

ON GIBSON'S DEFENCE OF QUINEAN ETHICS

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Abstract: Roger Gibson offers a defence of W.V.O. Quine's conception of ethics as "methodologically infirm" against Owen Flanagan's criticism. Gibson argues that Flanagan's critique of Quinean ethics is misdirected, and that he (Flanagan) fails to establish that ethics and science (natural science) are on a methodological par. In this essay, we argue that there may actually be some sort of overemphasis in Flanagan's argument, given its inclination to see Quine's holism as rejecting *any* form of correspondence theory, yet, *pace* Gibson (as well as Quine), this does not suggest that ethics is "methodologically infirm" in comparison with natural science. Rather, we argue that the comparative attempt between ethics and natural science is mistaken, because the two disciplines are *necessarily* different in goals, tasks and methods.

Introduction

We are neither restricted to the naturalists' school where all abstract or non-natural explanations of the world is rejected, and the belief that science is the sole basis of what can be known (Friedman, 1997:7); nor to that of pragmatists who judge things only through their productiveness. Just like Gibson, we are admirers of Quinean philosophy. The strand of his works that we admire most is his revolutionary challenge to analytic-synthetic cleavage and the radical epistemological reductionism of traditional empiricists in his, as Morton White (1982:186) calls it, "deservedly famous" paper, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism".

However, admiring Quinean philosophy does not confer the right to assume that Quine must always be right. Quine's claim of methodological infirmity in ethics in comparison to natural science is

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Of Gibson's Defense of Quinean Ethics

one of his claims that many scholars (for example Owen Flanagan, Morton White and Michele Moody-Adams) have found difficult to accept. This claim we are also inclined to reject, even if his form of holism is not radical as Gibson claims. The fundamental assumption underlining such claim is what Darlei Dall'Agnol (2003:75) has called *scientism*, a belief held by Quine himself that ethics, or philosophy in general, is a continuation of natural science (physics, et al) and therefore that philosophical problems should be addressed with scientific method. This claim, Dall'Agnol argues, is incompatible with Ludwig Wittgenstein's claim that philosophy and natural science are completely separate, and both notable scholars cannot be right in this case. Then, the question raised by Dall'Agnol is that which of these claims could be right (2003:75).

Gibson, however, has attempted to prove the rightness of Quine's claim by defending his (Quine's) claim from the attack of critics, particularly Flanagan's. Quine himself has reacted to other critics, particularly White and those who might want to hold similar argument. Gibson's argument in defence of Quine will be critically examined in this essay. The essay will try to answer Dall'Agnol's question by arguing that neither ethics nor philosophy can be a continuation of science. So, Quine's charge of methodological infirmity against ethics is mistaken. Meanwhile, the essay shall briefly outline the *metaethical* story as it starts from Alfred J. Ayer in relation to the Quinean charge.

Quine and the Charge against Ethics

The charges against ethics can be said to have started with Ayer who denies ethical judgements of any cognitive content. Ayer (1970:242-9) claims that moral statements lack truth-value, judging with his positivist verifiability criterion, which recognises a

proposition as meaningful only if its truth-value can be established through observation. In his emotivist theory, he argues that everyday ethical judgments are not what we think they are; we think they are cognitive, but they are actually emotional expressions. To say, “genocide is wrong” is actually something like saying, “genocide!” in an exclamation tone. He reduces ethical judgements to judgements of the author’s subjective state, and in the case of “genocide is wrong,” we only show an emotional dislike of genocide. Although, there are scholars before Ayer who had also maintained a similar subjective conception of ethics, unlike Ayer, they did not deny the genuineness of the statements of ethics (see Ayer 1970:243).

Despite what seems a genuine charge against ethics, Quine rejected the positivist verifiability principle, the principle which Ayer denies ethics of cognitive content, as nothing but mere dogma. Quine leaves Ayer’s argument against ethics empty by replacing his (Ayer’s) principle of direct and individual observation with holism, that is, a whole system of beliefs must be analyzed rather than simply its individual components (Quine 1971:74-7), and redefining an observation sentence as “occasion sentence that commands the same verdict for all witnesses who know the language” (Flanagan 1988:544). However, to many people’s disappointment, especially Flanagan, Quine, while faced with the task to bring ethics itself into the naturalist world, displays “yet another remnant of positivistic dogma” (Flanagan 1988:549). Quine creates a dichotomy between ethics and natural science in terms of their methods of justification. In a similar manner to Ayer’s, Quine, the same person who provides ethics with a shield from Ayer’s non-cognitivist attack, notices what can be seen as a case for *non-cognitivism* based on an epistemic gap between science and ethics. It is argued that the lack of genuine observation sentences

Of Gibson's Defense of Quinean Ethics

in ethics, and the consequential lack of empirical checkpoints to resolve theoretical disagreements, makes ethics “methodologically infirm” (Feleppa 2001:145).

As a fellow naturalist, Flanagan sees the Quinean dichotomy as unwarranted - a mistake. So, he (Flanagan) attempts to correct the mistake by reformulating the Quinean ethics (Flanagan 1982:56-73). Flanagan's two aims - first, to prove the unwarrantedness in Quinean ethics, and second, to reformulate Quinean ethics - turn out to be unsatisfactory to Gibson. This essay, however, as it will be later shown, accepts the first aim, albeit, for another reason, and rejects the second. The dichotomy, the essay argues, is actually there, and if it is there, then, Flanagan's attempt, like any other, to reconcile the dichotomy is likely going to fail. In other words, any attempt to fuse ethics with the 'naturalist' world, as will be shown, will likely fail. However, for the same reason of dichotomy, the essay will show that, just like Quine's, Gibson's claim of “methodological infirmity” against ethics is equally unwarranted.

Gibson against Flanagan

Gibson's aim, as said earlier, is to provide a defence for Quine's conception of ethics as “methodologically infirm” against Flanagan's attack. In an attempt to achieve this, Gibson (1988:534-5) restated and illustrated Quine's thesis, where objectivity, correspondence theory and healthiness are attributed to the scientific method of justification, while subjectivity, coherence theory and infirmity are said to be chiefly the method of justification in ethics. This restatement is made to determine later the accuracy of Flanagan's interpretation. Gibson's arguments against Flanagan can be said to be in two phases, since he has two claims against Flanagan. First, Gibson claims that Flanagan's critique of Quine's position succeeds only by

attributing to Quine a radical holism which does not belong to Quine. Second, Gibson (1988:534-5) claims that Flanagan's reformulation of the problematic part of Quine's ethical theory fails to establish that ethics and natural science are of the same methodological status. Gibson's arguments can be stated thus:

Argument I:

Flanagan rejects Quine's thesis in the belief that Quine's holism is radical

Quine's form of holism is not radical

The basis of Flanagan's argument is false

∴ Flanagan's critique of Quine is out-of-place.

Argument II:

Flanagan "naturalistic reformulation" is based on "practise" in ethics

Flanagan's "practise" is identical with Quine's "causal reduction"

"Causal reduction" itself requires coherence theory of truth

"Practise" does not put ethics on a methodological par with science

∴ Flanagan fails to establish that ethics and science are on a methodological par.

The success of these two arguments means two correlative achievements for Gibson. First is his explicitly stated aim that he would have succeeded in defending Quine's ethics against Flanagan's attack, second is his (Gibson) implicit aim that he would have succeeded in re-establishing Quinean conception of ethics as "methodologically infirm".

In the first part of his argument, Gibson examines the first claim of Flanagan, who, despite belonging to the same school of

Of Gibson's Defense of Quinean Ethics

thought with Quine, rejects the disparity Quine creates between ethics and natural science. Flanagan argues that while other versions of naturalism might consistently disparage ethics as “methodologically infirm” in comparison to natural science, such disparity is unjustified. It is also a form of inconsistency on the part of Quine's version of naturalism, because not only had his (Quinean) philosophical system (holism) rejected any “exhaustive reduction to observation”, but also the same subjective method of justification he is accusing ethics of, he (Quine) had initially claimed to be the lot of every significant discourse (Gibson 1988:535-6). This made Flanagan, in the second part of his argument, to reformulate the Quinean ethics so as to accommodate ethics as a legitimate naturalistic discourse (Gibson 1988:538-9).

Gibson agrees with Flanagan's claim that Quine is a holist, and that he has consequently rejected the archaic view of radical epistemological reductionism (1988:536). However, Gibson rejects not only Flanagan's reading of *total denial* of correspondence truth into Quine's holism, but also his (Flanagan's) conclusion from such claim that Quine's holism does not allow for methodological disparity between ethics and natural science. This ‘total denial’, for Gibson, is a kind of reading that attributes to Quine a radical holism which does not belong to Quine. Quine's holism is rather moderate, which still allows for the correspondence truth. This ‘total denial’ is evident in Flanagan's overstatement of Quine's claim, which Quine himself has warned against, that his holism should not be overstated to mean a total denial of correspondence truth (Gibson 1988:537-8).

Despite noting the flaws in his argument, Gibson (1988:538) still goes ahead to attempt reformulating Quine's naturalism. This is done in order to integrate ethics as a legitimate discourse into the

correspondence theory of truth, like natural science. This attempt, he argues, is based on the pragmatic aspect of ethical discourse. In his process of reformulation, Flanagan introduces the theory of “practice”. He argues that the same role observation plays in making natural science to be seen as manifesting correspondence truth, “practice” can play on the part of ethics. In other words, we can objectively test the correctness of a theory of the good life by how much it works - how much a theory maximizes our desired end (Gibson 1988:538-9).

Gibson also agrees that there can be instrumental moral values which have some link with natural science. However, he rejects the claim that this can elevate ethics to methodological parity with natural science (1988:538-9). Gibson gives two reasons for his rejection of Flanagan’s theory of “practice”. First is the fact that the theory of “practice” in Flanagan’s argument is the same as “causal reductionism” in Quine’s analysis, and both boil down to the utilitarian’s notion of instrumental moral values, where an action is judged based on how much its outcome maximises our desired end. Quine has, however, shown that this theory can only reduce the predicament of ethics by minimising our appeal to ethical axioms, but cannot put ethics on the same methodological pedestal as natural science. This is so because even in causal reduction itself, there must still be some ends, ultimate ethical values, “unreduced, and so unjustified”. The second reason is the fact that the whole talk about “practice” is only about our instrumental moral values, our noninstrumental moral values still remain unjustified (Gibson 1988:539). In other words, Flanagan has failed in his two attempts against Quine’s ethics. If Flanagan wants to raise a genuine criticism of Quine, then he has to find another reason for doing so, a reason which Gibson perhaps does not know.

Gibson, Quine and the Charge against Ethics: A Critique

A careful look at Gibson's arguments will suggest the validity of his position, which is his first explicit aim, showing the misdirection in Flanagan's critique of Quinean ethics and the failure of his (Flanagan's) attempt to reformulate naturalism so as to put ethics on the same pedestal as natural science. Does it then mean that he also succeeded in his second aim, which is, re-establishing Quinean ethics and showing that ethics is truly "methodologically infirm"? The answer is no. At least two reasons each will be given to show why we believe Gibson can be said to have succeeded in his first explicit aim, and failed in his second.

The first reason for the conclusion that Gibson achieved his first aim is that Flanagan's statement, which is suspected of being an overstated form of Quine's holism thereby leading to a straw-man, seems to harbour a form of overstatement. For instance, Flanagan asserts that

Sentences are brought to experience as a system which is ultimately constrained *only by* consistency consideration, our tendency towards epistemic conservatism, and the needs of practice. (1982:57)

The inclusion of the italicised phrase, *only by*, is part of the reason that made Flanagan to conclude that Quine's holism precludes any form of correspondence truth. Although, Flanagan tries to restate his aim in the reply to Gibson, his restatement cannot be said to be really Gibson's problem. His restatement either omits Gibson's major point or creates a new issue different from that earlier dealt with by Gibson. For instance, using his new formulation, let us say Gibson initially suggests that

The acquisition of new beliefs, as well as adjustment to current belief system are constrained (*only*) by consistency consideration plus our consideration of conservatism plus observational or practical feedback. (Flanagan 1988:542)

Flanagan restates that

The acquisition of new beliefs, as well as adjustment to current belief system is constrained *by* consistency consideration plus our consideration of conservatism plus observational or practical feedback. (1988:542)

However, Flanagan cannot claim that the two statements have the same epistemic status, with the presence of the word *only* contained only in the first. This amounts to creating a new issue, which cannot be said to be Gibson's problem, although Flanagan tries to deal with 'only' by stating that it is a triple conjunction with reference to practical feedback by the last conjunct.

The second reason that necessitates the conclusion that Gibson achieved his first aim is that the major point Gibson tries to establish seems to be missed even in Flanagan's response. Gibson warns that Flanagan should not force Quine into a radical form of holism that rejects any form of direct observation, because Quine himself had rejected such allusion. Gibson quotes Quine as saying,

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. (1988:537)

Unless Flanagan can show that Gibson misquotes Quine, any attempt to say that Quine rejects any form of direct observation will mean that Flanagan actually accepts P2 - that Quine's holism precludes any form of the correspondence theory of truth - which he (Flanagan) is trying to

Of Gibson's Defense of Quinean Ethics

reject. It is one thing to try to ascribe radical holism to Quine by overstating his claim, it is another to attack Quine because of the so-called mitigated holism. Flanagan tries unsuccessfully to do the latter, because all his attempts tend towards the former. This leads to our major point as it concerns Gibson's second aim, that is, even if Quine and Gibson are mitigated holists, can they still be justified to charge ethics with "methodological infirmity"?

Hence, given its reluctance not to see Quine's holism as rejecting all forms of direct observation, the charge of "overstatement" in Flanagan's attempt seems correct. However, one would be reluctant to say Gibson is successful in his second aim, that is, his attempt to re-establish Quine's conception of ethics as "methodologically infirm". The reason for this doubt is that a closer reading of Gibson's arguments against Flanagan seems to prove nothing beyond telling us that Flanagan's arguments are invalid. But this does not necessarily mean that Quine's claim which Flanagan was trying to attack is true. Making such claim will be nothing but an appeal to ignorance. Gibson himself conceded that.

Precisely what form such an account [an account that will put ethics and natural science on a methodological par] might take, I do not know. So far as I can tell, however, Flanagan does not provide one. (1988:540)

So, "Flanagan does not provide one" cannot be translated into "any other person cannot provide one". Neither can "I (Gibson) do not know" be translated into "it does not exist".

Another reason for Gibson's failure to re-establish Quinean ethics is that his account seems not to have thoroughly evaluated Quinean ethics in comparison with the rest of Quine's philosophical system. By so doing, one will be able to know whether there is or not

any sign of inconsistency in Quinean ethics and Quine's holism, as Flanagan points out (even if overstated). Gibson may respond to this by stating that it was never his aim to carry out any thorough comparison between and evaluation of Quinean ethics and Quine's holism. Rather, his aim is to show the overstatement in Flanagan's interpretation of Quinean ethics and how that does not help in curing ethics of its infirmity. However, as will be shown, a careful re-evaluation of Quinean ethics and Quine's holism is very important, because such re-evaluation would reveal some sort of inconsistency and incompatibility in the two theories of Quine. The re-evaluation will also reveal that Quine (or anyone else) does not have any justification for comparing ethical method with that of natural science, let alone according inferiority or infirmity to ethics relative to natural science.

The re-evaluation of Quine's views will now commence with his conception of ethics. Quine articulates a somewhat typical non-cognitivist view of ethics. This concerns the status of moral judgments. Quine argues that, in comparison with scientific method, the method of justification in ethics is "methodologically infirm". This is because scientific method is open to observation. As a result of this, Quine claims that the method "retains some title to a correspondence theory of truth". Ethical method, on the other hand, is not responsive to observation, therefore, its judgments lack cognitive content and "coherence theory is evidently the lot of ethics" (1981:63). What prompts Quine to adopt this conception of ethics, as pointed out earlier in Ayer's arguments, includes the absence of "observation character" and epistemic efficacy in moral judgments - its statements are non-testable and only evoke the agent's subjective feelings rather than

Of Gibson's Defense of Quinean Ethics

adding any more information to the concerned issue (Ayer 1970:245-6).

On the other hand, in Quine (1971:79) states in his holism that an individual statement cannot be understood or tested except in their relation to other statements. Wittgenstein similarly points out that "it is not single axioms that strike me as obvious, it is a system in which consequences and premises give one another mutual support" (1969:142). Consequently, the charge of inconsistency against Quinean ethics seems to contain an element of truth, as Flanagan has been trying to point out. Quine's conception denigrates ethics merely because its statements cannot be individually confirmed or disconfirmed; a claim that is inconsistent with the point made in his holism. Besides, while trying to show the status of empiricism without the "dogmas" and trying to put forward his holism in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism", Quine (1971:79) asserts that "the totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs ... is a man-made fabric which impinges on experiences only along the edges ...". If truly all human knowledge is "man-made" (mind-dependent), then Quine does not have any justification for claiming that ethical method is infirm merely because the method is subjective. At the same time, if knowledge is "man-made" (subjective), Quine will be inconsistent to claim that scientific method is objective (mind-independent), unless Quine wants to claim that natural science is not a body of knowledge.

Gibson may argue that such suggestion is still a radical reading of Quinean holism, for Quine himself had granted epistemic privilege to some forms of knowledge, likewise for a theory-free observation. Such suggestion will still be a misrepresentation of his naturalistic aim. The thrust of Quine's overall philosophy will show that even among the "man-made fabric" Quine still maintains a fact/value distinction.

Quine's fact/value distinction is evident in his response to Morton White, where Quine shows that no amount of analogy can equate sensations and emotions, except we want to lead ourselves to false analogy or create the "sixth sense" which would be the "moral sense" (Quine 1986:663-5). A mitigated conception will see Quine as quite consistent in his point since he only questions the empirical significance of a sentence, while still holding on to a holistic conception of meaning which serves to warrant non-cognitivism (Feleppa 2001:145).

This sort of interpretation, perhaps, is what puzzles many readers of Quine's philosophy, especially Flanagan who thinks that Quine is moving close to Ayer's positivism, after initially rejecting such position. Flanagan's puzzle is evident in his repeated lamentations: "I read Quine as speaking in much more naively positivistic tone about science than I thought him allowed [sic]" (1988:542); "the overall spirit ... of Quine's philosophy warrants the more robust, realistic and cognitivistic picture of ethics" (541). But some questions should be asked: Why must ethics be realistic and cognitivistic? Does that increase or decrease its value? Why must we reconcile "naturalism" and morality?

We are equally puzzled, but we refuse to follow Flanagan in his hope of reconciling "naturalism" and morality. Some scholars have made similar attempts, all of which have proven futile, in one way or the other. For instance, Gbenga Fasiku attempts to continue Quine's abandoned task of naturalizing ethics. His attempt leads him to the formulation of "possible world" (2008:256-73). Fasiku's "possible world" seems far from the naturalist world. It perhaps cannot help in naturalizing ethics. White (1986:186-99) also made a similar attempt to fuse ethics into the naturalist world by dragging emotions into the

Of Gibson's Defense of Quinean Ethics

world of sensation (1982, 1-14). Such attempt is bound to fail. This is because, as Quine (1986:663-5) has shown, it will not only lead to false analogy between emotions and sensations, it will also make us create a sixth sense that is a moral sense.

A similar mistake is what makes this essay depart from Flanagan's hope of a naturalistic moral realism, because Flanagan ends up confusing the "theory-laden" scientific facts with the theory-laden moral "facts" (1988:546-8). Flanagan's hope seems to be oblivious of the fact that, in the final analysis, the "theory-laden" scientific facts still have basis in realistic observation or, using Quine's term, "independent course of observable nature" (1981:63), while the theory-laden moral "facts", if they are facts at all, seem to be in no way independent of human regulation.

In other words, while we can set scientific knowledge free from being "man-made fabric", moral "facts" seem to be totally confined to being "man-made fabric". Therefore, one cannot agree with Flanagan's motive for claiming that Quine's fact/value distinction, which is supported by Gibson, "represents yet another remnant of positivistic dogma" (Flanagan 1988:549). This is because Flanagan's motive rests on the assumption that ethics and natural science are inseparable, while we contend that the two fields are distinct.

Flanagan's argument would have been more appealing if his motive was only to show that the direction to which Quine and Gibson have taken the distinction between ethics and natural science - the disparagement of ethics relative to science - is inconsistent with the distinctive natures and goals of the two disciplines. "Value" in ethics, as we have been trying to show, differs from "fact" in natural science, a belief also held by Quine and Gibson. But while Quine charges ethics

with “methodological infirmity”, Gibson tries to re-establish the charge. While showing the failure of Flanagan’s attempt at reformulation, Gibson (1988:540) adopts the term “elevate to” rather than “equate with”. The term Gibson adopts shows that he also believes, like Quine, that ethics is not just different from natural science, but it is weaker in method.

The question now is if the two methods have been shown to be different from each other, can we still be justified to refer to one as weaker than the other, without introducing a contradiction? In attending to this question we shall briefly examine the arguments of two scholars - Dall’Agnol and Moody-Adams. It will be shown how Quine’s philosophy contains this presupposition and why such a presupposition is mistaken. If we can prove Quine’s charge wrong with these scholars’ arguments, then Gibson will only be defending an empty claim, he would have only succeeded (if he succeeds at all) in showing the flaws in Flanagan’s attempt.

Darlei Dall’Agnol regards Quine’s whole effort to naturalize every aspect of philosophy as *scientism*, a view that means philosophy ought to be like science. Dall’Agnol (2003:75) argues that Quine’s analytic philosophy contains this type of presupposition and the presupposition is wrong in comparison to Wittgenstein analytic philosophy. He notes Peter Hacker’s point that “if Quine is right, then analytic philosophy was fundamentally mistaken.” He points out that Quine is a proponent of scientific philosophy whose whole ontology is directed by physics. Wittgenstein’s analytic philosophy, on the other hand, claims a total separation between philosophy and science, so they (Quine and Wittgenstein) both cannot be right (Dall’Agnol 2003:76). Dall’Agnol argues that if “analytic philosophy,” as Hacker also believes, is a view that establishes a sharp distinction between

Of Gibson's Defense of Quinean Ethics

natural science and philosophy, then Wittgenstein is right to maintain such description, while Quine's *scientism* is misguided - there is no justification for any attempt to reduce philosophy to natural science (2003:76).

It is the duty of science, Wittgenstein argues, to construct genuine propositions with truth-value; such propositions give a picture of the world. Philosophy, on the other hand, tasks itself with the clarifications of our conceptual framework creating pseudo-propositions in the process. In other words, while natural science engages itself with the construction of theories about reality, philosophy is rather an elucidating activity, explaining our theoretical apparatus. As a result of this, the two disciplines are bound to be different both in tasks and methods (Dall'Agnol 2003:76-7). Philosophy, rather than joining in the construction of propositions, sets necessary and sufficient conditions for the truth-value of those scientific propositions. It is entirely a "critique of language". A similar view is held by Alfred Taylor, although in defence of metaphysics. For him,

What the philosopher needs to know, as the starting-point for his investigation, is not the specialist's facts as such, but the general principles which the specialist uses for their discovery and correlation. His study is a 'science of sciences'. (1903:48)

A similar claim can be seen in Ayer's first class of ethical content which he himself endorses as ethical philosophy proper, although he deliberately ignores it because it does not suit his positivistic aim. For him, in ethics, "there are, first of all, propositions which express definitions of ethical terms, or *judgements about the legitimacy or possibility of certain definitions*" (1970:242). In other words, ethics can do either of the two disjuncts, like every other aspect

of philosophy. Going by Ayer's second disjunct, it is the duty of ethics to provide the necessary conditions for the legitimacy of those scientific definitions. On the contrary, Ayer (1970:243-6) inconsistently uses the same scientific definitions to examine the legitimacy of ethics, and in the process rejects the propositions expressing definitions of ethical terms, likewise those that express judgments about the legitimacy of definitions.

The second scholar is Michele Moody-Adams (1990:225) who similarly argues that Quine's charge of "methodological infirmity" against ethics rests on the wrong presupposition that the methods of ethics and natural science are comparable, but the mode of connection with experience differs among the two fields. So, any form of analogy between the methods of the two fields is misguided. While the method of science is to seek the truth-value of our statements to command agreement, ethics arouses self-scrutiny in the belief and attitude of an individual or society at large. The individual's belief and attitude, as influenced by his experience, is her self-conceptions, and moral reflection tends to stimulate the self-examination of such belief and attitude, rather than seeking agreement. In any case, the major aim of ethics is to guide human conduct (1990:225, 233). Moody-Adams (234), therefore, rejects not only any attempt to reduce ethics to science, but also the derogation of ethics as attempted by Quine and others.

If the claims of Dall'Agnol and Moody-Adams are correct, then neither Quine's charge of "methodological infirmity" nor Gibson's reestablishment of the charge is correct. Now, there seems to be no basis for Quine's charge unless he wants to appeal to "value" which he himself is rejecting. In comparing two different systems, as Max Weber notes, one system could not be chosen over another

Of Gibson's Defense of Quinean Ethics

without taking a value or end into consideration; for the choice would necessarily be dictated by the analyst's values (Portis 1986:75). Besides, as Wolff (2001:133) points out, Kant has warned that all normative concepts like "ought to" and "rights" are non-empirical. So, if Kant's conception is right, then any attempt to naturalise ethics, that is, reduce ethics to empirical science, is bound to be futile, perhaps needless.

Conclusion

As said earlier, we are not bound by any school of thought, be it naturalism or pragmatism. We can just admire Quine's philosophy. So, the essay did not aim to confine ethics to any of those theories, or to seek absolute objectivity for it. If absolute objectivity should be found in consequentialist ethics, then there might not have been ethics of duty (deontology). As White (1986:196) asserted, the permissibility of recantation in ethical discourse is greatly significant to philosophy. Also, Stevenson (1970:270) declared that the beauty and thoughtfulness of ethics is in its subjectivity, as emotivists would conceive it. The failure of Flanagan's attempt, and of many others like him, can be traced to the fact that they all "misdirectedly" attempted to fuse two different bodies of knowledge. While attempting to gain objectivity for ethics, they tried to equate its method with the method of natural science. The science of ethics ('ought') differs from that of natural science ('is'). As already shown in this essay, a similar mistake has been made by Quine by according methodological superiority or more strength to science over ethics.

In a nutshell, Gibson might have succeeded in showing the flaws in Flanagan's arguments, but he cannot infer from that that ethics is truly "methodologically infirm." The Quinean conception of ethics that he tried to re-establish can be said to truly abhor a fundamental

error in the face of the inconsistency that it also entails. This error, as shown, is evident in Quine's unwarranted comparison between the methods of ethics and natural science. The fundamentally different goals of the two disciplines necessitate the difference in their methods. So, any comparison between them in terms of method would be mistaken.

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Of Gibson's Defense of Quinean Ethics

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