A Noncognitivist Reading of Quine's Ethics

by Ronald J. Broach*

Abstract**

Until recently it has been tacitly assumed that Quine is a cognitivist about ethical sentences, that ethical sentences have cognitive meaning. I argue that for broad systematic reasons Quine must be read as a noncognitivist concerning ethical sentences. Because Quine himself has written as if he were a cognitivist, he has a number of claims about ethics which turn out to conflict with the noncognitivist reading of his position, and I make explicit the conflicts engendered by three particular claims. I tentatively explore a pair of strategies for eliminating the conflicts or reducing their effects. In the end these strategies do not appear promising, and Quinean ethics, on this noncognitivist reading of Quine, ends up somewhat the worse for wear.

Although Quine has written only a handful of articles concerned directly with moral issues, what he has written has generated debate about exactly what his position is or ought to be. On one hand, Quine argues that ethics is "methodologically infirm" compared to science. This is just to say that science has a claim to objectivity due to the fact that we can test scientific claims "against the independent course of observable nature" (Quine 1981, 63), while ethics has no such claim to objectivity because it has no such links with the world through observation. On the other hand, Flanagan (1982 and 1988) and White (1986) assert that ethics is not inferior to science, each denying, in his own way, the accusation of a lack empirical checkpoints. Ethical sentences, on their views, have the same (or similar) status as scientific statements.

Gibson further argues that Quine is best understood as an ethical relativist, where ethical relativism is understood to be a doctrine where an ethical statement can really be right for one individual or group while really being wrong for another individual or group (1988, 175). In short, an ethical claim is true

* Department of Philosophy, Washington University, Campus Box 1073, One Brookings Drive, St. Louis, MO 63130-4899.

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for one group while it is false for the other. Quine himself writes as if ethical statements have cognitive meaning in “On the Nature of Moral Values.” Here he claims that there is a legitimate mixture of ethics and science where ethical axioms can be causally reduced to other ethical axioms. In resolution of interpersonal moral conflicts, discussion about how this causal reduction proceeds leads to a situation in which “the issue has been gratefully transformed into a cognitive question of science” (1981, 64, my emphasis).

As I have characterized the debate, all of the participants assume that ethical sentences have some cognitive content, that ethical sentences are either true or false. In other words, all parties tacitly presuppose that Quine is a cognitivist about ethical statements. However, as far as I am aware, no one has explicitly argued that Quine is either a cognitivist or a noncognitivist. The simple fact that discussions of Quine’s ethics presuppose cognitivism without argument warrants an examination of the question. I shall argue that there are good reasons to believe that Quine cannot, given his philosophical system, be a cognitivist with regard to ethical sentences (in spite of all the presuppositions to the contrary).

My goal in this paper is three-fold. First (in Section 1), I show why we are compelled to read Quine as a noncognitivist with regard to ethics. I then (in Section 2) explore this relatively new reading of Quine through an examination of three claims made about ethics in “On the Nature of Moral Values.” We will see that these claims conflict with Quine’s account of cognitive meaning, and that to be consistent, he must either these claims or give up his account of cognitive meaning. If Quine has no third option available to him, it is clear that he would retract his claims about ethics and retain his theory of cognitive meaning. My final goal (in Section 3) is to tentatively explore two possible strategies for reconciling the three claims with his theory of meaning-options which I suggest are, for Quine, found to be wanting.

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1 One might claim that Quine is best given a Humean (noncognitivist) reading. Thus not all parties to the debate necessarily presuppose cognitivism and if so, my thesis is not philosophically interesting. This would be a mistake, for it is not clear that a Humean reading of Quine is acceptable. Even if it were reasonable, the widespread reading of Quine as a cognitivist by his commentators should be challenged. The simple fact that discussions of Quine’s ethics uncritically presuppose cognitivism warrants an examination of the question, and so my thesis is philosophically interesting even if no one has expressly advocated the opposing interpretation of Quine.

2 This paper has a limited scope. It is primarily an exposition of Quine’s philosophical system, drawing out the noncognitivist aspect of Quine’s ethics and the incompatibility of that reading of Quine with claims put forward earlier by Quine.
There are good Quinean reasons to assert that ethical sentences have no cognitive meaning. To see why this is so, let us begin by explicating the notion of cognitive meaning. First of all, we note that for Quine, theories (ethical or any other kind) are composed of sentences variously connected with one another (Quine 1960, 11). So sentences and the theories of which they are a part may be viewed as linguistic entities, and language, as Quine repeatedly asserts, is learned only from the overt behaviors of speakers of the language in publically recognizable situations. “There is nothing in linguistic meaning, then, beyond what is to be gleaned from overt behavior in observable circumstances” (Quine 1987, 5). Since public, overt behavior is necessarily empirically accessible, it follows that the linguistic meaning of sentences is the empirical meaning of the sentence. As Gibson writes,

Cognitive meaning is characteristic of a certain class of sentences, namely sentences that are used for making assertions. The defining property of such sentences is that, when used, they are either true or false, but not both simultaneously. Cognitive meaning fastens on truth: to know the cognitive meaning of a sentence is to know the conditions under which the sentence is true or false. (1982, 33)

As we shall shortly see, observation sentences, the sentences which link theory and observation (whether in science or in ethics), are assertorial and thus have cognitive meaning. Since linguistic meaning is cognitive meaning, and cognitive meaning is empirical meaning, the linguistic meaning of observation sentences is simply their empirical meaning. One might object that there can be cognitive meaning which is non-empirical in nature. Thus my equation of cognitive meaning with empirical meaning is mistaken. There is some evidence that this view is the one Quine endorses (Edmister and O'Shea

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3 The interpretation of Quine which follows is put forward in an unpublished manuscript (“Quine, Normative Ethics, and the Verification Theory of Meaning”) by Jay Campbell. I have embellished at points and skimmed over others, but the basic structure of the argument is Campbell’s. This line of argument was originally suggested to me by Roger Gibson.

4 There might be ways, other than the one detailed here, of acquiring cognitive meaning which are consistent with Quine's philosophical system. I owe this observation to the reviewer of this article, and it is important to recognize that I do not deny the point. However, if there is an alternative way of acquiring cognitive meaning, the details of such an account must be provided and I am unaware of anyone who has done so. Although I am very skeptical about this possibility (see Section 3 for a discussion of this point), it is an interesting direction for research in this field to take. What I do here is show that ethical statements do not, and cannot, have cognitive meaning in the same straightforward way that other sentences do in Quine's account. Thus, there is no available account of cognitive meaning for ethical statements. This is an interesting (and hitherto unexpected) finding.
1994, 55). I shall take up this issue in Section 3, where I shall indicate that this view is, on Quinean grounds, implausible. For the present argument, I will continue to assume that the cognitive meaning of a sentence (or group of sentences) is constituted by the empirical meaning of that sentence (or group of sentences).

Quine is explicit about what constitutes empirical meaning. "The [empirical] meaning of a sentence lies in the observations that would support or refute it" (1974, 38). Or even more perspicuously, "we recognize with Peirce that the meaning of a sentence turns purely on what would count as evidence for its truth . . ." (1969, 80). This is to say that the empirical meaning of a sentence lies in the empirical evidence available concerning the truth of the sentence.

Quine is also explicit regarding the way in which this empirical evidence is formulated. "Then the empirical content of a testable sentence or set of sentences for that speaker is the set of all the synthetic observation categoricals that it implies" (1992, 17). Observation categoricals are generalizations of the form "Whenever this, that" where 'this' and 'that' are observation sentences (1991, 268).

Observation sentences are "occasion sentences whose occasions are intersubjectively observable and, moreover, are generally adequate to prompt assent from any observer conversant with the language" (Gibson 1982, 34). To fully understand this definition, I shall quickly sketch Quine's taxonomy of sentences, that is, the categories into which all assertorial sentences must fall.

There are two broad categories, standing sentences and occasion sentences. Standing sentences can be divided into non-eternal sentences and eternal sentences. Occasion sentences can be subdivided into observation sentences and non-observation sentences. Standing sentences are sentences to which a speaker will assent regardless of current stimulation or the lack thereof. Examples of such sentences are 'There have been black dogs' and 'Copper conducts electricity'. For my purposes here, the distinction between eternal and non-eternal is unimportant. An occasion sentence is a sentence which does require some sort of stimulation each time it is proffered before a speaker conversant with the language can assent or dissent. Observation sentences are distinguished from non-observation occasion sentences in that assent to or dissent from them is not dependent upon collateral information about the

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5 This is not to ignore Quine's holism. As virtually every commentator on Quine acknowledges, it is not strictly speaking the individual sentence which is the bearer of meaning, rather it is chunks of theory, groups of sentences with critical semantical mass, which are the bearers of meaning. But as Gibson notes, observation sentences can be said to have individual meaning (1982, 33).
stimulus. An example will serve to make this clear. 'This man is a bachelor' is a non-observation occasion sentence because, though it requires a stimulus (the man), not all competent speakers of the language will correctly assent or dissent: only those who have some intimate knowledge (collateral information) of that man can correctly respond.

The sentence 'It is raining' is an occasion sentence because a speaker will only assent to it under certain stimulations (the set of these stimulations is called the affirmative stimulus meaning) and he will dissent from it on certain other stimulations (the set of these stimulations is called the negative stimulus meaning). In the absence of stimulations he cannot assent or dissent — the stimulation is required. Furthermore, 'It is raining' is an observation sentence because, given some sort of stimulation concerned with rain or its absence, virtually all speakers presented with the same stimulation shall agree in their assent or dissent — they need no collateral information. It is the criterion of intersubjectivity which provides objectivity, while the criterion of commanding immediate assent or dissent upon presentation with a stimulus forges a link between theory and observation, an empirical grounding.

Let us now return to the definition given earlier for observation sentences: "occasion sentences whose occasions are intersubjectively observable and, moreover, are generally adequate to prompt assent from any observer conversant with the language" (Gibson 1982, 34). Given Quine's taxonomy of assertorial sentences, it is clear that this definition expresses the necessary and sufficient conditions for qualifying as an observation sentence. The necessary conditions are that the prompting stimulus is intersubjectively observable and that there is unanimity of assent or dissent among the linguistically competent observers without those observers having recourse to any collateral information. The sufficient condition is that "each of its occasions of utterance must be such as to command on-the-spot agreement of all linguistically competent witnesses to the occasion" (Campbell, unpublished manuscript, 8).

On Quinean grounds, we may finally give the reasons for thinking that there are no ethical observation sentences. The fundamental claim is that any ethical sentence which purports to be an observation sentence is really a standing sentence or a non-observation occasion sentence. Let me give three examples of sentences which appear to be clear cases of moral observations, but are not so in Quine's sense, to show how this claim establishes the fact that there are no ethical observation sentences.

The first example is Owen Flanagan's 'It is cruel of that man to torture that cripple.' Surely, Flanagan asserts, this sentence "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' (1988, 546). That is to say, when
queried about this sentence, everyone will assent to it without recourse to collateral information — the intersubjectivity criterion is met. However, this example fails to meet one of the necessary conditions of observation sentences, namely the criterion requiring presentation of a stimulus. For no matter what circumstances I was in, no matter what stimulus I was presented with, I would assent to that sentence. This situation, where no observation is required to elicit my assent, carries this sentence out of the realm of observation sentences and into the realm of standing sentences.

Here is the second example: ‘This man is virtuous.’ Similar to an earlier example, ‘This man is a bachelor,’ this certainly meets the requirement of a stimulus being necessary to prompt assent or dissent. If there is no one around and the context of the utterance is no help when you say this to me I simply cannot assent or dissent. But here the second necessary condition for observation sentences, the intersubjectivity criterion, is not met. If you point to Bob and say ‘He is virtuous,’ and I have never before seen, heard of, or read about Bob, I cannot answer, for my answer requires that I have collateral information about Bob. But recall that for observation sentences, presentation of the stimulus commands an immediate verdict, and all competent speakers’ verdicts will agree without the speakers having recourse to collateral information about the subject. Just as in the case of ‘That man is a bachelor,’ where it is clear that not all competent speakers of the language will have the intimate knowledge to pronounce on matters of any given man’s bachelorhood, it is just as clear that not all competent speakers of the language will have the intimate knowledge to pronounce on matters of virtue. So, just as the bachelor case is shown to be a non-observation occasion sentence, the virtue example is also shown to be a non-observation occasion sentence.

The third example illustrates how, even though the necessary conditions for observation sentences are met, the sufficient condition must also be met. The example sentence is: ‘Those children are cruel,’ uttered in circumstances where clearly the children in question are acting cruelly. Let us assume that all linguistically competent observers assent immediately to this sentence. It is also clear that one must view the scene before being able to assent or dissent. Thus both necessary conditions for observation sentences are met. However this is still not enough to guarantee that the sentence in question is an observation sentence. As Campbell writes,

for a sentence to be an observation sentence, each of its occasions of utterance must be such as to command on-the-spot agreement of all linguistically competent witnesses to the occasion ... From each witness's perspective, the stimulations which prompt his/her assent must
be individually sufficient to prompt the assent, but also . . . assent to the sentence must be given only in the presence of stimulations sufficient to prompt assent. With respect to judgements of cruelty (and other moral judgements as well), there are many stimulatory situation or scenes . . . of which a witness would affirm ['Those children are cruel'], not immediately upon witnessing the occasion, but only if supplied with collateral information (unpublished manuscript, 8-9).

So the critical element here is that, though the sentence meets the two necessary conditions, and is immediately assented to by all on this occasion, to be an observation sentence, all of its occasions of utterance must meet these necessary conditions. It seems clear that this will not be the case.

Here, then, is a summary of the Quinean argument against the existence of moral observation sentences. No purported moral observation sentences are actually observation sentences. The three examples provided illustrate the ways in which a sentence can fail to be observational. It shall either lack the necessary condition of requiring stimulation to prompt assent (and thus actually be standing a sentence), or it shall lack the necessary condition of commanding immediate, intersubjective agreement of competent speakers’ verdicts without speakers’ having recourse to collateral information (and thus actually be a non-observation occasion sentence). Or finally, a purported moral observation sentence shall lack the sufficient condition that all occasions of utterance of the sentence must meet both necessary conditions (and thus, once again, be a non-observation occasion sentence). This is not an a priori in-principle argument of the sort we are familiar with, for Quine rejects that method of philosophizing. This result simply follows from the naturalized epistemology and the theory of cognitive meaning Quine avers. So, given the philosophical system which Quine has constructed, the facts of the matter just happen to be such that no purported ethical observation sentence qualifies as observational.

At this juncture it might be objected that this noncognitivist reading of Quine’s work casts Quine as simply and arbitrarily defining ethical observation sentences out of existence. At least one of the conditions of observation sentences, necessary or sufficient, must be wrong, misguided, or simply too stringent. But this is not the case. In short, the distinction among kinds of sentences is consistent with Quine’s naturalism, the position that there is no theory-neutral position from which to view our own theorizing. For Quine, naturalism amounts to the claim that our best scientific theory is the theory from which to view our own theorizing, and this distinction among kinds of sentences plays a central role in Quine’s characterization of science. The fact that
these distinctions and definitions of sentences work in science is the standard for their acceptability – for there is no other theory, on Quine's view, from which we can evaluate them. If our best theory of the world tells us that observation sentences are usefully defined in the manner I have outlined, then it is not the case that the necessary and sufficient conditions characterizing observation sentences are wrong.

The conclusion that, for Quine, ethical sentences have no cognitive meaning follows quickly once it is established that there are no ethical observation sentences. Recall that cognitive meaning is linguistic meaning, linguistic meaning is empirical meaning, empirical meaning is constituted by empirical evidence, empirical evidence is embodied in observation categoricals, and observation categoricals are compounds of two observation sentences. If there are no ethical observation sentences to compound, there are no observation categoricals, no empirical evidence, no empirical meaning, no linguistic meaning, and thus no cognitive meaning to ethical sentences. As Quine says, "[n]atural science owes its objectivity to its intersubjective checkpoints in observation sentences, but there is no such rock bottom for moral judgments" (1986, 664). This is the methodological infirmity from which ethics suffers.

So it seems that Quine's account of cognitive meaning commits him to denying the existence of ethical observation sentences, and thus ultimately commits him to a noncognitivist position with regard to ethics. But if this is so, then three claims Quine has explicitly made about the nature of ethics conflict with his noncognitivism.

Section 2

The first conflict concerns Quine's fundamental claim about ethics: "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" (Quine 1981, 63). But if, on the noncognitivist reading of Quine, ethical sentences have no cognitive meaning, and thus are not bearers of truth, it is difficult to make sense of his assertion that ethics is relegated to a coherence theory of truth. A brief examination of the concept of coherence will show why this is so.

In general, coherence "is a matter of how well a body of beliefs 'hangs together': how well its component beliefs fit together, agree or dovetail with each other, so as to produce an organized, tightly structured system" (Bon-
Jour 1985, 93). How are we to pin down these notions of “fitting together” or “dovetailing?” The following criteria attempt to specify these relations. First, there is clearly a notion of logical consistency at work, the absence of implicit or explicit contradiction. The fewer statement sets of the form “‘y’ and ‘not y’” which exist in the body of sentences being examined, the greater the coherence of that body. However, consider the body of sentences which consists of “my computer is good” and “all humans have a right to life.” No explicit contradictions are contained in this set of sentences. However, we do not think it a terribly coherent set — there needs to be “some sort of positive connection among the beliefs in question, not merely the absence of conflict” (BonJour 1985, 96).

The second criterion to include then must specify the kind of positive connection and how strong that connection must be. BonJour’s analysis advances inference relations as the “obvious” positive connection, and he suggests, basically, that the strength of that connection should be such that each sentence in a coherent system should be entailed by the conjunction of the rest of the sentences in that system (BonJour 1985, 96-7).

However in the notions of “inference relations” and “entailment” we find the difficulty for the noncognitivist reading of Quine. Inference relations and entailment are the stuff of introductory symbolic logic course. As teachers we commonly characterize inference rules, entailment relations, as truth preserving. That is the defining characteristic of valid argument forms: given the truth of the premises, the truth of the conclusion is guaranteed. But on a noncognitivist reading of Quine, ethical sentences do not have truth values. So they are not entities which are capable of standing in relations of entailment or of inference to anything else. So they are not entities capable of participating in coherence relations. Thus, a coherence theory of truth certainly cannot apply to them.

Of course one can object that inference relations are not the appropriate way to characterize the connections needed for coherence among sets of sentences. However, if this objection is correct, then there must be some other way to characterize these connections, but there seem to be no other relevant candidates. And if there are no other relevant candidates, the notion of in-

6 Lawrence BonJour has discussed the nature of coherence in connection with his defense of a coherence theory of justification within traditional epistemology (1985, 93-101). Although here I am interested in a coherence theory of truth, the formal characteristics of BonJour’s analysis of coherence seem to make it quite neutral with regard to the uses to which that concept is put. For my purposes here I shall simplify his discussion and focus only on the formal characteristics of his analysis, rather than on parts of his analysis peculiar to his defense of coherence theories of justification.
ference relations providing the needed connections wins by default. More positively, this conception of coherence is one which works quite well in other disciplines — science, for example — and this is evidence (particularly for Quine) that the conception is a good one.

The second conflict obtains between a noncognitivist reading of Quine and Quine's previous treatment of the relation between what Gibson terms "derivative moral values" and "ultimate moral values" (1988, 162). Quine asserts the following relation between the two.

There is a legitimate mixture of ethics with science that somewhat mitigates the methodological predicament of ethics. Ethical axioms can be minimized by reducing some values [derivative values] causally to others [ultimate values]; that is, by showing that some of the valued acts would already count as valuable anyway as a means to ulterior ends (1981, 64).

Ultimate moral values are thus analogues of general scientific hypotheses which account for many disparate scientific phenomena, in that, singly or jointly, ultimate moral values are able to account for many disparate derivative ethical values. That Quine wants to develop this parallel relationship is clear from the first sentence of the quote above.

Let me develop this parallel a bit further. If ultimate moral values are analogous to their functional counterparts in science, then they might plausibly share other features with such general scientific hypotheses — features like empirical meaning. Let me give an example to make this clearer. The ratio of the number of hydrogen atoms to oxygen atoms in water, the solidity of matter, and the solubility of sodium chloride in water are all accounted for ultimately by speaking of charged subatomic particles. The charged subatomic particle hypothesis is general because it allows for causal reduction of sentences which used to account for these three phenomena separately, and without reference to one another, to the charged subatomic particle hypothesis. But note that this general hypothesis is far removed from observation sentences — in the web of belief these theoretical hypotheses are a fair distance from the edges. They have cognitive (empirical) meaning only as members of a chunk of theory which implies observation categoricals. That is to say that these theoretical/general hypotheses "contribute indispensably to the critical semantical mass of various clusters of scientific hypotheses, and so partake of the empirical content imbibed from the implied observation categoricals" (Quine 1991, 269).

But there is an important asymmetry between ethical sentences noncognitivistically construed and scientific hypotheses. Scientific hypotheses imply
observation categoricals and thus have cognitive meaning. The general hypotheses which include theoretical terms can "partake" of cognitive content and thus sense can be made of causal reduction from sentences about disparate scientific phenomena to such hypotheses because both the disparate sentences and the hypotheses have meaning. Ethical sentences, for Quine, do not imply observation categoricals and thus have no cognitive meaning. Thus, if the ultimate moral values, which, like their scientific analogues the general hypotheses, must "partake" of cognitive content from their chunk of theory, then they no cognitive content because their chunk of theory has none. As far as I can see, on Quine's grounds, there is no sense to be made of causal reduction of one cognitively meaningless sentence to another. This is in direct conflict with Quine's assertion that "[ethical axioms can be minimized by reducing some values causally to others" (1981, 64).

The third conflict obtains for the same reasons the second arises – it concerns Quine's claims about the possibility of conflict between ultimate moral values. He asserts that ultimate values can conflict:

Even in the extreme case where disagreement extends irreducibly to ultimate moral ends, the proper council is not one of pluralistic tolerance (1981, 64-5).

There remains the awkward matter of a conflict of ultimate values within the individual (1981, 65).

The difficulty arises in trying to see what constitutes the conflict. Two subsets of ethical sentences containing different ultimate values cannot conflict by producing different observation categoricals for the now familiar reasons. The different values cannot be said to conflict because they do not cohere well – for as we have seen, it makes no sense to speak of coherence for the cognitively meaningless sentences arising from the noncognitivist reading of Quine.

So to summarize the argument to this point. A noncognitivist reading of Quine on ethics seems to be warranted by Quine's theory of cognitive meaning. Quine, as well as some important commentators, has written as if

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7 I refer here directly to how non-observational sentences gain cognitive content. However, at another level one can see Quine's account of language learning at work. Observations sentences and observations terms are learned holophrastically. Theoretical terms are only learned analytically by parsing sentences acquired holophrastically. If ethical sentences learned holophrastically are without cognitive meaning, by what mechanism could theoretical terms derived from them have cognitive content?

8 I shall return to a similar point in Section 3.
ethical sentences have cognitive meaning. Specifically, he has asserted three claims: (1) a coherence theory of truth is the lot of ethics, (2) some moral values can be causally reduced to other moral values, and (3) ultimate moral values can conflict. My claim is that, on the noncognitivist reading of Quine which denies cognitive meaning to ethical sentences, no sense can be made of these claims, and thus either they must be abandoned or his theory of cognitive meaning must be abandoned. It is clear that Quine's response would be to maintain his theory of cognitive meaning on the grounds that it has been tremendously useful to date, and abandon his three claims about the nature of ethics.

Section 3

All of the arguments I have advanced to demonstrate the conflict between Quine's three assertions and a noncognitivist reading of Quine focus on cognitive meaning (understood as empirical meaning) to the exclusion of other sorts of meaning. At this point it is quite relevant to ask whether some other conception of meaning might apply to ethical sentences, and whether this conflict might be mitigated if there were some other kind of meaning to which ethical statements could lay claim. Two kinds of meaning Quine acknowledges are emotive meaning and *non-empirical* cognitive meaning. I shall explore the resources of both types of meaning as potential strategies of reconciling Quine's three claims with the noncognitivist understanding of Quine that I have suggested.

It seems clear that ethical sentences do have emotive meaning for Quine because he holds that "[w]e can still call the good good and the bad bad, and hope with Stevenson that these epithets may work their emotive weal" (1981, 65). Granting that ethical sentences have emotive meaning, just what is it that they have? I can think of two interpretations of "emotive meaning" which could be acceptably applied to Quine's philosophy. The first is simply rhetorical force. This rhetorical force need make no essential reference to the moral feeling of either speaker or hearer. One merely offers a sentence to one's listener, which, if accepted, will change the behavior of the hearer. Even if this sketchy account would be filled out further, I think it is clear that this conception would not have the resources to provide ethical observation sentences, and thus it could not provide cognitive meaning to ethical sentences. This conception could not save both a noncognitivist reading of Quine and his three assertions.

The second interpretation of "emotive meaning" which might be applied to Quine's system is a straightforward Stevensonian notion of emotive
meaning where “the major use of ethical judgements is to create an interest” and “It is possible . . . to say ‘this is good’ is about the favourable interest of the speaker and the hearer . . .” (Stevenson as cited in Warnock 1978, 56, 57). On this account of emotive meaning, there is an essential reference to the feelings of the speaker and hearer of some ethical sentence. This is, in effect, the move White makes in “Normative Ethics, Normative Epistemology, and Quine’s Holism.” Here he claims that,

if science — that is to say, descriptive science — retains some title to a correspondence theory of truth “thanks to its links with observation,” then ethics should retain some title to a correspondence theory of truth thanks to its links with observation and feeling (1986, 654-5).9

This account of meaning as moral feeling might provide ethical observation sentences, and thus provide cognitive content for ethical sentences. Even if one denied that this was really cognitive content, allowing moral feelings some lesser status, that status might be made to do the same work as cognitive content. For example, one might be able to develop an acceptable account of how emotive contents can cohere, or how some of them can be causally reduced to others. If so, then a method of retaining both the noncognitivist reading of Quine and Quine’s three assertions would have been found.

Quine addresses this appeal to moral feeling for providing cognitive content in his “Reply to Morton White.” First he notes that his definition of observation sentence (viz. “an occasion sentence that commands the same verdict from all witnesses who know the language” (1986, 665)) allows both sensory stimulations and emotions to count as stimulations which prompt occasion sentences, and so does not beg the question against emotions. However, for one thing, our emotions or moral feelings are not publicly accessible stimulations, and so cannot command the same verdict from all competent speakers of the language. For another thing, the same publicly accessible stimulations do not command the same verdict from competent speakers if those speakers do not have access to the same collateral information about the situation. As Quine summarizes, “[n]atural science owes its objectivity to its intersubjective checkpoints in observation sentences, but there is no such rock bottom for moral judgements” (1986, 664). So this appeal to moral feelings or emotions will not produce moral observation sentences, and thus will not produce cognitive content.

Note that White provides suggestions for reconceiving “feelings” in naturalistic/physicalistic terms, just as Quine reconceives experiences as surface irritations (White 1986, 659), and so this analogy is less problematic than it first appears.
Can an account of the coherence of moral feelings, the reducibility of moral feelings and the incompatibility of ultimate moral feelings be given to save both Quine’s theory of meaning and these three claims? I must admit that I am skeptical. Causal reductions of feelings to other feelings is like trying to causally reduce one observation sentence to another – ‘Lo, blueness’ just cannot be causally reduced to ‘Lo, a circle’. A coherence of emotions is slightly more plausible, and one can easily explain ultimate value conflicts in terms of ultimate feeling conflicts. Though none of this will provide the objectivity which ethics would have if it had moral observation sentences, there is clearly room for research here.

I turn now to the other kind of meaning countenanced by Quine. Speaking about mathematical sentences, Quine has suggested that a group of sentences can lay claim to non-empirical cognitive meaning if these sentences play an essential role in some theory which does imply observation categoricals.

I think it’s a mistake to require that a sentence must have empirical content in order to be meaningful. In fact, I think that there’s no end to the important [non-empirical] beliefs and truths . . . You can add a whole bunch of them together and they won’t be enough to imply any observations . . . They seem plausible by virtue of symmetry, simplicity, fitting in to the things that we have well established by tests. These are indispensible, moreover, in suggesting further hypotheses which one can test. Science would be paralyzed if we excluded the untestables (1994, 55).

This point is clearly generalizable to ethical sentences. As I have shown, the whole set of ethical sentences does not have critical semantical mass; that is, it does not, and cannot, by itself imply any observation categoricals. However, if ethical sentences were to play an essential role in some theory or branch of science which did imply observation categoricals, then the sentences of ethics would, on Quine’s view, have non-empirical cognitive content. If the sentences of ethics have cognitive meaning in this non-empirical way, then there is no conflict with Quine’s three claims for we would have an alternative to the noncognitivist ethics that I have argued is entailed by the standard Quinean account of cognitive meaning as empirical meaning.

I contend, however, that there is no theory or branch of science which we can plausibly claim would be “paralyzed” without ethical sentences or for which ethical sentences are “indispensable” for implying observation categoricals. The most likely candidates for such a theory might well be contemporary psychology or philosophy of mind. In these fields, reference is often made to ethical beliefs in explaining and predicting people’s behavior or mo-
tivation to behave in a particular way. One might think that these sentences of ethics are essential to the predictions of behavior which are part of psychology and philosophy of mind.

Without venturing too much detail, I contend that the sentences of ethics are not indispensable to these disciplines. It seems quite reasonable to expect that the folk psychology which underlies explanations that employ ethical sentences will be shown, by advances in other physical sciences, to be inadequate. Paul Churchland, a philosopher who is quite conversant with contemporary neuroscience, maintains that we can (or will be able to once contemporary biological sciences advance further) explain and predict the behavior of humans in terms of “particle physics, atomic and molecular theory, organic chemistry, evolutionary theory, biology, physiology and materialistic neuroscience” (1990, 211-2). This kind of explanation, in full accord with all of the best science, would be far preferable, for Quine, than the current explanations of human behavior which rely upon the rather less scientific doctrines of folk psychology. Such a naturalistic/physicalistic explanation of human behavior would not require ethical sentences in order to produce observation categoricals (just as none are needed for observation categoricals in physics, organic chemistry or neuroscience).

Though I do not deny Quine’s general point that non-empirical cognitive meaning is possible, I contend that ethical sentences cannot (in the most likely cases) be plausibly understood to meet the criteria Quine has indicated are necessary for having non-empirical cognitive meaning. This is not a conclusive argument against ethical sentences having non-empirical meaning, but it does indicate the kind of difficulties such an account would have to address to be convincing. Once again, there is clearly room for further research here.

So what is the result of this exploration of Quine’s views on ethics? If we are, as I have argued, required by Quine’s philosophical method in general, and his theory of cognitive meaning in particular, to take a noncognitivist reading of Quine, then the three claims which I have highlighted from “The Nature of Moral Values” stand in conflict with that reading. One way which shows some promise of reconciling the two is providing an account, acceptable on Quinean grounds, of the coherence of moral feelings, the reducibility of moral feelings and the incompatibility of ultimate moral feelings. I am skeptical about the prospects for such a tactic. Another strategy for saving Quine’s three claims is showing that non-empirical cognitive meaning is possible for ethical sentences by providing a theory or branch of science in which ethical sentences are indispensable. I am skeptical of prospects for this alternative as well. If my skepticism about these strategies is justified, then Quine would be forced to abandon either his theory of cognitive meaning or
the three claims. As I indicated earlier, Quine would certainly give up the
three claims about the nature of ethics.

Is it such a bad thing for Quine to have to deny ethical sentences any cogni-
tively important sense of meaning? On Quine’s system we were, after all, try-
ing to accommodate the layman’s notion of morality into our best theory of
the world. That we have failed to do so is merely the result of common sense in
the guise of science telling us that our layman’s notion of morality was not in
accordance with our evidence. As Quine wrote in his first article on ethics,
“we have to deplore the irreparable lack of empirical checkpoints that are the
solace of the scientist” (1981, 66), and “[i]t is a bitter irony that so vital a mat-
ter as the difference between good and evil should have no comparable claim
to objectivity” (1981, 63). In short, so much the worse for ethics.

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