Quine on Ethics

Quine on Ethics:

The Gavagai of Moral Discourse

By

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To my wife

Banu Beste Başol Alican

So we have the linguist asking 'Gavagai?' in each of various stimulatory situations, and noting each time whether the native assents, dissents, or neither. But how is he to recognize native assent and dissent when he sees or hears them? Gestures are not to be taken at face value; the Turks' are nearly the reverse of our own. What he must do is guess from observation and then see how well his guesses work.

— Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word and Object*

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FOREWORD

Alain de Lille was right to urge caution: *Nōn omne quod nitet aurum est*. As an aphorism rendered in various ways in different languages, all expressed with the eloquence of the original, the basic insight was and still is eminently relevant to philosophy: All that glitters is not gold. Mining for gold is indeed becoming increasingly more frustrating as philosophical publications become increasingly more abundant. The process of evaluation is no longer even like mining for gold, but more so like separating the wheat from the chaff. Any gold to be found during the harvest is a welcome windfall, which is what one will find in *Quine on Ethics: The Gavagai of Moral Discourse*.

Works of wheat or chaff linger for some time, before they fade away, never to be heard of again. It is the gold that withstands the test of time, as it keeps speaking to the human spirit. No matter the subject, the capacity of a work to promote the growth and development of the human mind is the ultimate criterion for meeting the test of time. Neither Father Time nor human vanity, however, can alter the nature of gold. Its luster radiates from within.

What is it, then, that constitutes philosophical gold? How exactly does it differ from what gives rise to wheat or ends up as chaff? The question merits our attention for three reasons. First, we need reliable benchmarks to take advantage of the proliferation of philosophical subdivisions and the production of philosophical books and articles. Second, we need a clear conception of excellence in philosophy, not only because it is a worthwhile activity in itself, but also because such a conception will set a standard for greater achievements. Third, like all humanities disciplines, philosophy is in danger of turning into an ideation market through the commodification of its problems, solutions, and methodologies. Yet truly philosophical ideas are not commodities. They are the living flames of the human spirit.

We may take the gold standard, which Alain uses as a metaphor apposite to any human endeavor or achievement, as a condition of excellence in the original sense of *aretē*. Accordingly, a philosophical work is golden inasmuch as it is excellent. But what makes it so? What are the standards of excellence in philosophy? Are they universal? Can we reasonably propose such standards in an age of pluralism? While it may be difficult to come up with a set of criteria ensuring universal consensus, it should be possible to specify necessary conditions acceptable to the majority. Any contribution

meeting the relevant conditions should ideally be based on a clear and thoughtful understanding of the aims of philosophy, the nature of philosophical thinking, and the range of works fostering the continual growth and development of philosophy as a discipline.

The work that follows here is philosophical gold in every sense. This appraisal, given that it, too, is philosophical, calls for justification, especially since formal inquiries into the nature of philosophical excellence are already scarce and sketchy. Justification requires, at minimum, satisfaction of the preliminary criteria specified above. A criterion is a kind of rule, measure, or standard. It sets a basic condition to be met. For example, one condition for serving in the armed forces may be integrity. But what is integrity? How do we define it? How do we measure it? A clear conception, or explanation, of integrity is needed, if it is to function as a standard. The articulation of the concept transforms it into a condition. The same holds for scholarly contributions. When we propose certain conditions for the evaluation of a work of philosophy, we imply that those conditions articulate the correlative notion of excellence. Four such conditions stand out in this case: originality, cogency, fecundity, and beauty. The remaining task, together with an elucidation of their nature and their dictates, is to determine whether they are satisfied by *Quine on Ethics: The Gavagai of Moral Discourse*.

Originality: Whether it is scientific, artistic, theological, or philosophical, an original work does not imitate any other work, neither directly nor indirectly. It does not simply repeat, in different words, what others have said just as well, or perhaps even better, a practice that is all too common in contemporary scholarship. This does not mean that a philosophical work does not, or should not, engage others in serious conversation. On the contrary, such interaction is essential for creativity. The history of philosophy itself, from Thales to the present, is an ongoing dialogue between major philosophers. Some belong to certain philosophical schools, and some support certain philosophical traditions. Those who have left a mark have at least one thing in common: originality.

The true philosopher is an original thinker, and original thinkers are creators. They create ideas, ideals, insights, visions, theories, systems, and solutions. They pose difficult questions, search for satisfactory answers, and introduce new ways of looking at the world. Why would anyone write philosophy without having anything new to say? And how could anyone say anything worthwhile without understanding what is worthy of attention? Do we not feel both gratification and disappointment upon discovering that someone else has already thought of and written about an idea occurring to us independently as a novel one? How many philosophical works would

remain on the shelves, or in electronic storage, if a divine hand were to weed out everything other than philosophical gold?

One entry that would still be there is *Quine on Ethics: The Gavagai of Moral Discourse*. But in what sense is this book original? How can anything written about a philosophical dignitary such as Quine be original, especially when it is preceded by a plethora of commentary on his ideas and works? In this case, the standard of originality is grounded in the concept of truth: A philosophical work is original insofar as it reflects the truth of our experience as a human being. It must shed light on this truth. Many distinguished philosophers have analyzed and evaluated Quine's philosophy, several prominent ones focusing specifically on his ethics, each from a particular point of view. What Alican has done not only exposes their strengths and weaknesses, thus revealing the truth implicit in each, but also unravels the ontological and epistemological assumptions, elements, and ramifications of Quine's own views on ethics.

Delving deep into the nature and structure of moral discourse at its foundations, Alican provides us with a synoptic and creative vision of the mosaic of truth underlying Quine's concerns with ethics as a philosophical enterprise and morality as a social institution. He begins with the question of moral value and its relation to the justification of moral judgment, thereby explicating and vindicating Quine, while remaining sensitive to established traditions and emerging trends in moral theory. His central achievement is in demonstrating the role of observationality in Quine's ethics, including its various nuances, presuppositions, and implications, an achievement which speaks to the fundamental validity and continuing relevance of Quine's thesis of the methodological infirmity of ethics as compared with science.

The more difficult question, however, is how an entire ethical theory, a coherent and comprehensive moral outlook, or in this case, a brazen metaethical intervention, can be compressed into the space of an essay as brief as Quine's. We may answer this question, as Alican does, by noting that the conceptual apparatus required for the construction of an ethical platform is already present in Quine's logical, ontological, and epistemological work, which then naturally supports his metatheoretical examination of moral philosophy. The real problem is in unpacking all of that without damaging any part of what Quine had so densely and carefully packed into such a compact presentation. Intellectual adventures of that sort have always been reserved exclusively for creative minds.

The act in which Quine conceives and develops his stand on ethics is a patently creative act, but can the act of the philosopher who extracts the essence and implications of that position also be characterized as creative? Indeed, it can be, obviously because what is extracted does not exist on its

own prior to the extraction, and must therefore be brought into existence for the first time, but not so obviously, and far more importantly, because extraction as a philosophical activity is not strictly mechanical, or merely logical, but also intuitive, and hence, a matter of first probing into the ethical the way that Quine understands it, and then articulating it within a broader conceptual structure through analysis, synthesis, inference, and association.

Cogency: Originality is not enough. A philosopher may create an idea, or formulate a theory, but unless it is cogent, it will remain abstract, useless, and uninteresting. An idea lacking cogency is like a bird lacking wings. It will never get off the ground. Such an idea certainly cannot fulfill a serious explanatory function. An idea is cogent to the extent that it illuminates some aspect of our existence and essence as human beings, thereby functioning as a principle of explanation and inspiring new possibilities toward a better understanding of the world. A cogent idea or theory is a landmark in the growth and development of philosophical thought. It claims the title of cogency when it jointly satisfies two basic conditions: validity and lucidity. That happens when (1) it expresses a truth supported by a compelling line of reasoning and (2) it follows rigorous analytic standards so that we can comprehend it in the fullness of its truth. We may take these two conditions, namely validity and lucidity, as complementary criteria for cogency.

A philosophical work can be valid without being lucid, or in other words, penetrable, understandable, and communicable. The history of philosophy is replete with such works. The works of Hegel and Heidegger, for example, are generally considered great contributions to philosophy, but not great works of philosophy. Following a long visit with Hegel, Goethe is known to have confessed in a letter to a friend, that he had listened to Hegel speak for a long time, finding his ideas immensely important, but failing to understand anything the man had said.

Philosophical thinking is not merely a process of dividing a concept or theory into its constitutive parts, but also, and essentially, an attempt to discover and disclose the logical relations uniting those parts into a whole, and either simultaneously or subsequently appraising the truth or tenability of the whole. How can we understand a concept or theory if we do not appreciate the logical relations between its elements, assumptions, and consequences? Is it an accident that such a distinguished philosopher as Bertrand Russell considered logic the essence of philosophy? Whatever else it may be, philosophy is a logical activity, where we ascend, from an analysis of the constituents of a concept or theory, to a comprehension of the whole, on the wings of the logical relations supporting its formal structure. Should the

structure happen to collapse, the act of understanding collapses with it. Validity and lucidity, as the primary ingredients of cogency, are essential to the integrity of such a structure.

As definitive features of excellence in philosophy, validity and lucidity are manifested clearly and distinctly in *Quine on Ethics: The Gavagai of Moral Discourse*. Not only does Alican unwrap the logical structure of Quine's conception of ethics, thereby illuminating the terrain of its philosophical underpinnings, he also analyzes and evaluates the views of a large number of critics objectively and accurately. With the hand of a master analyst, he succeeds in showing the strengths and weaknesses of both Quine and his critics, while at the same time delineating the true structure of Quine's position on the nature and shortcomings of moral philosophy as it is practiced, certainly in Quine's day, but also today, which adds relevancy and urgency to the inherent cogency.

Fecundity: The philosopher is an artist and philosophical thinking is a creative act. Although it proceeds with conceptual and logical analysis, philosophical thinking begins before the reflective stage of cognition. This is the level of intuition unlocking an aspect or dimension of our phenomenal experience, either toward establishing facts or toward tackling problems. Whether it is through the metaphysician identifying the essence of reality as form, matter, spirit, will, or process, the ethicist grounding the principle of moral distinction in duty, virtue, or pleasure, or the aesthetician declaring the nature of art to reside in manifest beauty, significant form, or aesthetic emotion, the common denominator is always an articulation of the philosopher's insight into the fundamental nature of the central concept.

Such articulation is a creative act, precisely because it is an intuitive one, which makes it a personal process reflecting the individual philosopher's unique relationship with the world at large. The theories and systems that philosophers develop are attempts at a rational justification of their deepest intuitions. The resulting conceptual framework, however, is never final or complete. This is both because even the most profound insights and the most productive ideas of the greatest philosophers are limited in various ways and because the domain of knowledge is itself inexhaustible, given that the world is in constant flux, where the conditions of human existence fluctuate in tandem.

A philosophical work is excellent, not only because the position it promotes is valid and lucid, but also because the work itself is fecund, that is, because it inspires, instigates, and introduces new ways of expanding our understanding, preferably in alignment with the relevance and gravity of the problem under consideration. This feature of the philosophical work is inherent in its logical form, which, in turn, is founded in the intuition that gives

rise to its conception. That intuition permeates it logical structure as an inherent potentiality. Do we not, when we encounter Plato's theory of Forms, Spinoza's notion of substance, or Whitehead's philosophy of process, seek to grasp the fundamental intuition that nourishes the corresponding outlook? Could we understand any of it if the meaning implicit in the intuition did not determine the logical structure of its articulation?

Philosophical concepts, theories, and systems are good or bad relative to the needs and conditions responsible for their conception and inception. They are not true or false in an absolute sense in the manner of propositions. Even good contributions die of old age as Hegel rightly pointed out some time ago. Such concepts, theories, and systems acquire their value from their propensity to clarify, reformulate, or settle the important questions coming up in the course of our existence as inhabitants of a universe we comprehend very little yet aspire forever to understand better.

To propose fecundity as a standard of excellence, then, is to require philosophical works to provide an impetus for deeper and richer inquiry and exploration. It does not matter whether the work is a book or an article, and in either case, whether it is long or short. Some of the longest works may leave us unmoved, while a short article may replenish the stores of creativity in our capacity for philosophical reflection. The magnitude of such inspiration reflects the depth of the intuition from which the contribution arises. Why would we keep going back to philosophical legacies such as Plato's dialogues, Spinoza's *Ethics*, or Whitehead's *Process and Reality*, if they were not inexhaustible sources of inspiration?

The fecundity of a work of philosophy, like that of a work of art, lies in the fact that the vision it articulates is not a final resolution in a finished structure, but a wealth of potentiality in a critical and reflective experience. It emerges not merely as a logical or intellectual form but also as a radiance of the truth implicit in that form. This is what one finds in *Quine on Ethics: The Gavagai of Moral Discourse* as Alican validates Quine's position on ethics with a lucidity allowing the fecundity to shine through.

Beauty: Philosophy proceeds with a fundamental intuition reflecting a significant aspect or dimension of our experience in and of the world. The process through which any philosophical work comes into being is therefore a creative act, which then makes the outcome of that process a conceptual artifact. No two philosophical works are identical, though they may indeed be similar in certain respects. Even within the same philosophical school, be it idealism, materialism, or pragmatism, philosophers tend to differ in the way they intuit the nature of reality. This intuition is influenced by a multitude of personal, cultural, social, political, religious, and philosophical factors. Do we not gaze into Plato's soul or Spinoza's mind when we read their

works? Do we not feel their presence in their work the way we feel the presence of the artist in his or her work?

Philosophical creation and reflection, like their artistic counterparts, hold a mirror to the mind of the philosopher in his or her contemplation of truth. Meaning is the focal point of both creation and appreciation, emphatically so in art, but indubitably also in philosophy. The artist communicates meaning through the medium of significant form, the philosopher through the medium of conceptual form. The artist presents, depicts, reveals; the philosopher argues, analyzes, demonstrates. We comprehend the meaning of the artistic work through spiritual empathy, that of the philosophical work, through rational intuition, but the common thread running through both is nothing other than truth, pure and simple. Neither a work of art nor a work of philosophy can achieve excellence without aiming at the truth, that is, without being truthful. The more truthful, the better. A work that is truthful is not only truly excellent but also genuinely beautiful.

This is because truth is beautiful. Do we not feel the thrill of Archimedes when we make even a modest discovery concerning some aspect of how the world works or what life is about? What could possibly account for such a compelling attraction to the truth save for its beauty? Could we qualify any creative work as beautiful if it were not also truthful? The connection between the two is best reflected in the discovery of true beauty by Socrates during his haunting ascension through the ladder of love to enlightenment. The aesthetic appeal of a philosophical work, much like that of a work of art, emerges in the process of appreciating both the cogency of the claims it makes and the way the philosopher weaves them into a coherent whole.

The work laid out in the following pages is a beautiful one in the most relevant sense. Its beauty originates from its intuitive grasp of Quine's thoughts on ethical theory. Alican successfully unwraps the essence of Quine's conception of moral philosophy, as he evaluates the philosopher's provocative thesis of the methodological infirmity of ethics as compared with science, in the light of his celebrated contributions to other branches of philosophy, with particular emphasis on his epistemology, philosophy of language, and philosophy of science, combined with penetrating insight into his ontology of value. The unwrapping process he undertakes extends with equal skill, caution, and respect to critics and commentators. The outcome is a conceptual map of Quine's understanding and appraisal of moral philosophy, in short, his philosophy of moral philosophy, as Alican puts it.

No serious ethicist can afford to ignore Quine's position. It is a valid and compelling call, once urgent and still relevant, for reformation in ethical theory, at least in its empirical aspirations. The questions Quine raises and the issues he discusses remain central to any inquiry into the nature of moral

value and the validity of moral principles. Anyone appreciating the challenge in Quine's stirring assessment of the methods of ethics will find great value in the way it is analyzed, explained, and defended in *Quine on Ethics: The Gavagai of Moral Discourse*.

What makes Alican's reconstruction of Quine's brief yet resounding engagement with ethical theory a creative work par excellence is his commitment to bringing out the truth of indispensable insights and intuitions in an otherwise tightly packed and highly condensed original that is demonstrably open to misunderstanding. Alican succeeds, not only in teasing out Quine's ideas with remarkable finesse and clarity, but also in putting them back together in a conceptual framework that is, at once, original, cogent, fecund, and beautiful.

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PREFACE

Our acquaintance with Quine's thoughts on ethics and morality is anchored to a single essay of his on metaethics: "On the Nature of Moral Values" (1978). Yet despite his limited involvement in the field, the response in the philosophical community has been lively enough, with plenty of objections to Quine and a lack of agreement in opposition. Part of the attraction rests in Quine's prominence as a philosopher, which alone commands attention, even without his active participation in ethical studies on a prolonged basis. But the bulk of the interest comes from the provocative nature of his sole contribution, where he asserts, explicates, and defends the methodological infirmity of ethics as compared with science. That is the central theme of this book.

While Quine's take on moral discourse has not been ignored by any measure, its academic reception has so far been limited to journal articles. The subject matter now has a history of scholarship dating back more than four decades. The growing volume of commentary, without anything resembling a consensus on the proper interpretation, has finally developed into a serious enough problem to justify reconsideration on a scale deeper and broader than what is possible in the space available for a standard journal article. This volume is an attempt to fill that need.

The focus is both on Quine's approach to ethics and on the reception of that approach in the secondary literature, though the book is not merely a conspectus of Quine, followed by a survey of commentators. That, too, stands to be a useful service, which is, in fact, provided here. The overarching aim, however, is to make a more valuable contribution by identifying and removing the source of the discord in the critical reception of Quine on ethics: inadequate attention to the nature and importance of his conception of observationality, which is either neglected or misinterpreted by even those who address his naturalism and holism in discussing his critique of ethics as a philosophical enterprise and his evaluation of morality as a social institution.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The people who consistently enrich every initiative I contemplate and carry out in terms of scholarly work have all entered into my life either as friends or as teachers. And those two categories have naturally blended into each other in the fullness of time. I have learned from my friends, while becoming friends with my teachers, each one making me a better philosopher, and, I trust, a better person, through erudite instruction, passionate discussion, and heated disagreement.

The teachers leaving the deepest and most memorable marks on various stages of my life and career have been Feridun Baydar, Robert E. Bergmark, Roger F. Gibson Jr., Michael H. Mitias, and Carl P. Wellman. As one of the world's foremost authorities on Quine, Gibson provided the primary impetus behind the conception and production of the present project. He never actually saw this book at any stage of its production, and alas, he never will. Yet as my mentor at Washington University in St. Louis, where I did my graduate work in philosophy, he nurtured my appreciation of Quine while molding my understanding of the relevant themes and issues. He also honored me as a member of my dissertation committee, even though I was specializing in ethics with a thesis on utilitarianism, which fell outside his areas of specialization but not outside his areas of competence. I hope this volume demonstrates my admiration and illustrates his influence.

The friends responsible for my development beyond a formal education, mainly through a never-ending discussion of philosophical problems, often in mutual dissent and fierce opposition but always with dialectical progress, are Timothy L. Anderson, Michael Howard Brunson, Ned Mims French II, Philip Walter Gaines, Paul Owen Martin, William Whitfield McKinley Jr., and Tara Lyn McPherson.

Philip and Whit, both individually and together, are the most formidable critics, and therefore the most valuable allies, one can possibly encounter. Having studied philosophy with them as overconfident college students boasting an insatiable appetite for questioning everything, paired with an irrepressible aversion to accepting anything at face value, I feel fortunate that they continue to humor, support, and facilitate my pursuit of wisdom decades later. Still as brilliant as ever, and now even more disputatious, they persistently challenge just about every thought I formulate and articulate in print. We may not always agree as dialectical partners, but that is what strengthens our quest for knowledge as individual scholars.

Deserving recognition in a separate category, all her own, is my wife, Banu Beste Başol Alican. Although my formal education was complete by the time I met Banu, I have learned more from her than I had from all the institutional libraries illuminating my path before then. She is the one who makes philosophy worth doing, and indeed, life worth living. She is the one who makes everything I do all the more enjoyable and that much more useful. She is the one who makes my every step more exciting, and the journey itself, absolutely thrilling. She is the one who makes the world go round. She is the one.

INTRODUCTION

This book is an assessment of Quine's approach to moral philosophy (1978). It is, in other words, an analysis of his philosophy of moral philosophy, or more specifically, an evaluation of his metaethical outlook as expressed through his critique of normative ethics as a philosophical enterprise and his appraisal of conventional morality as a social institution. The reason for such a guarded qualification of the theme is that Quine is not an ethicist, which then makes it somewhat misleading to speak of "Quine's ethics," or of "Quine's moral philosophy," though it is both convenient and acceptable to do so as shorthand, since the book is, in fact, on Quine's perspective on ethics and morality, whether or not he can reasonably be said to have an ethical theory or moral system as such.

Within the domain of discourse thus defined and demarcated, the present volume combines an exegetical analysis of the foundations, constitution, and methodology of Quine's conception of ethics as a philosophical activity, or process, with a critical survey of the reception of his position in the philosophical community. It is comprehensive in scope and representative in scholarship. Put differently, it covers everything relevant to the subject, without devoting the same attention to everyone who said something about it.

There are numerous commentaries on Quine's ethics, some favorable, some unfavorable, some merely expository. Earlier reactions tend to focus more on his thesis of the methodological infirmity of ethics as compared with science, while later ones, either instead or in addition, tend to bring out a broader spectrum of interpretive issues. The aim of this one is to identify and restore the most important parts and aspects of what others have missed, the common denominator being the depth and breadth of Quine's emphasis on observationality. The restoration process builds on engagements with four of the earliest and most significant reactions in the literature, with a separate chapter dedicated to each: Owen J. Flanagan Jr. (1982; 1988); Morton White (1986); Michele M. Moody-Adams (1990); Jay Campbell (1996).

Flanagan reduces Quine's position on the methodological infirmity of ethics to a failure to recognize the evidentiary function of moral consequences, that is, the consequences of moral acts, which presumably provide an empirical foothold in ethics, where justification thereby proceeds with

observational standards comparable to those in science. Yet his emphasis on consequences constitutes an irrelevant and therefore invalid appeal to observationality, given that the moral values invariably required to sort out such consequences are not themselves observational, though they are indeed the fundamental methodological elements invoked in moral justification.

White likewise attributes the alleged methodological infirmity of ethics to a misconception on the part of Quine, contending in opposition that feelings, or emotional experiences, are the methodological counterparts in ethics of sensory data in science. But he overestimates the parity in question. Feelings and emotions are not observational in the relevant sense, which is the sense of producing widespread or unanimous agreement on publicly shared or accessible stimulation. They fall short at least in the requirement of public access if not also in that of unanimous agreement.

Moody-Adams follows a different strategy, setting out to demonstrate, still in opposition to Quine, that ethics is merely different from science rather than being inferior to it. Yet she ends up promoting an ideal approach as opposed to vindicating the prevailing practice where the operating difference between ethics and science really does confirm its methodological infirmity relative to science, exactly as suggested by Quine, thus pointing to a difference that is at the same time a weakness.

Campbell paves the way for a transition in the scholarly reception of Quine on ethics, turning a trend of strict opposition into one of conceptual clarification and theoretical interpretation. He construes Quine as an ethical noncognitivist, to wit, as someone who denies that ethical statements can be true or false. The textual evidence, however, is firmly divided between cognitivism and noncognitivism, with Quine favoring neither perspective over the other. This is not because he is torn between the two, or equally appreciative of both, but because he has no particular loyalties in either direction. Quine is interested more in stimulus meaning than in cognitive meaning, which makes his primary concern the intersubjective agreement of observers rather than the reality of the observation or the veracity of its description. That is why he is no more a cognitivist than a noncognitivist, and judging by the evidence, probably not at all one or the other.

The scope of coverage also includes briefer encounters with the contributions of Fasiku Gbenga (2008), Robert Sinclair (2011), and Dale Dorsey (2006), along with a few others, as each one becomes relevant in the course of discussion. Allocating a separate chapter for a fuller engagement with each would have been redundant with the material already covered. The project as a whole, on the other hand, is informed by all, and at least partly critical of each, though, in every case, with something gained and something learned.

CHAPTER ONE

QUINE ON ETHICS

Abstract: This chapter is an overview of Quine's outlook on ethics and his conception of morality. It documents and discusses his intervention in ethics as a philosophical enterprise and his appraisal of morality as a social institution. The emphasis is on his thesis of the methodological infirmity of ethics as compared with science (section 1.3), which has been the center of critical attention for decades. The infirmity postulated consists of shortcomings in evidence, justification, truth, and objectivity, jointly confirming the decisive difference to be in the role of observation in the operations of science versus ethics. Put simply, science is observational in a methodologically relevant way that ethics is not. Coverage also includes Quine's understanding of the nature of moral values (section 1.2), his approach to moral conflict, particularly to its sources and its resolution (section 1.4), and his thoughts on the causal forces, or explanatory principles, behind morality as a social construct (section 1.5). The overall aim of the chapter is to set up an exegetical foundation against which to explicate and evaluate the reception of critics and commentators in subsequent chapters, which is why the focus here is predominantly on the relative methodological infirmity of ethics.

1.1. General Overview

Widely hailed for his work in other areas of philosophy, Quine has a memorable contribution in ethics as well: "On the Nature of Moral Values" (1978). This is a provocative essay published in 1978 as a chapter in a multi-author anthology on ethics.[1] It was reprinted in 1979 as a journal article and

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[1] The anthology where Quine's essay first appeared, *Values and Morals* (1978), is a festschrift honoring three of the leading ethicists of the twentieth century: William Klaas Frankena, Charles Leslie Stevenson, and Richard Booker Brandt.

in 1981 as an entry in a collection of Quine's own essays.[2] It represents his
only publication in ethics.[3]

Given that his main interests lie elsewhere, it is fortunate that we have
anything at all by Quine in any connection with ethics. Given his inestima-
ble contributions to other branches of philosophy, throughout an exception-
ally productive career, it is unfortunate that we have only one thing.[4]

While his participation in ethics, essentially an intervention in metaethics,
lacks the impact of some of his better-known contributions to philosophy,
this is not a reflection of the quality or relevance of the work itself. Just
about anything anyone has written in the second half of the twentieth cen-
tury lacks the impact of those better known titles by Quine, chief among
them, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (1951/1953), *Word and Object*
(1960/2013), and "Epistemology Naturalized" (1969a). However that may
be, his thoughts on ethics have generated a steady stream of commentary
still trickling in today.

The original essay continues to attract attention for three reasons in par-
ticular: First, as already mentioned, it is the only piece exclusively on ethics
by one of the most prominent philosophers of the twentieth century. Second,
it is the best clue we have as to whether and how Quine might have envis-
aged naturalizing ethics on the model of his pioneering vision for naturaliz-
ing epistemology. Third, it is where he presents a brief yet controversial
comparison between ethics and science, advancing what is now known as
his thesis of the "methodological infirmity of ethics as compared with sci-
ence" (Quine 1978, 43).

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[2] References to Quine's "On the Nature of Moral Values" (1978/1979/1981) give
the date and pagination of the 1978 edition alone.

[3] Quine's "On the Nature of Moral Values" is not so much his only publication in
ethics as it is his only original work devoted entirely to ethics, thus excluding replies
to critics, a category consisting of only one reply (Quine 1986d) to only one critic
(White 1986), as well as tangential discussions on matters of ethical or moral interest
within work in other areas, as in section 13 ("Values") of *The Roots of Reference*
(Quine 1973, 49–52), to cite just one example.

[4] It is difficult to exaggerate the extent of Quine's contributions to philosophy. The
impact speaks for itself, while the range is given as follows by Roger F. Gibson Jr.,
one of Quine's leading exponents: "profound contributions to numerous subfields of
philosophy, including philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, philosophy of lan-
guage, metaphysics, epistemology, logic and set theory, philosophy of logic and set
theory, and ethics" (Gibson 1998, 667). Quine's direct reply constitutes one of his
many endorsements of Gibson as an authority on Quine's philosophy: "As expected,
Gibson has done a masterly job of sketching my evolving views" (Quine 1998, 684).

What makes Quine's foray into ethics so memorable is that the vehicle of incursion is a sensational appraisal declaring ethics methodologically inferior to science in several respects, as illustrated through a comparison of the two enterprises on benchmark indicators such as evidence, justification, truth, and objectivity. This makes the "methodological infirmity" in question an epistemological infirmity.[5] As for the military metaphor of forays and incursions, the imagery may not be entirely appropriate, given that Quine is not the enemy of moral theory. He is, however, a relentless rehabilitator at the "meta" level of any field in which he participates, even briefly so, and that is precisely how he approaches ethics and metaethics as well.

The primary aim of this chapter is to elucidate Quine's conception of the methodological infirmity of ethics. The alleged infirmity is the central focus of critical, dialectical, and defensive attention throughout the book. Given its function and importance, it is best introduced in its original context, as part of an organic position, rather than in isolation as an abstract notion. The remainder of the chapter is therefore dedicated to a comprehensive overview of Quine's essay, including his thoughts on the nature of moral values (section 1.2), his thesis of the methodological infirmity of ethics (section 1.3), the sources and resolution of moral conflicts (section 1.4), and the origins and persistence of the institution of morality (section 1.5). While the ancillary perspectives are not integral parts of the logic of methodological infirmity, a thorough coverage of the essay as a whole will promote a better appreciation of the core concept as well as the overall approach.

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[5] My characterization of this methodological infirmity as an epistemological infirmity has a precedent in Gibson (1986, 139–154), who takes Quine's conceptions of underdetermination and indeterminacy to be comparable only epistemologically and not ontologically, which is why, Gibson argues, Quine holds that there is a fact of the matter to physics but not to translation. Gibson's insight into Quine on this point is this: "under-determination of theory is a thesis belonging to epistemology, not to ontology; it is a statement about *evidence* for theory, not about *truth* of theory, and this despite the fact that every such theory will have its own ontology" (Gibson 1986, 151). Quine (1986a, 155–157) explicitly and enthusiastically affirms this interpretation, as is evident in the opening sentence of his response to Gibson: "Unlike so many, Gibson fully understands the difference in status that I ascribe to the indeterminacy of translation and the under-determination of natural science" (Quine 1986a, 155). While this emphasis on epistemology is specifically in the context of a comparison between physics and linguistics — see Gibson (1986, 141): "linguistics (i.e., translation)" — the same basic approach and the grounds of the attendant distinction apply reasonably well to Quine's comparison of science and ethics. In the same vein, recall Quine's subscription to the "mutual containment of science and epistemology" (Quine 1998, 684).

1.2. Moral Values

Quine's (1978, 37–45) engagement with ethics begins with an analysis of the origins and development of moral values as a segue into the questions motivating his essay: What exactly are moral values, where do they come from, and what makes them moral? He is not after a formal definition of any sort. Morality being what it is, and values being what they are, he simply wants to establish the nature of moral values, as indicated in the title of his essay: "On the Nature of Moral Values" (1978).

His answer is a naturalistic one. All values are, at bottom, a matter of what we like. And what we like is, as it was with Bentham, "under the governance of two sovereign masters" (1789, 1): pleasure and pain.[6] Quine thus considers moral values innate in origin and developed through learning. The innate aspect is grounded in our natural likes and dislikes: the sentient response to pleasure and pain. The learned aspect, defined as "the acquisition of dispositions to discriminatory behavior" (Quine 1978, 37), manifests itself through operant conditioning: behavior modification through experience with sensory episodes.

This binary model is not uniquely about morality.[7] Quine contends that all values, moral or otherwise, are innate in origin and developed through learning. They are innate in the sense that we are hardwired to like pleasure and to dislike pain, being inclined thereby to seek pleasure and to avoid pain, learning eventually, though rather quickly, to develop behavior patterns that facilitate the attainment of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, while inhibiting behavior patterns that frustrate the attainment of pleasure and the avoidance of pain.

We are thus predisposed, without learning to do so, both to enjoy and to seek out experiences eliciting sensual satisfaction, and likewise predisposed both to dislike and to avoid experiences eliciting sensual dissatisfaction. The learning mechanism kicks in as a latent and extensible ability to determine how best to promote these natural tendencies. The kind of learning relevant here has two components, belief and valuation, together constituting the "bipartite equipment of learning" (Quine 1978, 37–38).

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[6] The quotation is from the opening sentence of *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* (1789) by Jeremy Bentham. The reference above to "pleasure and pain" follows the opposite of the order adopted by Bentham in the original. While Bentham had a predilection for listing pain before pleasure, that preference is neither compelling in itself nor apposite to the context here.

[7] Other examples where the same model is relevant include Quine's analysis of pleasure (1973, 27–32) and his discussion of the nature of natural knowledge (1975a, 67–81).

The epistemic component, belief, functions as an assessment and prediction mechanism for the similarity of sensory episodes (events). Once value is identified, or established, what is required, by way of learning, is judgments and predictions determining the similarity of one episode to another, specifically of one that has not been experienced to one that has. This is a type of cognitive calibration, comparing experiences and expectations through a process of iterative alignment designed to improve predictive accuracy. Adjustments are made on an ongoing basis as new experiences are added and as predictions succeed or fail. Reflecting the comparative nature of the process and the reliance on estimates of similarity, Quine speaks of the process as proceeding with "similarity standards" or "similarity space."

The evaluative component is a natural assessment algorithm for mapping out experiences in terms of a reward-penalty matrix. This is where we rank our likes and dislikes through the "ordering of episodes along the valuation axis" (Quine 1978, 37–38). The result is not an explicit ranking, an actual list or chart to be consulted and modified upon each new experience, but an accretion of mental notes serving as a cognitive repository of personal preferences.

Both components of the bipartite equipment of learning are developed as learning proceeds. On the epistemic side, our similarity space evolves as we learn by trial and error to recalibrate similarity standards that lead to bad predictions. On the evaluative side, we gradually develop, again through learning, unconditioned likes and dislikes for events that originally elicit conditioned likes and dislikes. This is moral training through the "transmutation of means into ends" (Quine 1978, 38–41): "We learn by induction that one sort of event tends to lead to another that we prize, and then by a process of transfer we may come to prize the former not only as a means but for itself" (1978, 38).

The binary model of value formation, manifested in innate origins plus learning, together with the bipartite equipment of learning, helps formulate an answer to the question of what makes moral value moral, that is, of what distinguishes it from other types of value. While the model and the equipment are common to all values, the particular contents and the mode of application help set out the relevant differences. Quine's primary requirement for moral value, a necessary condition, is that there has to be a social dimension. Describing that dimension in terms of our ideological and behavioral orientation toward others, he distinguishes between two main types of moral value: altruistic and ceremonial. Both are concerned with the value we place on the welfare of others, differing only in the distribution of that value. Altruistic value is the value we place on the welfare of others severally. Ceremonial value is the value we place on the welfare of others collectively.

It is not clear whether Quine regards oneself as an integral part of the sphere of moral consideration. He mentions neither inclusion nor exclusion. Inclusion would seem to be the natural conclusion, given that the social dimension specified concerns everyone. On the other hand, exclusion can reasonably be inferred from his repeated emphasis on "others" in both a distributive sense and a collective sense. Then again, the question of inclusion versus exclusion of the moral agent is not just about whether one may or may not (or must or must not) count oneself (at all or as much) in adjudicating moral disputes, but also about whether morality is relevant at all in isolation (i.e., where no "others" are affected), as in the possibility and sensibility of a moral obligation to benefit oneself or at least not to harm oneself.

Quine (1978, 39) appears to be struggling, though the appearance is a Socratic ruse, with the original questions as well: What exactly are moral values, where do they come from, and what makes them moral? A sequential reading of the text shows him trying to ease his way into a serviceable answer by distinguishing moral from nonmoral values. He presents this as a difficult task in contrast to what may otherwise look obvious: "There are easy extremes: the value that one places on his neighbor's welfare is moral, and the value of peanut brittle is not" (Quine 1978, 39). While apparently simplistic, this answer actually captures the spirit of the question. Knowing very well that it does, despite feigning hesitation and offering qualification, Quine embraces the social element as the distinguishing feature of morality: "It is hard to pick out a single distinguishing feature of moral values beyond the vague matter of being somehow irreducibly social" (1978, 39).

As for the distinction between altruistic and ceremonial values, there is hardly any hesitation there at all. With the qualification that one pay no "regard to ulterior satisfactions accruing to oneself" (though this is not equivalent to excluding oneself altogether from the sphere of moral consideration), Quine defines altruistic values as those "that one attaches to satisfactions of other persons, or to means to such satisfactions," and ceremonial values as those "that one attaches to practices of one's society or social group" (1978, 39).

Altruistic and ceremonial values overlap in two ways: First, "[a]ltruistic values are in part institutionalized and so may take on added ceremonial appeal," which is why "there is altruistic value in so behaving as not to offend against a neighbor's ceremonial values" (Quine 1978, 40). Second, altruistic and ceremonial values may share the same origin and course of development: They may both be innate (originating from some possibly innate faculty of sympathy), they may both be "inculcated by precept" without "palpable reward or punishment," and they may both arise in moral training in which means get transmuted into ends (Quine 1978, 38–41).

1.3. Methodological Infirmity of Ethics

Having identified the common core of morality, namely the innate and learned components shared by everyone and processed through social inter-action, Quine proceeds to ponder why that combination fails to produce a uniform moral outlook manifested as a global moral consensus (1978, 40–44). He attributes the difference to the learning component, reiterating that the relevant conditioning takes place through a combination of reward and punishment, which are not necessarily combined in the same proportion, applied with the same intensity, or directed toward the same end in every household or community. He adds that any such divergence grows wider as we move from the smallest social unit to the largest, where we eventually encounter relativism at least across cultures.

Despite finding a diversity of opinion and attitude among all values, he submits that such differences tend to be greater among sensual values and aesthetic values than among moral values (Quine 1978, 40–41). This is be-cause the social nature of moral value places a premium on conformity, thereby bringing about greater uniformity compared to other values, includ-ing sensual and aesthetic ones. Conformity with moral standards common to the relevant social group is encouraged, and deviations discouraged, whereas sensual and aesthetic sensibilities are not regulated as openly, as extensively, or as effectively as moral values.

Nevertheless, even with a premium on conformity, and despite sanctions against deviations, we are prone to conflict and disagreement. The theme of moral conflict is both a prologue and an epilogue to Quine's thesis of the methodological infirmity of ethics (MIE) as compared with science, easily his most significant contribution to ethical theory. It is a prologue in the sense that it motivates a comparison between ethics and science, while it is an epilogue in the sense that Quine returns to the theme of conflict after establishing his thesis of infirmity.

The thesis is not a single claim but several of them together explaining why and how ethics is methodologically inferior to science:

> Moral contrasts are not, of course, so far to seek. Disagreements on moral matters can arise at home, and even within oneself. When they do, one re-grets the methodological infirmity of ethics as compared with science. [MIE 1] The empirical foothold of scientific theory is in the predicted ob-servable event; that of a moral code is in the observable moral act. [MIE 2] But whereas we can test a prediction against the independent course of ob-servable nature, we can judge the morality of an act only by our moral stand-ards themselves. [MIE 3] Science, thanks to its links with observation, re-tains some title to a correspondence theory of truth; but a coherence theory

is evidently the lot of ethics. [MIE 4] Scientific theories on all sorts of useful and useless topics are sustained by empirical controls, partial and devious though they be. It is a bitter irony that so vital a matter as the difference between good and evil should have no comparable claim to objectivity. [Quine 1978, 43, original in two paragraphs separated at the end of MIE 3]

Commentators locate Quine's thesis of the methodological infirmity of ethics somewhere in the passage quoted above but not always in the same part. They tend to identify it variously as one or another or a combination of the statements marked off with bracketed labels. Yet reducing the thesis to a single statement is neither necessary nor productive. Since Quine makes several claims, we can consider them severally, instead of, or at least before, collapsing them into a single statement. The following is a reconstruction bringing together the four separate statements as components of the relative methodological infirmity of ethics:

MIE 1   Evidence: The empirical foothold of a scientific theory is in the predicted observable event, whereas the empirical foothold of a moral code is in the observable moral act.

MIE 2   Justification: Corroboration in science proceeds by testing observable events predicted or implied by a scientific theory, against the independent course of observable nature, whereas justification in ethics proceeds by testing observable moral acts prescribed or permitted by a moral code, against our moral standards themselves.

MIE 3   Truth: Science operates largely within a coherence theory of truth, with an auxiliary claim to a correspondence theory of truth through its links with observation, whereas ethics operates solely within a coherence theory of truth, having no legitimate claim to a correspondence theory of truth.

MIE 4   Objectivity: Science promises objectivity through various empirical controls, whereas ethics has no comparable standards of objectivity.

Although these are distinct claims, they are united by a common denominator: observationality. That is the bottom line in Quine's outlook on ethics. Science is observational, ethics is not. More accurately, science makes use of observation in a way that normative ethics does not and cannot. We never actually observe a moral or immoral act. We observe an act and formulate an opinion as to its morality, or learning from and drawing on past experience, we observe an act and classify it under a category of acts on whose