DISCUSSION

Flanagan on Quinean Ethics*

Roger F. Gibson

In 1978, Quine published his first and (so far) only essay devoted entirely to the topic of morality, namely, "On the Nature of Moral Values." What other scanty remarks he has made on the topic are to be found in The Roots of Reference, The Web of Belief, "What I Believe," "Reply to Morton White," and a few lines scattered here and there in various and sundry essays.

To my knowledge, there have been but two published responses to "On the Nature of Moral Values." The first to appear was Owen J. Flanagan, Jr.'s "Quinean Ethics": the second was Morton White's "Normative Ethics, Normative Epistemology, and Quine's Holism." Both Flanagan and White are, like Quine, ethical naturalists. However, for their different reasons, they both deny the epistemological thesis advanced by Quine in "On the Nature of Moral Values," namely, that ethics as compared to physics is methodologically infirm. Recently, Quine has defended his thesis against White's arguments. However, he has not defended his thesis against Flanagan's. In what follows, I offer such a defense.

In "On the Nature of Moral Values," Quine succinctly states his thesis of the epistemological infirmity of ethics as follows: "The empirical foothold of scientific theory is in the predicted observable event; that of

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4. Quine, "Reply to Morton White."

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a moral code is in the observable moral act. But whereas we can test a prediction against the independent course of observable nature, we can judge the morality of an act only by our moral standards themselves. Science, thanks to its links with observation, retains some title to a correspondence theory of truth; but a coherence theory is evidently the lot of ethics.”

Suppose, to illustrate Quine’s point, that two scientists disagree about whether a certain beaker contains acid. In order to settle their dispute they immerse blue litmus paper into the liquid in the beaker; subsequently, the paper turns red. They agree that the beaker contains acid. In short, the test for the claim that the beaker contains acid is whether or not it corresponds to the world (in Quine’s weak sense of “correspondence,” quoted above).

Now suppose that two persons disagree about whether some particular action is moral or immoral. This disagreement may take either of two forms. On the one hand, the two persons might agree that all actions of kind ABC are moral and that all actions of kind ABD are immoral yet disagree about whether the particular action in question is of kind ABC or kind ABD; and there very well may be no “independent course of observable nature” against which to decide the matter. On the other hand, the two persons might agree that the action in question is of kind ABC yet disagree about the morality of acts of that kind: and, again, there very well may be no “independent course of observable nature” against which to decide the matter. In short, the test for the claim that the action or principle in question is immoral is whether it “coheres” with one’s moral standards; if not, then it is immoral.

In his essay, “Quinean Ethics,” Quine’s fellow ethical naturalist, Flanagan argues that Quine’s ethical theory is actually inconsistent with his systematic philosophical naturalism, that is, with the rest of Quine’s philosophical system. The crux of Flanagan’s “argument is that Quine’s concern with the ‘methodological infirmity of ethics as compared to science’ is unwarranted.” It is unwarranted, Flanagan contends, because “the two characteristics of ethics which lead Quine to contrast scientific and moral discourse, namely, (1) that ‘we can judge the morality of an act only by our own moral standards themselves’, and (2) that ‘there must remain some ultimate ends unreduced and so unjustified’ are attributes which . . . [Quine] himself has shown are characteristic of all significant discourse and thus do not serve to distinguish ethics from science at all.”

Flanagan develops his essay in three sections. In the first section he makes “some remarks about Quine’s general philosophical position, highlighting the theses of holism and naturalism since these will be used later on to undermine the theses that 1 and 2 [above] uniquely afflict ethics.”

6. Flanagan, p. 56.
7. Ibid., note omitted.
8. Ibid.
In the second section Flanagan discusses and fills out "the unproblematic part of Quine's ethical theory." In the final section Flanagan provides "a critique and a naturalistic reformulation of the problematic part of Quine's ethical theory." "Unlike Quine's, my theory," says Flanagan, "counts normative ethics as meaningful and as a legitimate part of an overall naturalistic theory."

In the remainder of this essay, I shall argue that Flanagan's critique of Quine's claim that ethics is methodologically infirm is misdirected, on the grounds that Flanagan's claim erroneously presupposes that Quine is committed to a radical form of holism. I shall also argue that Flanagan's "naturalistic reformulation" of Quine's ethical theory fails to demonstrate that ethics is on a methodological par with science.

One should be clear about what precisely Flanagan is claiming. He is not claiming, he warns his readers, that "it is impossible to be a consistent philosophical naturalist and hold that ethics is methodologically infirm compared to science." Indeed, there have been philosophers who were consistent naturalists and who maintained that ethics is methodologically infirm on the grounds that ethical utterances are noncognitive. Rather, Flanagan's claim is specific to Quine. He claims "that Quine's naturalism precludes counting ethics as one of the underprivileged modes [of discourse] since the grounds that Flanagan's claim erroneously presupposes that Quine is committed to a radical form of holism. I shall also argue that Flanagan's "naturalistic reformulation" of Quine's ethical theory fails to demonstrate that ethics is on a methodological par with science.

Flanagan is certainly correct in his claim that Quine rejects this archaic view, and he is equally correct when he goes on to attribute this rejection to Quine's acceptance of holism. On these grounds, Flanagan concludes that "no simple traditional way of contrasting ethical and scientific discourse is available to Quine."

This much of Flanagan's argument—that Quine's view about the methodological infirmity of ethics is inconsistent with his naturalism—can be summarized as follows:

P1: Quine's rejection of the two dogmas of empiricism (namely, the analytic-synthetic distinction and radical epistemological reductionism) supports and is implied by holism.

P2: Holism precludes any talk of correspondence obtaining between the sentences of a theory and the world.

9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., pp. 73-74.
12. Ibid., p. 64.
13. Ibid.; my emphasis.
P3: Holism eliminates first philosophy, thereby opening the way for naturalism.

P4: Holism-cum-naturalism applies equally to science and to ethics.

P5: Quine in effect denies P4 on the ground that "science, thanks to its links with observation, retains some title to a correspondence theory of truth; but a coherence theory is evidently the lot of ethics."

C: Quine's ground for denying P4 is inconsistent with his acceptance of P2.

The next step in Flanagan's argument is to restore consistency to Quine's system by rejecting P5. This amounts to supplanting Quine's claim that "science, thanks to its links with observation, retains some title to a correspondence theory of truth; but a coherence theory is evidently the lot of ethics" (which is inconsistent with P2) with the claim (which is consistent with P2) that a coherence theory of truth is the lot of both science and ethics. Thus, pace Quine, ethics is not "methodologically infirm" as compared to science.

I believe that the argument sketched above has a certain cogency, but it is nevertheless unsound. The difficulty is that P2 overstates the scope of Quine's holism. On Flanagan's interpretation, Quine's holism thesis asserts "that sentences are brought to experience as a system which is ultimately constrained only by consistency considerations, our tendency toward epistemic conservatism, and the needs of practice."15 Again, Flanagan writes, "Quine has shown that the thesis of determinate meaning is untenable and that the thesis of exhaustive reduction to observation [i.e., radical epistemological reductionism] is mythical even for those [observation] sentences on the periphery of our systematic scientific theories."16 And, finally, "Quine has spent his philosophical career convincing us that all checks are ultimately intersystematic."17

Now, this conception of holism is a form of radical holism, and it may very well preclude any talk of correspondence obtaining between the sentences of a theory and the world (P2). However, Quine rejects this form of holism, opting instead for a form of mitigated holism which allows, nay, insists, that observation sentences have their own, individual empirical (stimulus) meanings: "I must caution against over-stating my holism. Observation sentences do have their empirical content individually, and other sentences are biased individually to particular empirical content in varying degrees."18 Indeed, it is only by virtue of the fact that observation sentences do have their own, individual empirical mean-

15. Ibid., p. 57; my emphasis.
16. Ibid., p. 65; my emphasis.
17. Ibid., p. 70; my emphasis.
ings that Quine can say that observation "is the tug that tows the ship of theory" and that "science . . . retains some title to the correspondence theory of truth."19

Thus, it seems to me that since P2 overstates Quine's holism, the first step of Flanagan's argument fails: it does not show that Quine's claim (that ethics as compared to science is methodologically infirm) is inconsistent with Quine's holism-cum-naturalism. This, of course, renders otiose the second step of Flanagan's argument, namely, restoring consistency by maintaining that the coherence theory of truth is the lot of both ethics and science.

Flanagan is not insensitive to the possibility that his foregoing argument falters because P2 may be an overstatement of Quine's holism. In this regard, he writes:

But perhaps I am drawing too simple a picture. Quine is not an idealist. We are not entirely intersystematically constrained in our scientific theorizing, although it is in principle impossible to tell exactly when we are not so constrained. Holism is dialectical. Our theories have what Quine likes to refer to as an oddly reciprocal relationship with experience. Theories break through the linguistic barrier now and again, and thanks to some feedback from nature we adjust accounts. The feedback is never, of course, totally free of theoretical static. Nonetheless it is this feedback which constitutes the "empirical foothold," the "empirical controls," "the predicted observable event" which, according to Quine, science courts from time to time. But is ethics really so empirically uninvolved as to be worthy of disparagement by these standards?20

Clearly, Flanagan wants his readers to answer this question with a resounding no. If we can justify this answer, then we can deny Quine's claim that ethics is methodologically infirm as compared to science, not however, as before, on the grounds that the coherence theory of truth is the lot of both ethics and science, but now on the grounds that both science and ethics have some title to the correspondence theory of truth. But, if science corresponds to observation, to what does Flanagan believe ethics corresponds? In a word, practice:

The corresponding role to observation [in science], of course, is played [in ethics] by practice. The theory of the *summum bonum* . . . [the normative side of naturalized ethics, according to Flanagan] is the theory of the form(s) of life which most comprehensively maximizes our aims, our interests. The best way to find out whether some particular hunk of the theory of the good life is correct is to try it, to practice it. The value of truth telling, for example, is ultimately not merely maintained because of intersystematic con-


Consistency considerations. It is maintained because of these and because it works; truth telling tends to help maximize our aims, our interests. So Quine is wrong that the empirical foothold [of the moral code] is "in the observable moral act." It is in the consequences of the observable moral act. These consequences break the hold of the system, and they undercut the thesis that we can judge our values "only by our moral standards themselves."21

But does this "naturalistic reformulation of the problematic part of Quine’s ethical theory," this appeal to the consequences of observable moral acts rather than to the moral acts themselves, put ethics fully on a methodological par with science, as Flanagan claims?

Certainly, there is something to be said for Flanagan’s claim, so far as nonultimate, or instrumental, moral values are concerned. Indeed, Quine remarks that “there is a legitimate mixture of ethics with science that somewhat mitigates the methodological predicament of ethics.”22 And what is this mixture of ethics with science? Causal reductionism. “Ethical axioms can be minimized by reducing some values causally to others; that is, by showing that some of the valued acts would already count as valuable anyway as means to ulterior ends. Utilitarianism is a notable example of such systematization.”23 For such nonultimate moral values, at least, Flanagan’s “practice” and Quine’s “causal reduction” seem to come down to the same activity. Even so, the method of causal reduction requires no more than the coherence theory of truth: “This way of resolving moral issues is successful to the extent that we can reduce moral values causally to other moral values that command agreement.”24 However, Quine warns, “there must remain some ultimate ends, unreduced and so unjustified.”25 Furthermore, he does not believe that appeals to science can resolve conflicts over such ultimate ends: “In an extremity we can fight, if the threat to the ultimate value in question outweighs the disvalue of fighting.”26

The question is, then, does Flanagan’s appeal to “practice” and to “our aims, our interests” do anything toward elevating disagreements about noninstrumental moral values to the methodological status of disagreements about scientific claims? The issue here between Flanagan and Quine is not over the prospect of providing some kind of ultimate justification for noninstrumental moral values: “The naturalistic theory I am promoting,” says Flanagan, “shares with Quine the belief that ultimate justification is impossible.”27 Rather, the issue concerns the purported

21. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., p. 65.
27. Flanagan, p. 72.
objectivity of noninstrumental moral values. Clearly, if “our aims, our interests” are “correct” only because they are ours, then they lack the kind of objectivity that Quine claims is characteristic of those scientific claims that “correspond” to “the independent course of observable nature.” Thus, if a consistently naturalistic Flanagan is to succeed in elevating ethics to the methodological status of science, where “our aims, our interests” are “correct” because they “correspond” to “the independent course of observable nature,” he must provide some other naturalistic account of the purported objectivity of “our aims, our interests.” Precisely what form such an account might take, I do not know. So far as I can tell, however, Flanagan does not provide one.

In sum, I have argued that Flanagan’s critique of Quine’s ethical theory (which alleges that Quine’s holism-cum-naturalism is inconsistent with his claim that ethics is methodologically infirm) fails because it erroneously construes Quine as advocating a radical form of holism. Thus, Flanagan cannot legitimately conclude that the coherence theory of truth is the lot of both ethics and science. Further, I have argued that Flanagan’s “naturalistic reformulation of the problematic part of Quine’s ethical theory” fails to demonstrate that ethics as well as science has some title to the correspondence theory of truth since Flanagan has not shown that noninstrumental moral values enjoy the kind of objectivity characteristic of science.