth of any individual statement.”⁴

This means that we cannot divide a statement and a fact and define the truth by the correspondence between them. Therefore, what we must decide to accept, or not, is language as a whole. As far as we admit the inextricability thesis, it is impossible to change the meanings of a word or a sentence independently from other words and sentences. Therefore, this problem is not a problem we can resolve by moderating our understanding of semantic holism but is, rather, a principal problem for semantic holism.

2 Quine and Fichte's claims for strong semantic holism

We can divide semantic holism as follows:

Weak semantic holism: the meaning of a word or sentence depends on the meaning of other words or sentences.

Strong semantic holism: each word or sentence does not have meaning but the whole of the theory has semantic content.

The semantic holism Quine made claims for is strong semantic holism, because he thought that “the unit of empirical significance is the whole of science”. The semantic holism Fichte made claims for is also strong semantic holism.

“Das schlechthin postulierte ist nicht möglich, erweist er [Idealismus], ohne die Bedingung eines zweiten, dieses zweite nicht, ohne die Bedingung eines dritten u.s.f.; also, es ist unter allem, was er aufstellt, gar keines einzeln möglich, sondern nur in der Vereinigung mit allen ist jedes einzelne möglich. Sonach kommt, seiner eigenen Behauptung nach, nur das Ganze im Bewusstseyn vor, und dieses Ganze ist eben die Erfahrung. Er will es näher kennen lernen, darum muss er es analysiren, und zwar nicht durch ein blindes Heruntappen, sondern nach der bestimmten Regel der Composition, so dass er unter seinen Augen das Ganze entstehen sehe.”⁵

He made similar claims in other places, and we can say that he made claims for a strong semantic holism. However, how should we understand the above quotation?

First, I show that this section cannot be understood in the same way as a more usual axiomatic system. Given that, for example, the five axioms of Euclidian geometry hold, then all theorems hold. Thus, if a theorem T does not hold, then not all five axioms can hold. Because, generally speaking, if ‘ $p \rightarrow q$ ’ holds, then its contradiction ‘ $\neg q \rightarrow \neg p$ ’ holds. However, it is not necessary to understand the theorem T in order to understand the five axioms, because we understand the five axioms without knowing all theorems. If ‘ $KaA \rightarrow KaT$ ’ holds (‘ KaA ’ means that a knows A), then its contraposition ‘ $\neg KaT \rightarrow \neg KaA$ ’ holds, but ‘ $A \rightarrow T$ ’ is not a sufficient condition of ‘ $KaA \rightarrow KaT$ ’; therefore, we cannot say ‘ $\neg KaT \rightarrow \neg KaA$ ’ from ‘ $A \rightarrow T$ ’. In order to say so, it is necessary that ‘ $Ka(A \rightarrow T)$ ’ holds. Therefore, according to ordinary understanding, the above section is irrational.

However, Fichte thought that ‘ Kap ’ must hold in order for ‘ p ’ to hold and also that ‘ $Ka(p \rightarrow q)$ ’ must hold in order that ‘ $p \rightarrow q$ ’. If so, if ‘ $p \rightarrow q$ ’ holds, then ‘ $Ka(p \rightarrow q)$ ’ holds and, furthermore, ‘ $Kap \rightarrow Kaq$ ’ holds. If ‘ $Kap \rightarrow Kaq$ ’ holds, then ‘ $\neg Kaq \rightarrow \neg Kap$ ’ holds. In this

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 41-42.

⁵ Fichte, *Erste Einleitung in die Wissenschaftslehre*, SWI, 448.

way, the above section becomes understandable.

Then, did Fichte think that 'Kap' is actually present in order for 'p' to hold? I would answer yes. When he explained the first principle in his *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, he thought that the correctness of 'A=A' depends on "I am". 'A=A' (i.e., 'A is A') according to him means that if A is, then A is. As for a necessary relation X between A in the antecedent and A in the consequent he said the following:

"X wenigstens ist *im Ich*, und *durch* das Ich gesetzt — denn das Ich ist es, welches im obigen Satze urtheilt, und zwar nach X als einem Gesetze urtheilt"⁶
„Beide (A im Subjecte und A im Prädikate) also sind, insofern sie gesetzt sind, im Ich gesetzt; und das im Prädicate wird, unter der Bedingung, dass das im Subjecte gesetzt sey, schlechthin gesetzt; und der obige Satz lässt demnach sich auch so ausdrücken: Wenn A *im Ich* gesetzt ist, so *ist es gesetzt*; oder — so *ist es*."⁷

This 'Ich' is not an individual subject, but 'das absolute Subjekt'⁸ or 'das absolute Ich.'⁹ Therefore, the semantic holism holds not for an individual subject but, rather, for 'das absolute Ich'. However, if a person selects idealism as his philosophical standpoint then, even if he is an individual, he would think that it must be known a priori whether every fact holds or not and assert semantic holism. In order to confirm such semantic holism, he must deduce explicitly all necessary conditions of the principle from it, and it would become the *Wissenschaftslehre*.

To the end that we prove that Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* is semantically holistic, we need to prove the following two things:

- ① Fichte denied the distinction between analytic and synthetic truth.
- ② Fichte is not a foundationalist.

Furthermore, in order to show the actual significance of Fichte's semantic holism, we need to consider how he could reply to an objection to semantic holism:

- ③ How does he explain changes in the meaning of language?

However, I would like to argue only for ① here.

3 Fichte's negation of the distinction between analytic and synthetic

If the distinction between analytic and synthetic truth is possible, then the distinction between a sentence that is true only due to its meaning and a sentence that is true due to its meaning and experience becomes possible. The former has a truth value independent from the latter. So, semantic holism cannot hold. Forder and Lepore claim, therefore, that it is a necessary condition for semantic holism to renounce the distinction between analytic and synthetic sentences.¹⁰

If Fichte's philosophy is semantically holistic, Fichte must have denied the distinction between analytic and synthetic sentences. I would like to consider this question here, but this issue is a little complicated. So, let us begin with explaining how Fichte understood the difference between a priori and a posteriori.

(1) Distinction between a priori and a posteriori

⁶ Fichte, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, SWI, 93.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. 97.

⁹ Ibid. 109.

¹⁰ Jerry Forder and Ernest Lepore, *Holism*, Blackwell, 1992, p. 23.

Fichte's distinction differs from Kant's distinction.

In Kant: Kant thought that a judgment with exact necessity and universality is a priori or pure judgment and a judgment without them is a posteriori or empirical judgment.¹¹ In this view it is impossible that one and the same judgment is a priori and a posteriori.

In Fichte: On the contrary, Fichte thought that all judgments can be a priori and also a posteriori.

“Inwiefern man jene letzten Resultate des Idealismus ansieht, als solche, als Folgen des Raisonnements, sind sie das *a priori*, im menschlichen Geiste; und inwiefern man ebendasselbe, falls Raisonnement und Erfahrung wirklich übereinstimmen, ansieht, als in der Erfahrung gegeben, heisst es *a posteriori*. Das *a priori* und das *a posteriori* ist für einen vollständigen Idealismus gar nicht zweierlei, sondern ganz einerlei; es wird nur von zwei Seiten betrachtet, und ist lediglich durch die Art unterschieden, wie man dazu kommt. Die Philosophie anticipirt die gesammte Erfahrung, *denkt* sie sich nur als nothwendig, und insofern ist sie, in Vergleich mit der wirklichen Erfahrung, *a priori*.”¹²

According to Fichte, a priori judgment is a judgment deduced from principle by inference and a posteriori judgment is a judgment that is produced by experience. If they are true, they coincide with each other and one and the same judgment can be given by both inference and experience. The difference between the two cases is in the way in which the judgment is reached.

If a priori judgments and a posteriori judgments are divided, without overlap, as Kant thought, a priori judgments can have meanings and truth values independently from a posteriori judgments and, therefore, semantic holism is denied, even if the distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments is not renounced. It is a necessary condition for semantic holism to renounce the Kantian distinction between a priori and a posteriori judgments. However, it is not a sufficient condition.

(2) Distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments

(a) A synthetic judgment with an empirical subject conception

According to Kant, analytic judgments are judgments whose predicates are contained in their subjects and synthetic judgments are judgments whose predicates are not contained.¹³ Kant would say that the judgment, “The bird is an animal”, is analytic, because the concept ‘animal’ is contained in the concept ‘bird’.

However, Fichte said that “The bird is an animal” is a synthetic judgment¹⁴. The concept ‘animal’ is certainly contained in the concept ‘bird’, but it is because the concept ‘animal’ is already inherent in the concept ‘bird’. The concept ‘bird’ was previously constructed by a synthetic operation. Fichte called such judgments, which are made from such synthetic concepts, synthetic judgments.

Kant would have recognized that ‘bird’ is an empirical concept and is constructed through a lot of experiences. However, once such a concept is given, the judgment “The bird is an animal” can be made by analyzing the subject concept; therefore, it is an analytic judgment. Kant gave the sentence “Gold is yellow metal”¹⁵ as such an example.

¹¹ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B3f.

¹² Fichte, *Erste Einleitung in die Wissenschaftslehre*, SWI, 447.

¹³ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A6f=B10

¹⁴ Fichte, *Grundlage der gesammten Wissenschaftslehre*, SWI, 116.

¹⁵ Kant, *Prolegomena*, § 2

According to Fichte, such a judgment, with its subject a synthetic concept and its predicate arrived at by analyzing the subject concept, is a synthetic judgment, while Kant thought it to be an analytic judgment. This said, these ‘synthetic concepts’ are not only ‘empirical concepts’ but also ‘a priori concepts’ according to Kant. So let us consider the latter next.

(b) A synthetic judgment with an a priori subject concept

Kant said that “A triangle has three sides” is an analytic sentence.¹⁶ The concept ‘triangle’ is a priori but it is also a concept that is constituted in combination with space as an a priori form of *Anschauung* and quantity (*Quantität*) as an a priori concept (*Kategorie*), one of “eine große Menge abgeleiteter Begriffe a priori.”¹⁷ Therefore Fichte would say the concept ‘triangle’ is synthetic and the judgment “A triangle has three sides” is also a synthetic judgment.

This said, if we understand correctly Kant’s distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments, then this distinction by Kant could be compatible to semantic holism. But Kant’s philosophy is not semantic holism, because of his distinction between a priori and a posteriori judgments.

(c) Distinction between empirical concepts and a priori concepts

Fichte thought that a concept can be explained by judgments (I explain this later). Therefore, the explanation of empirical concepts would be made by empirical judgments and the explanation of a priori concepts would be made by a priori judgments. By the way, Fichte thought that all judgments are a priori and also a posteriori. Therefore, all concepts would be a priori and also a posteriori to him.

(d) Logical laws are also not analytic

Fichte thought that logical laws like “A=A” are posed by ‘Ich’, as I mentioned above. Therefore, the logical laws are true not due to their meanings, but due to the principles of *Wissenschaftslehre*.

(e) The three principles are also not analytic

The three principles in his *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* are true also on the basis of not being due to their meanings. The first principle “*Das Ich setzt ursprünglich schlechthin sein eignes Sein*”¹⁸ is true as “*Ausdruck der Tathandlung*,”¹⁹ and, therefore, it is true not due to its meaning. The second principle “*so gewiss wird dem Ich schlechthin entgegengesetzt ein Nicht-Ich*”²⁰ is true as a transcendental condition of the law of contradiction; therefore, it is true not due to its meaning. The third principle “*Ich setze im Ich dem teilbaren Ich ein teilbares Nicht-Ich entgegen*”²¹ is true as a synthesis of the first two principles. The first two principles are not analytic; therefore, the third principle as their synthesis is not analytic. All principles are true not on the basis of their meanings but due to *Tathandlung*.

¹⁶ Cf. Kant, *Metaphysik der Sitten*, VI273. The correct expression is “daß ich, um ein Dreieck zu machen, drei Linien nehmen müsse (ein analytischer Satz).” This contradicts Kant’s claim that “*Mathematische Urteile sind insgesamt synthetisch*” (Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B14). Kant is supposed to correct the latter claim in the first *Kritik*.

¹⁷ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A82=B108.

¹⁸ Fichte, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, SWI, 98.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 96.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 110.

As a result, we could say that there is no analytic judgment and no distinction between analytic and synthetic judgment for Fichte. Fichte said, “Es giebt demnach überhaupt dem Gehalte nach gar keine bloss analytischen Urtheile” (SWI, 114).

It provides the necessary conditions for semantic holism to renounce the distinction between a priori and a posteriori judgments and the distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments. However, we can prove his strong semantic holism on the basis of this argument as follows.

5 Fichte’s strong semantic holism

(1) Holism of the meanings of words in Fichte

Fichte said that every concept can be understood in confrontation with other concepts, for example, “es [roth] ist gesetzt, als ausschliessend alle übrigen Farben, als nicht gelb, nicht blau u.s.w.”²² This argument leads us to the holism of the meanings of words. For example, color concepts like ‘red’, ‘yellow’, etc. have their meanings in confrontation with each other and the concept ‘color’ would also have its meaning in confrontation with other concepts like ‘brightness’, ‘form’, ‘size’, etc. Generally speaking, when the words ‘A’ and ‘B’ are distinguished, there is a common identity as well as differences between them. Suppose that the common identity is expressed by the concept ‘C’, then ‘C’ would be an universal concept containing ‘A’ and ‘B’ on the one hand while ‘C’ has its meaning also in confrontation with another concept ‘D’, on the other hand. Therefore, there is also a common identity and differences between ‘C’ and ‘D’.

This argument could continue in the same way until all concepts are involved in it, because it is impossible that the two concepts ‘A’ and ‘S’ are quite different, without any common identity or similarity. Because ‘A=A’ and ‘S=S’ hold even in such cases and Fichte calls such self-identity ‘reality’.²³ The concept ‘reality’ is the ‘highest’²⁴ concept that is shared by all concepts. By the way, we might think that this concept ‘reality’ could also hold in confrontation with another concept. This concept would be ‘negation’, which is derived from the law of contradiction ‘A ≠ not-A.’²⁵ If we were requested again to find the common concept between ‘reality’ and ‘negation’, we would have no other concept to use than ‘reality.’ So, in this way all concepts can hold in one network and the meanings of words are holistic.

(2) From the semantic holism of words to the semantic holism of sentences

Remember the above-quoted sentence, “es [roth] ist gesetzt, als ausschliessend alle übrigen Farben, als nicht gelb, nicht blau u.s.w.” Fichte explains here the word ‘red’ by sentences like “red excludes all other colors”, “red is not yellow”, and “red is not blue”. If ‘red’ is explicandum and these sentences are explanandum of it, then we cannot use the understanding of ‘red’ in order to understand these sentences. A similar thing holds in an explanation of ‘yellow’. The meanings of words are given by the meanings of sentences.²⁶ If so and, as we mentioned above, the meanings of words hold in a network, then the meanings of sentences can also hold in a network.

²² Fichte, *Grundriss des Eigenthümlichen der Wissenschaftslehre*, SWI, 380.

²³ Fichte, *Grundlage der gesammten Wissenschaftslehre*, SWI, 99.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, SWI, 118.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, SWI, 101.

²⁶ Fichte later said explicitly that “kein Begriff ist ausser im Urtheile, und beide zusammen, Begriff und Urtheil, nicht sind, ausser im Schlusse” (*Über das Verhältniß der Logik zur Philosophie oder transscendentale Logik*, SWIX, 367).

