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"Book in Focus"
Quine on Ethics: The Gavagai of Moral Discourse
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Prologue

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Why bother with Quine's ethics? This could conceivably come up regularly as the very first question in the scholarly reception of the present volume. More accurately, given that the mere mention of "Quine's ethics" may be found objectionable, namely on the grounds that he does not actually have an ethical system or moral philosophy of his own, the critical challenge would quite likely be articulated in a slightly different form: Why bother with what Quine has to say about ethics? The real question, however, is this: How can any serious scholar reasonably ignore such a cogent and exciting foray into ethical theory by one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century?

What Quine has done, though he admittedly has not developed his own moral philosophy, is to import into a metaethical challenge the conceptual apparatus of his resounding contributions in epistemology, metaphysics, the philosophy of language, and the philosophy of science. Since he has packed that cumulative wisdom into a brief and tightly woven contribution in metaethics, it is up to us to unpack it. The present volume is an attempt to do just that. It is also an initiative to show where others were right, as well as where they were not, in their own attempts to unpack Quine's thoughts on the matter. What makes the overall project worthwhile is not simply that Quine is a prominent philosopher but more so that he has said important things about ethics that unfortunately remain in the shadow of the more important things he has said about other areas of philosophy.

Such a natural distraction in simultaneous exposure to competing virtues is not unlike how film viewers might fail to notice what an amazing actress Marilyn Monroe is, simply because they cannot get past what a gorgeous woman she is. I myself have always admired Ms. Monroe as a talented actress, despite noticing that she is rather easy on the eyes as well. That is also the spirit in which I have written this book on Quine. There are qualities in Quine's take on ethics and morality that deserve to share the limelight with his seminal contributions in other areas of philosophy. Initiating a dialogue on Quine's foundational challenge to normative ethics, especially as it is practiced at present, can only help to expose and address the opportunities for methodological refinement in moral discourse.

1. The Relevance of Quine to Ethics

Quine on Ethics: The Gavagai of Moral Discourse is the first comprehensive treatment of Quine's views on ethics and morality. While information on the specific aims and actual contents of the book is readily available through a press release by Cambridge Scholars Publishing, as well as an online extract incorporating the entirety of the front matter and a portion of the first chapter, the "Book in Focus" series provides a welcome opportunity to elaborate in a less formal setting on the underlying motivation for the project as a whole. Why indeed do we need such a book?

This question is obviously relevant to any scholarly undertaking, but it may seem particularly appropriate under the circumstances, because the idea of a book on the moral philosophy of Quine must appear at least a little odd, perhaps somewhat like the idea of a book on, say, the metaphysics of John Rawls or the epistemology of Peter Singer. The apparent curiosity, at any rate, is not that Quine's views on ethics do not deserve serious consideration but that his views on everything else attract so much attention that they generally dwarf any interest in the former. Otherwise, it is not as if inquiring after Quine on ethics were like asking about William Shakespeare as a scientist, Isaac Newton as a playwright, or Cary Grant as a singer. None of them is known for any of that, at least not in that order.

To adopt a proper benchmark from popular culture, if we must have one at all, the engagement of Quine in moral philosophy as a scholarly activity would be more like the participation of Frank Sinatra in movie acting as a professional career. Just as Sinatra was a talented actor receiving critical acclaim for his cinematic performances, though he was appreciated more for his stellar career as a singer, so too was Quine an insightful contributor to moral philosophy, while he was known primarily for his momentous contributions in other areas of philosophy. Sinatra, to be sure, had a greater presence in motion pictures than Quine did in moral philosophy, but the point is that they both ventured successfully outside their main area of expertise, each one leaving a significant mark beyond his distinctive claim to fame.

Quine's contribution to ethical theory, brief though it may be, is in the form of a critical metaethical intervention concerning a specific methodological matter. His thoughts on the subject, including his appraisal of ethics as a philosophical enterprise and his conception of morality as a social institution, are condensed into an essay titled "On the Nature of Moral Values" (1978). That essay is his only publication dedicated exclusively to ethical theory. It was drafted and published as a contribution to a festschrift in honor of William Klaas Frankena (1908–1994), Charles Leslie Stevenson (1908–1979), and Richard Booker Brandt (1910–1997). And it has been receiving steady critical attention ever since its publication, though not by any measure generating massive scholarly interest.

However that may be, the brevity of Quine's participation in ethics as a division of philosophy, as reflected in the singularity of his contribution to the field, may stoke suspicions concerning the validity and viability of a scholarly initiative to cover his corresponding views at any length. The general question posed above, both in the prologue and in the main body, may thus appear just as urgent in a more specific formulation: Why do we need a book on Quine's ethics if he is not even an ethicist and there is consequently hardly any information on his moral philosophy? To be even more specific:

Why should we bother to examine the ethical views of someone with only one publication in ethics, not even a book at that, just a solitary essay in an anthology with multiple authors?

The answer, if it is to be satisfactory at all, must be either that the piece is so good that it deserves all the attention it gets, regardless of who wrote it, or that the author is such a prominent philosopher that whatever he says in a professional capacity on any topic deserves serious consideration, regardless of his primary area of expertise. The truth lies somewhere in between, closer to an appreciation of the man's vast contributions to philosophy than to a veneration of his limited work in ethics.

Whatever the answer, though, we must keep in mind that Quine had not published a single piece on ethics, not even that solitary essay, when he was invited to participate in the corresponding festschrift, which was organized in honor of three of the most eminent ethicists of the twentieth century. With so many actual ethicists available throughout the world, whose presence and participation in the festschrift would have constituted such a natural fit with the three that were being honored there, not to mention all the other professional ethicists making up the rest of the contributors, why invite someone from outside the profession, so to speak, or rather, from outside the division or subdivision, to be precise?

It is clear that Quine was invited for his stature, reputation, and influence as a philosopher, not for his existing accomplishments as an ethicist, for no such accomplishments existed at the time. Yet it is no secret that the most compelling and disruptive ideas in ethical theory have historically come from philosophers who were known at least as much if not more for their contributions to other divisions of philosophy, typically spanning the entire spectrum of rational inquiry, with the most memorable examples including Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, and John Stuart Mill, to name only a few of the most brilliant contributors to moral philosophy. The point is not that Quine's name belongs right up there with those of Aristotle, Kant, and Mill, but that one need not be a specialist to make a special contribution.

Anyone inclined to mistrust Quine's inclusion among notable contributors to ethical theory may find it interesting, possibly even convincing, to consider how his greatest expositor, Roger F. Gibson Jr., summarizes Quine's intellectual legacy in philosophy:

> In his writings and lectures Quine has, for the most part, preoccupied himself with exploring the relations obtaining among mind, world, and language. As a result, he has made profound contributions to numerous subfields of philosophy, including philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, philosophy of language, metaphysics, epistemology, logic and set theory, philosophy of logic and set theory, and ethics. [Gibson, 1986, 667]

Gibson's summary of Quine's contributions demonstrates incidentally that Quine's apparently anomalous inclusion in the festschrift for the three ethicists, was, in fact, a perfect fit for the occasion. Frankena, Stevenson, and Brandt, all trained in the analytic tradition, had produced particularly well-received publications in metaethics. All three had spent some time at the University of Cambridge, Frankena and Stevenson both studying with G. E. Moore, the latter also with Wittgenstein, and Brandt earning a second bachelor's degree there, specifically in the philosophy of religion, on top of a double major in philosophy and classical studies at Denison University.

As contemporaries of Quine (1908–2000), who was born just four days after Frankena and only a couple of days before Stevenson, all three ethicists thus brought fresh perspectives and vast expertise to ethics as a philosophical enterprise at exactly the time that Quine was leaving his own mark in several distinct areas of philosophy. And the common denominator of their most valuable contributions, metaethics, was at that time, as it still is at present, closely associated with the philosophy of language and the philosophy of knowledge, which were widely recognized as two of Quine's most important areas of expertise. Hence, the reason for his inclusion in the festschrift. The circumstances of his inclusion, of course, are no guarantee of the value of his contribution, which is what the present volume is dedicated to demonstrating.

2. The Views of Quine on Ethics

What is it, then, that is so worthy of attention in Quine's all-too-brief professional engagement with ethics? The main attraction in his contribution to moral philosophy, which is also the central focus of the present initiative contemplated in his defense, is Quine's thesis of the methodological infirmity of ethics (MIE) as compared with science. The thesis, put simply, is that normative ethics is inferior to positive science in terms of definitive criteria for methodological strength, including evidence, justification, truth, and objectivity. Here is how Quine puts the matter in his own words:

> 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 regrets the methodological infirmity of ethics as compared with science. [MIE 1: Evidence] The empirical foothold of scientific theory is in the predicted observable event; that of a moral code is in the observable moral act. [MIE 2: Justification] 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. [MIE 3: Truth] 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. [MIE 4: Objectivity] 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; the original text is in two paragraphs with a break between MIE 3 and MIE 4]

The parts of the passage marked off here as separate criteria illustrate the details of the scoring convention employed for the methodological comparison offered. Thus representing the defining characteristics of rational inquiry, at least according to Quine, these criteria may be taken as severally necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for methodological propriety in any area of study where the search for truth, or for agreement, where truth is not a goal, proceeds with arguments based on evidence. The methodological infirmity of ethics, then, is not a general defect or absolute deficiency but a relative disadvantage in comparison with science where both are judged specifically in reference to the considerations stipulated.

The most natural temptation in opposition to Quine's thesis would be to object either that the assessment is inaccurate or that the comparison is irrelevant. The first would be to challenge Quine on the veracity of his declaration that ethics is methodologically infirm in comparison with science. The second would be to reject the relevance of that

comparison altogether. Among Quine's critics on this matter, Owen J. Flanagan Jr. (1982; 1988) and Morton White (1986) are the leading examples of the first approach, while Michele M. Moody-Adams (1990) is the strongest proponent of the second approach. Together they account for the earliest and strongest critical reactions to Quine on ethics.

Flanagan's (1982; 1988) objection is that the real focus in moral evaluation is not on moral acts but on the consequences of those acts, which then purportedly provide the empirical foothold Quine denies to exist in normative ethics. This argument, however, misses the force of Quine's insight that the moral standards we regularly employ in evaluation of the consequences Flanagan proposes as an empirical foothold keep normative ethics confined to a coherence theory of truth. This is because the operative standards in morality have no foundational connection with objective reality even if actions and consequences are indeed observational.

White's (1986) objection is bolder, as he openly admits that moral deliberation in any context is all about how we feel about the matter, that is, about the action being contemplated or evaluated. This is to embrace feelings not just as morally indicative but also as methodologically relevant, authoritative, and conclusive, while denying that such an inward focus on our emotional response keeps normative ethics confined to coherence truth, and objecting instead that feelings themselves could very well serve as the empirical counterpart in moral discourse of sensory data in positive science. Yet both the objection and the position it supports ignore the fact that feelings are not observational in the sense required for empirical confirmation in positive science.

Moody-Adams (1990), in contrast to both Flanagan and White, objects that ethics is just different from science, not inferior to it in any way. This rings true, of course, but it does not quite capture the way that ethical theory has, in practice, been fashioned after the scientific method for centuries. This tendency has transformed normative ethics into a mimetic operation emulating the various protocols of science, particularly in pursuit of a justification procedure with the validity and reliability of scientific conclusions, but failing to do it anywhere near as well. The failure, rather ironically, is due to the inherent differences Moody-Adams herself points out between ethics and science.

The alternative that Moody-Adams presents as a paradigm for moral discourse successfully captures the true nature of ethics as a philosophical enterprise and thus goes to the heart of the matter regarding the essence of moral deliberation. However, although it captures the spirit and substance of moral philosophy so well, in fact, because it captures the spirit and substance of moral philosophy so well, it fails to demonstrate that normative ethics is not methodologically infirm as compared with science in just the way that Quine says it is.

To be more specific, Moody-Adams nominates the "self-understanding," or "self-conception," of the moral agent as the real empirical foothold in normative ethics (1990, 230), which is reasonable enough in itself, in addition to being perfectly realistic as a model for moral reasoning, but the methodological platform thereby identified is not the least bit convincing as an empirical foothold on a par with what goes on in science and hence with how scientific inquiry proceeds. Whether it is called "self-understanding" or "self-conception," the allegedly empirical foothold Moody-Adams nominates is supposed to provide the requisite methodological grounding through "moral reflection" in the form of "self-scrutiny" or "self-examination" (1990, 231), but no part of that

internal process is observational in any sense approaching the observationality of look-ing out the window and confirming that it is raining, which is precisely what Quine is looking for in terms of conformity with a correspondence theory of truth in corrobora-tion of a foundational connection with reality.

An additional problem with the approach of Moody-Adams is that the nomination of any empirical foothold for ethics, no matter what it is, constitutes an effort to demon-strate that ethics is, after all, just as firm as science on the very criteria proposed by Quine, whereas her overarching position in opposition to Quine is that the very com-parison is irrelevant and therefore invalid. She tries to have it both ways as she ends up playing Quine's game in the end despite rejecting it from the beginning. It is not even consistent, let alone being convincing, to nominate an empirical foothold for eth-ics, hoping thereby to demonstrate that ethics is on a methodological par with science, while arguing all along that the two activities are so different in nature and function as to defy any meaningful comparison between them in regard to methodology.

The central problem common to all three of the critics mentioned above, to say nothing of a host of others coming up in the book, is a failure to appreciate the full extent of Quine's emphasis on observationality as an essential ingredient in his naturalism and as a critical element in his holism. The unifying aim of the present volume is to restore that emphasis and to demonstrate its relevance to Quine's thesis of the methodological infirmity of ethics as compared with science. The book is also concerned with other interpretive matters, including the question whether Quine was a cognitivist or non-cognitivist in his understanding of ethical theory, but the primary goal is to defend his assessment of ethics relative to science in methodological terms. As confirmed by his systematic attention to observationality, the point of Quine's comparison is not that ethics is not as useful as science, but simply that ethics is not science, in other words, that it is not observational, at least not in any relevant way.

This is not to play down how provocative Quine's thesis is. I am not saying that the comparison is entirely innocuous, holding no cause for alarm and presenting no reason for resistance. Quine is not arguing that ethics is simply different from science and not at all inferior to it. That is the response of Moody-Adams. What Quine is claiming is that ethics is indeed inferior to science in methodological terms, at least with respect to the foundational connection with reality presumably available to positive science but not to normative ethics. What he is not claiming, however, is that the methodolog-ical infirmity of ethics as compared with science makes normative ethics invalid or un-reliable as a guide to common morality.

Even if their methodological differences place normative ethics in a separate league from positive science in evidentiary terms, they do not strip ethics altogether of a ra-tional foundation in epistemic terms. Not all justification is evidentiary. Nor is all evi-dence empirical. The world does not consist strictly of sticks and stones. And confir-mation is not always a matter of raindrops on windows. It is just that sticks and stones, and raindrops on windows, are all so hard to miss, deny, or ignore. And that is what accounts for the central role of observationality throughout the comparison between ethics and science.

3. The "Gavagai" of Moral Discourse

Quine's emphasis on observationality is also the inspiration for the reference to "gavagai" in the subtitle of the present volume. The lack of observationality Quine detects in moral discourse is a direct reflection of the "gavagai" quality of the moral insights commonly invoked in evaluation and justification in normative ethics. While the term "gavagai" will be familiar to anyone interested in Quine, that segment of the general population does not add up to a great many people. It corresponds, at best, to a small but well-defined minority, naturally excluding and possibly alienating everyone else. The esoteric nature of the term, however, does not present a real obstacle, given that the main title ("Quine on Ethics") is clear enough to make up for any barriers to insight into the subtitle ("The Gavagai of Moral Discourse"). Even so, a brief exposition of the connection may benefit anyone who may be wondering about the terminology.

Like most other scholarly monographs, this book is intended for a specific community with special interests as opposed to a general audience without limitation. Elaborating further on any part of the title would thus be the academic equivalent of turning into that awkward character at parties who thinks he is funny but ends up having to explain his jokes when he sees that nobody is laughing. Yet the viability of normative ethics is no laughing matter. Even those with no particular interest in Quine may find something of interest in his thesis of the methodological infirmity of ethics as compared with science. And the notion of observationality is so crucial to that position that any association with the epistemic imagery of "gavagai" becomes immediately relevant. The reference therefore deserves adequate contextual orientation lest it be lost for a lack of terminological familiarity.

The term "gavagai" was invented by Quine as part of a thought experiment designed to demonstrate the inscrutability of reference, which informs his thesis of the indeterminacy of translation, both of which are consistent with his position on the underdetermination of scientific theory by empirical evidence. The final item in that string of philosophical problems, or positions, is the notion that we start out with the meager input of sensory hits on our nerve endings but end up with the torrential output of scientific paradigms structuring and facilitating our efforts to understand the reality in which we find ourselves in our phenomenal experience of the world at large. This makes the term "gavagai" the epistemic symbol of the search for meaning, among other things, in our collective attempt to make sense of our acquaintance with reality as we explore it from the inside as passengers on Neurath's boat.

Introduced in his *magnum opus*, *Word and Object* (1960, 29–33, 37–40, 43–45, 51–53, 72–73, and *passim*), though also coming up elsewhere (e.g., 1968; 1970; 1990, 42, 51–52; 1995, 79; 1996), Quine's celebrated thought experiment has readers imagine a linguist observing a native in the context of anthropological fieldwork focusing primarily on language, specifically in a scenario where the respective languages of the linguist and the native are radically different. Following a series of utterances with no discernible association with the immediate surroundings, the native finally says something in apparent reaction to a contextual stimulus that is also open to and observed by the linguist. He utters "Gavagai" (serving both as a word and as a sentence) just as a rabbit scurries by, whereupon the proper translation, at least at first, remains open in the absence of collateral information (Quine's term for additional information that is necessary to formulate a hypothesis or to draw a conclusion but cannot be gleaned from the context alone). This is because the term could conceivably refer to anything from

fairly typical alternatives, such as "rabbit," "animal," and "white," to entirely fanciful possibilities, such as "rabbit stages" and "undetached rabbit parts." The point is that, where the two languages have no history of translation in either direction and no record of personal interaction between their native speakers, any attempt to translate utterances observed in one language will be at the mercy of the ontological commitments prevailing in the other language, which may or may not coincide with those in the first language.

Lying at the intersection of several philosophical problems occupying Quine in the form of dialectical lacunas, this supremely versatile metaphor brings together his notions of referential inscrutability, holophrastic indeterminacy, and ontological relativity, while cutting across his philosophy of language, philosophy of knowledge, and philosophy of science. Originally conceived and presented specifically in illustration of the inscrutability of reference, it is just as useful in exposition of the underdetermination of scientific theory by empirical evidence. This is because it draws attention to the nature and significance of observation as the only empirical connection available for bridging the vast epistemic gap between sensory input and theoretical output. While that point of intersection with reality at a foundational level is what drives the scientific method, that again is precisely what is missing in normative ethics, which is why the latter is confined to a coherence theory of truth while the former retains at least some claim to a correspondence theory of truth.

4. The Significance of Quine's Challenge

The methodological infirmity of ethics as compared with science thus boils down to a disparity in access to observational confirmation. That is the essence and extent of the infirmity intended. The epistemic gap between the evidentiary input available for scientific inquiry and the theoretical output delivered as scientific knowledge is manifestly wider in moral discourse, where the aim is not just to find the rabbit in the gavagai but even more so to decide what to do with either the rabbit or the gavagai. As a matter of fact, in moral applications, the whole point of figuring out whether we are all indeed talking about a rabbit would be so that we can subsequently discuss how we all feel about the rabbit, typically with some of us wanting to pet it while others want to kill it.

Lexical agreement on "gavagai" as "rabbit," for example, is hardly enough to expose or express the moral context of the dead gavagai in the film *Fatal Attraction*. The plot famously follows an escalating conflict between Daniel ("Dan") Gallagher, played by Michael Douglas, and Alexandra ("Alex") Forrest, played by Glenn Close, in the aftermath of their brief affair as Gallagher returns home to his wife and his family after a weekend fling with Forrest. Abandoned, angry, and anxious to let everyone know, the stereotypical "other woman" portrayed by Ms. Close ends up killing the pet gavagai of her former lover at the end of a violent campaign of fury ignited by jealousy and fueled by indignation.

Problems in real life, no doubt, are much harder to sort out than the fictional conflict between the characters played by Michael Douglas and Glenn Close. We all know that both are in the wrong in the scenario imagined, one of them more so than the other. The Michael Douglas character is clearly in the wrong for breaking his nuptial vows by cheating on his wife, but the Glenn Close character is guilty of even greater wrongdoing, as the justice she seeks for being jilted by her counterpart from the briefest of flings

consists in violently terrorizing his entire family. While the cheating husband is morally censurable for his affair, the gavagai killer and family stalker is positively abominable for her violence.

Neither act, however, represents a moral problem, certainly not in the standard sense. Each one instead constitutes a clear and distinct moral transgression, immediately identifiable as such without any diagnostic difficulty. Neither one qualifies, therefore, as a proper moral problem, at least not from a philosophical perspective. Real moral problems are never easy to adjudicate, which is exactly why they are problems. And the diagnostic difficulty in the real world is exacerbated all the more by the methodological infirmity of ethics as compared with science.

The morality of an action or situation is just not as straightforward a matter as the state of the weather, for example, to invoke Quine's favorite analogy for stimulating our intuitions concerning observational relevance. Our agreement on whether it is raining is almost always simply a matter of our taking a look out the window, or straight up at the sky if we already happen to be outside, whereas our agreement on moral matters is hardly ever secured through a shared observation of that sort or in that manner. That is because the former is indeed a matter of observation, while the latter is a matter of evaluation, which is why Quine holds positive science to be fundamentally observational while finding normative ethics inherently evaluative. That is all that he means in declaring ethics to be methodologically infirm as compared with science. Science is observational in a way that ethics is not.

Unfortunately, putting that difference in terms of a methodological infirmity on the part of ethics, though perfectly valid in the context of the corresponding comparison, leaves the matter open to a potentially serious misunderstanding, especially if it is taken out of context as a general appraisal of the inherent validity and reliability of decision procedures in normative ethics. Part of the purpose of the present volume is to provide the exegetical foundation required to preclude the possibility of such a misunderstanding, while another part is to uphold the accuracy of the original appraisal, particularly against the various critiques offered in opposition to it. The most promising critical reaction to Quine, though not necessarily an ultimately successful one, is not to challenge the accuracy of his evaluation but to question the relevance of the comparison.

That is indeed the approach advocated by Moody-Adams (1990). Where her particular appeal falls short, however, is in execution, which is where she gets sucked into Quine's game and suckered into playing by his rules. She rejects the terms of the comparison but attempts to meet it on its own terms anyway. One cannot play Quine's game and win. That is because the game is rigged. It is a comparison of ethics with science on the basis of quintessentially scientific criteria, which quite naturally indicate, at least jointly, that ethics is infirm as compared with science on the basis of the chosen criteria.

It is difficult to argue with that. It is also easy to do so. Either ethics is inferior to science with respect to the criteria specified by Quine, simply because the criteria are distinctively scientific, which does not constitute a real inferiority on the part of ethics considered on its own terms, or the comparison is irrelevant altogether, again because the criteria are distinctively scientific, thus creating and maintaining a design bias from

the outset. Note that the alternatives are not mutually exclusive. But why compare ethics with science at all? Because normative ethics has long been practiced in envious emulation of the various methodological innovations emerging from the sweeping intellectual transformation responsible for scientific progress since the dawn of the European Enlightenment, becoming particularly conspicuous with the technological advancements following the Industrial Revolution.

With moral discourse never developing a general or universal methodology of its own, at least not a standard methodology uniquely identified with normative ethics as a whole, Quine is well aware that we as moral agents have always been inclined to ground morality in whatever we found at the time to have the greatest validity and reliability for insight into reality. He knows therefore that we as a species started out by instinctively attributing our moral norms and standards to a divine origin all through antiquity and far into the middle ages, subsequently abandoning that association in favor of newly emerging paradigms for remodeling moral reasoning after the defining characteristics of the scientific method, a scholarly temptation starting with the modern era, though gaining momentum during the Age of Reason. The essence of this methodological transition in our ongoing search for moral orientation and grounding is captured in part in Quine's following ruminations on the corresponding developments in our existential journey:

> No wonder there have been efforts since earliest times to work a justification of moral values into the fabric of what might pass for factual science. For such, surely, were the myths of divine origins of moral law. [Quine 1978, 43]

The ultimate aim of the present volume is to demonstrate the enduring relevance of Quine's thesis of the methodological infirmity of ethics as compared with science, showing not only that it is still valid as an assessment of how normative ethics is perceived and practiced at present but also that it is still useful as a warning that scientific aspirations are best confined to scientific pursuits. Ethics may indeed be simply different from science, not inferior to it, but it is bound to fall short whenever it is practiced either in imitation of science or in competition with science. And that is precisely because it is inherently different from science.

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