Pragmatism, Ethics, and Correspondence Truth: Response to Gibson and Quine*

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1. When I first read Quine's "On the Nature of Moral Values" in 1978, I was already convinced that the same arguments Quine had given for a naturalistic epistemology with both descriptive and normative components applied straightforwardly to ethics. If normative epistemology was to be the enterprise of sorting reliable techniques of knowledge acquisition from unreliable ones in theoretical domains, normative ethics was to do the same for practical knowledge. The goal of the two enterprises taken together was to lead us to rational believing and reasonable living, pragmatically understood.¹

Naturalism moderated by pragmatism, it seemed to me, offered a way of thinking about ethics which did not reduce it to the enterprise of merely describing the noncognitive states of persons (as in Ayer, for example), but which allowed for openly cognitivist, fallibilistic, and nonfoundationalistic normative reflection on our lives and practices. It seemed an exciting, but largely unnoticed, prospect that Quine's general philosophy could be used to rehabilitate the sorry image of normative ethics held by many analytic philosophers at that time.

I was surprised, therefore, when, upon reading his essay, I discovered that Quine resisted the picture of ethics I had envisioned; and in particular that he remained largely skeptical about the prospects for a normative ethics with anything like the cognitive respectability of normative epistemology. My aim in "Quinean Ethics" (1982) was to push what I thought were the considerations favoring my way of reading Quine over his way of reading himself.² I am grateful to Roger Gibson for his thoughtful comments upon my essay.³

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response to that essay and for the opportunity it provides to clear up some ambiguities in my paper, as well as for the chance to say a little about why I am still convinced that the overall spirit—pardon the expression—of Quine’s philosophy warrants the more robust, realistic, and cognitivist picture of ethics that I advocated in my original paper, and still advocate.

2. Gibson thinks that I interpret Quine as a radical holist and equate holism with the view that all truth is truth by coherence. In particular he thinks that I accept P2: “Holism precludes any talk of correspondence obtaining between the sentences of a theory and the world.” Actually I reject P2. Gibson was misled no doubt by my saying that Quine’s claim that “we can judge the morality of an act only by our own moral standards themselves” fails to pick out anything distinctive about ethics because it picks out a characteristic of all significant discourse. This way of putting the point is, I agree, an overstatement. However, at many points in the paper when I explicate what holism is (pp. 57, 58, 65, 70–73), I stress that holism is the thesis that the acquisition of new beliefs, as well as adjustments to current belief systems, are constrained by consistency considerations plus considerations of conservatism plus observational or practical feedback. Indeed, the first quote Gibson gives in support of the interpretation that I hold P2, and in which he italicizes “only if,” is actually a triple conjunction whose last conjunct refers to such practical feedback.

What I wanted to stress was that this observational or practical feedback is never, in science, in ethics, even in the most primitive perceptual experience, free of conditioning by our basic cognitive apparatus and the overall, ontogenically transformed, state of the conceptual system. I stressed the cognitive determinants and coherentist features of all our epistemic and practical activities because I read Quine as speaking in much more naively realistic and positivistic tones about science than I thought him allowed.

The other two quotations that Gibson gives in support of the interpretation that I hold P2 should be read in this light. The statement that Quine holds that “all checks are ultimately intersystemic” occurs in the context of a discussion of the holistic features of tests of extremely primitive scientific hypotheses in which I am trying to highlight that feature, as well as the fact that even observation sentences can be given up if there is great enough pressure from above—“observation is the tug that tows the ship of theory; but in an extreme case the theory pulls so hard the observation yields.”

Gibson inserts the word “observation” when he quotes me as writing that “Quine has shown that the thesis of exhaustive reduction to observation is mythical even for those [observation] sentences on the periphery of our systematic scientific theories.” I did not have observation sentences

in mind here. I was thinking again of very low level statements within "our systematic scientific theories"—of statements such as, to use Gibson's example, "There's acid in the beaker if the litmus paper turns red, otherwise it's alkaline." Sentences like this are on the periphery of our systematic scientific theories, but they occur, so to speak, at one level up from the observation sentences on the periphery of the web of belief.

In any case, what I did not want to suggest, and never did suggest, was that ethics is stuck with coherence truth. Indeed, that is what I took Quine to be wrongly insisting on. I never doubted that there was a plausible pragmatic conception of truth—roughly truth as idealized rational acceptability—which did not mistakenly identify truth with coherence simpliciter, and which was applicable across cognitive domains. It is unfortunate in two respects that in my continuous, and possibly overly enthusiastic, emphasis on the holistic aspects of epistemic and practical life, I provided Gibson with reason to think I believe P2, first, because I did not and do not, and, second, because this interpretation leads him to misunderstand the grounds on which I reject P5. My problem with P5 is not that P5 gives science the right to correspondence truth which no theory is allowed; it is that it gives ethics no right to this kind of truth.

This much, I think, takes care of Gibson's first objection to my argument. My argument cannot be unsound because P2 is false since P2 is not part of my argument.

3. This clears the way for Gibson's concern with what he sees as the second phase of my argument. Here Gibson reads me just as I intended, that is, as arguing that both science and ethics are entitled to a (suitably pragmatic) conception of correspondence truth. Gibson is dissatisfied with this phase of my argument, however, because he thinks I fail to show that ethics is "fully on a methodological par with science." I agree that I fail to show this. But then I was not trying to show this; and I still do not see that that particular burden of proof falls on an opponent of Quine's disparaging attitude toward ethics, an attitude that continues to show up in a more recent publication in which he contrasts moral judgments with "cognitive" judgments.5

In rejecting Quine's contention that ethics is methodologically infirm as compared to science, my concern was with the methodological infirmity

4. See H. Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), for more on such a conception of truth. In his argument for his particular brand of nonfoundsational pragmatism, what he calls "internal realism," Putnam is careful to point out that "Internalism does not deny that there are experiential inputs to knowledge; knowledge is not a story with no constraints except internal coherence" (p. 54). In a footnote (n. 30) in my original essay, I claimed that my views were consonant with Putnam's. It is probably relevant therefore that Putnam has been recently chastised by Quine, "Reply to Hilary Putnam," in The Philosophy of W. V. Quine, ed. L. E. Hahn and P. A. Schlipp (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1986), pp. 427-51, for thinking Quine, at times, "scientistic" and for "over-stating" his holism and for underestimating "observation sentences, the channel through which empirical content is imbibed" (p. 427).

charge, not with the question of the plausibility of a precise analogy between ethics and science. 6 "Infirm," according to the dictionary on my desk, means "decrepit," "weak," "feeble," or "defililated." Normative ethics might be different from physical science in certain important respects without being methodologically infirm or decrepit. Since the ethical conception I defend in "Quinean Ethics," and elsewhere, explicitly relativizes an indeterminately large portion of ethical knowledge to particular social systems, I was clearly committed to denying a precise analogy between physics and ethics. But a standard (Tarski-Davidson) conception of correspondence truth cashed out in terms of idealized rational acceptability is fully compatible with such relativism. 7

Let me try briefly to restate the argument against the view that ethics is methodologically infirm compared to science and normative epistemology by taking into account both Gibson's objections and some recent remarks of Quine's. Both Quine and Gibson make a lot of observation sentences, so let us start there. An observation sentence is simply "an occasion sentence that commands the same verdict for all witnesses who know the language." 8

There are two broad claims that might be made regarding observation sentences: (1) that there are no observation sentences in ethics and (2) that ethical observation sentences do not stand in the same justificatory relation to moral theory as ordinary observation sentences stand in relation to scientific theories. Obviously if the first claim is true, the second issue does not arise. But even if there are ethical observation sentences they might fail to have justificatory bearing. Nevertheless, if this second claim turned out to be true, it is still conceivable that something besides observation sentences could be found which could play the right justificatory role.

6. It was basic insight of pragmatism in the Deweyan mode that ethics uses largely the same methods—inductive logic, inference to the best explanation, adjustment on the basis of practical feedback, and so on—that science uses. This insight looks all the more on the mark given what I take to be the general consensus in the philosophy and history of science that there is no unique and formally isolable method which can be designated as the scientific method. The substantive differences, the differences in results, between ethics and science can still be explained, on such an analysis, in terms of the closer ties of ethical reflection to local needs, prior practices, and so on. See, however, Bernard Williams, Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), for an argument against ethical objectivity that focuses on the way science transcends localness and ethics does not; see John McDowell, "Critical Notice: Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy," Mind 95 (1986): 377–86, for a fascinating response to Williams.


Quine believes 1 and thereby tries to pre-empt 2 from arising. In a recent paper he writes:

Consider . . . the moral occasion sentence ‘That’s outrageous.’ In the hope of getting it to qualify as an observation sentence, let us adopt an unrealistic “best-case” assumption about our linguistic community, to the effect that all speakers are disposed to assent to ‘That’s outrageous’ on seeing a man beat a cripple or furtively snatch a wreath off a door or commit any other evil that can be condemned on sight without collateral information (the malefactor would be ‘foreign,’ since our fellow speakers are assumed to deplore all such acts). Would ‘That’s outrageous’ then qualify as an observation sentence? It would still not, simply because it applies also and indeed mostly to other acts whose outrageousness hinges on collateral information not in general shared by all witnesses of the acts. The sentence ‘It’s raining’, in contrast, almost never hinges on information not shared by present witnesses and the sentence ‘That’s a rabbit’ does so only seldom. These two consequently qualify well enough as observational, a status that is somewhat a matter of degree. ‘He’s a bachelor’, at the other extreme, depends on collateral information that is seldom widely shared. ‘That’s outrageous’ is intermediate between ‘That’s a rabbit’ and ‘He’s a bachelor’. Even our best-case assumption is insufficient, we see, to qualify it as an observation sentence. Moral judgments differ thus from cognitive ones in their relation to observation.9

The first point to make is that this is hardly a best-case scenario: the stipulated stimulus conditions vary considerably in kind (cripple beating and wreath stealing); and ‘outrageous’ is a very general judgment category. It is a well-known finding in cognitive science that categories of a high degree of generality are subject to less consistency of use across speakers than terms of more intermediate levels of generality. One would expect therefore less firmness in judgments of outrageousness than in, for example, judgments of cruelty.10 Furthermore, one can easily amplify differences in usage by picking contentious or nonprototypical cases. The issue of collateral information notwithstanding, wreath stealing is not a prototypically ‘outrageous act’ for many speakers. But surely cripple beating is.

9. Ibid.
10. For a comprehensive and probing study of the implications of this research, see George Lakoff, Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). It is interesting in relation to such research that many philosophers—Angeombe, Murdoch, MacIntyre, and most recently Williams in Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985) have favored thicker, more world guided, moral concepts over thinner ones. For some probing worries about one such approach, see Samuel Scheffler’s review of Williams’s book, “Moralit through Thick and Thin: A Critical Notice of Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy,” Philosophical Review 96 (1987): 411–54.
Quine can respond that the problem remains that the sentence-type 'That's outrageous' applies mostly to acts 'whose outrageousness hinges on collateral information that is seldom widely shared.' But we can easily win the argument for ethical observation sentences, as defined by Quine, by picking a less general sentence-type with a few indexicals thrown in. The sentence, 'it is cruel of that man to torture that cripple' surely lies in the vicinity of 'That's a rabbit' for speakers of our language, and sentences in that vicinity Quine admits 'qualify well enough as observational.'

So 1 can be rejected. Only 2, the thesis that 'moral observation' lacks altogether, or has 'feeble,' justificatory bearing on our ethical conceptions, remains. One way of arguing for a radical asymmetry between moral observation sentences and their scientific brethren is along the following lines: Moral observation sentences are the result of our holding a certain moral conception and thus are evidence that we hold this conception. But they do not provide confirmatory evidence for that conception. His rejection of ethical observation sentences notwithstanding, some such worry lies behind Quine's remark that "we can judge the morality of an act only by our moral standards themselves."

Since the whole idea of observation sentences depends on knowing a language, there is a sense in which all such sentences depend on prior acquisition of a certain picture of the world, and thus a sense in which our assent or dissent to such sentences serves as evidence that we hold a certain picture. Still one might think of certain portions of this picture as highly world guided and relatively invariant across cultures, and other parts of this picture as almost completely socially constructed. This would allow one to accept that there are moral observation sentences while denying that they have the same 'cognitive significance' as the observation sentences which guide scientific theorizing because they are more socially constructed and, thus, more reflective of a certain variable way of seeing things than confirmatory of it. The guiding intuition here would be that the more invariant observations are epistemically superior to the variant ones.

Even if we accept, as we should, that ethics is largely a social construction, we should resist too readily this deflationary way of putting things. First, it is not at all an implausible view to think that there is a


12. This is Gilbert Harman's position in The Nature of Morality: An Introduction to Ethics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), and in Harman, "Moral Explanations of Natural Facts."

certain small class of relatively invariant observation reports, for example, about deep-seated aversions—physical abuse and torture are bad—which in the first instance guide the construction of ethical theory and then later provide an epistemically significant "empirical foothold" for judgments about the goodness or badness of certain acts, or about the overall quality of some life forms over the alternatives. To be sure, such footholds will underdetermine almost all interesting ethical judgments: but that is equally true for most interesting scientific statements. The claim that "This act is bad because cruel" is not obviously more underdetermined by its observational roots than the claim that "This is acid because the litmus paper turned red."

Gibson contrasts the situation of testing for acidity to ethical testing. But the way he frames the example is misleading. Gibson stipulates (what is certainly fair to assume) that the two scientists agree on what would count as relevant evidence in the acid-alkaline case, whereas he has us imagine a situation of ethical controversy in which the content of the disagreement is left completely open. The asymmetry between the two cases is then alleged to consist in the fact that in the unspecified moral case (unlike the specified scientific case), there might be no way to decide what action has been performed, or even if there is agreement on that, there might be disagreement about whether such actions have some further property, say 'badness'; and that furthermore there might be no straightforward observational tests—agreeable to all parties—to be performed. It is true that this "might" be the case. But the strong disanalogy breaks down in two directions. First, the auxiliary assumptions which link judgments of badness to perceived acts of cruelty are at least as widely accepted and well-grounded as those linking judgments of acidity to perceived redness in litmus paper. In the other direction, there are indeterminately many cases in science in which there is disagreement about what event has occurred, or about the further properties of some event or set of events, and in which, furthermore, there is no known way of testing. Many important hypotheses in cosmology, astrophysics, geology, and evolutionary biology fit this bill.

The second point is related. We should be careful not to overrate the importance of observation reports for justification or truth. Consider again the judgment "That's outrageous." Quine correctly points out that this judgment usually depends on collateral information. One point is simply that this sentence, like the sentence "He's a bachelor," which also depends on collateral information, need not for this reason give rise to epistemic worries. Often the collateral information will be easy to gather and the truth value of the sentence easy to appraise.

14. Gibson says that science corresponds to observation. But this is a misleading and un-Quinean way of putting things. To be sure, science is entitled to the correspondence theory of truth, but even the low-level sentence "This is acid" fails, strictly speaking, to correspond to observation.
Mathematical justification, as Quine himself admits, is not tied—or at least not very directly tied—to observation. The linking of degree of observability with cognitive status is a mistake of positivism, and it is a mistake which does not merely, as Ayer thought, make ethics look suspicious. It also, as Quine and others have shown, renders most of science cognitively suspect as well. Furthermore, observation sentences may be the "tug that tows the ship of theory," but they frequently do not express facts which hold up as true descriptions of the deep structure of reality. For example, 'That this table is a solid with no spaces between its parts' was a firm observation sentence which was believed to be true prior to the atomic theory of matter. There is no reason to think that ethical discoveries cannot, like scientific discoveries, be made in reaches very far from mundane and direct observation and lead to epistemic adjustments in our basic attitudes and modes of moral perception.

This brings me to a final set of points concerning justification. Gibson, like Quine, accepts that feedback about our practices might legitimately ground certain "non-ultimate or instrumental" moral values and practices, but he insists that "the issue concerns the purported objectivity of non-instrumental moral values." The part of normative ethics dealing with instrumental issues would presumably have something like the status which Quine confers on normative epistemology: "For me normative epistemology is a branch of engineering. It is the technology of truth-seeking. Like any technology, it makes free use of whatever scientific findings may suit its purpose." The alleged infirmity from which ethics suffers but which does not enfeeble science and normative epistemology lies in the fact that our ultimate ethical values remain "unreduced and so unjustified." In science and normative epistemology there "is no question . . . of ultimate value, as in morals; it is a matter of efficacy for an ulterior end, truth or prediction. The normative here, as elsewhere in engineering, becomes descriptive when the terminal parameter is expressed. We could say the same of morality if we could view it as aimed at reward in heaven."

I do not see how this argument can be made to work. Although Quine never says explicitly what he means by ultimate values except that they are irreducible, I take it that he has in mind such traditional candidates as 'pleasure,' 'happiness,' and the like. To be sure, any socially enriched theory of what happiness consists in will be irreducible to observation or, what is different, to basic facts about human nature. But it is hard to see how this constitutes a significant objection since, according to Quine, the slide from unreduced to unjustified is illegitimate. There are electrons is, after all, irreducible, but not thereby unjustified. Furthermore, as I argued above, it is not as if our noninstrumental socially enriched

15. For some interesting remarks on his conception of mathematical truth, see Quine's "Reply to Hilary Putnam," in Hahn and Schilpp, eds., p. 430.


17. Ibid., p. 665.
moral conceptions are picked from thin air. In the first place, they invariably have some, possibly very remote, links to certain basic appetites and aversions. Second, even if we cannot reduce our ultimate values to something else, we can often say nontrivial things about them which have justificatory bearing. For example, we can sometimes say things about the ways in which some newly discovered good is good. This need not involve instrumental reduction as much as feature specification of the nature of the particular good. Third, even if we find that there are certain things, pain, for example, about which we have little more to say than that it is so bad because people hate it so much, it is hard to see why allowing one part of our ethical conception to bottom out in such a bald fact engenders lack of justification—especially since science's bottoming out in similarly bald facts is taken by Quine and Ginison to ground its justifications.

It seems simply stipulative to suggest that the values that guide science and normative epistemology, as we know them, are unproblematic "ulterior ends"—some sort of 'descriptive terminal parameter' specified by nature in the way our values would be specified by God if there was a God. We do science and epistemology in ways that show every sign of being driven by socially specific values. Furthermore, insofar as we can ground some sort of minimal transcultural "need to know" it will be grounded in certain basic features of persons as epistemically capable biological organisms as well as in certain basic desires to live well—characteristics which may also drive our ethical constructions across social worlds.\(^{18}\) The attempt to draw a distinction between the unproblematic ulterior ends of truth and prediction which guide science and epistemology and our ultimate ethical values that sit "unreduced and so unjustified" tries to mark a distinction where there is none and represents yet another remnant of positivistic dogma.

\(^{18}\) See Putnam for some related points.