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# *Naturalism and Nonsense: Quine and Wittgenstein on Ethics*

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## *Abstract*

W.V. Quine's and Ludwig Wittgenstein's (early) ethical views are compared. The aim of the comparison is to show that despite many similarities between the two philosophers' views, their approaches to the subject are fundamentally different. Underlying the points of affinity are two fundamentally different philosophical temperaments. Both put forward complete philosophical structures with which their ethical views are remarkably consistent; both see everything from their own philosophical standpoint. Accordingly, Quine's naturalistic stance and Wittgenstein's transcendental stance are explored in order to expose the deep differences between their ethical views, despite many seeming similarities. Further, it is shown that their ethical views can only be understood when placed within the context of their respective philosophical frameworks. A comparison of Quine and Wittgenstein on ethics, then, reveals many components of the general philosophical positions of two of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century, while clarifying their respective ethical views and the deep differences between them.

***Naturalism and Nonsense:***
***Quine and Wittgenstein on Ethics***

***Goldmund***: 'One cannot say very much with mere letters and words. Sometimes I'll be writing a Greek letter, a theta or an omega, and tilt my pen just the slightest bit; suddenly the letter has a tail and becomes a fish; in a second it evokes all the streams and rivers of the world, all that is cool and humid, Homer's sea and the waters on which Saint Peter wandered; or it becomes a bird, flaps its tail, shakes out its feathers, puffs itself up, laughs, flies away.'

***Narcissus***: 'Those are magic letters.... But for the pursuit of science they are, of course, unsuitable. The mind favors the definite, the solid shape, it wants its symbols to be reliable, it loves what is, not what will be, what is real and not what is possible. It does not permit an omega to change to a serpent or a bird.'

-Herman Hesse, *Narcissus and Goldmund*

# *Naturalism and Nonsense: Quine and Wittgenstein on Ethics*

## *Introduction*

A considerable amount of literature has been devoted to the comparison of the philosophies of W.V. Quine and Ludwig Wittgenstein. There exists, also, extensive literature on the subject of Wittgenstein's ethics as well as important papers on Quine's ethical views. Still, a detailed comparison of their respective views on ethics is wanting.

A comparison of Quine and Wittgenstein is encouraged by the many similarities which exist between them. Both were greatly influenced by Frege and Russell and both are generally thought to be analytic philosophers. Following the analytic tradition, they pay particular attention to the structure of language in the hopes that by clarifying its structure, certain philosophical problems can be dispelled. In this way, both philosophers try to limit enquiry and analysis to what can be firmly established. Despite these points of affinity, however, their philosophical objectives are diametrically opposed.

A comparison of Quine's and Wittgenstein's ethical views is particularly revealing of the deep differences which separate them. Although Quine and Wittgenstein each wrote only one essay dedicated specifically to ethics, much can be said about what little they did say. Quine is a naturalistic philosopher who maintains that there is no special philosophical subject matter or method; as a result, philosophy is continuous with science. Every subject of enquiry, then, falls within the scope of scientific explanation. Ethics is no exception. It too is investigated scientifically. By contrast, Wittgenstein eschews naturalism and views the attempt to solve philosophical problems scientifically as a major source of philosophical confusion. For

Wittgenstein, the whole point of ethics is that it is beyond the scope of science and in this sense is transcendental.

Their different philosophical standpoints notwithstanding, Quine and Wittgenstein agree that the methods of science are incapable of establishing ethical or valuational conclusions. For Quine, this is because ethics lacks the empirical checkpoints of science. For Wittgenstein, ethics lies beyond the world of facts and is impervious to scientific investigation. Where Quine deplores the fact that the study of ethics is methodologically infirm as compared to science, Wittgenstein resists all attempts to answer questions like whether there are values or not, or whether the Good can be defined. This is, he thinks, to belittle ethics. Essentially, to examine ethics scientifically is to look at it in the wrong way. If value could be explained scientifically, it would cease to have value. It would simply be another fact. Thus, while these two philosophers often say similar things about ethics, they deal with this subject from diametrically opposed standpoints.

Neither Quine nor Wittgenstein is an ethical philosopher. Nor does either philosopher address arguments from a different point of view. How they approach ethics is interesting because they both present a pristine view. As a result, they do not fall prey to the kind of confusions that A.J. Ayer recognized of ethical philosophers:

> The ordinary system of ethics, as elaborated in the works of ethical philosophers, is very far from being a homogeneous whole. Not only is it apt to contain pieces of metaphysics, and analyses of non-ethical concepts; its actual ethical contents are themselves of very different kinds.[1]

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[1] A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1952) 103.

Many philosophers fail to distinguish between these different kinds, and as a result, "it is often very difficult to tell from their works what it is that they are seeking to discover or prove."[2] This is not the case for Quine and Wittgenstein. They do not fall prey to Ayer's criticism of ethical philosophers because their respective ethical views follow from a well-worked out philosophical stance and are remarkably consistent with the philosophical framework within which they are working.[3]

The purpose of this study is not to position Quine and Wittgenstein against each other. It is of little, if any, interest to try to determine who is right or wrong. If we try to do this, then we are obliged to attend to the minor details of their particular claims, and in doing this we risk missing the thrust of their views, as well as their significance. Rather, I explore Quine's naturalistic standpoint and Wittgenstein's transcendental standpoint in order to expose the deep differences between their ethical views, despite the seeming similarities. The main focus will be on their essays on ethics, but other works will be referred to in order to achieve a full understanding of their ethical views. Although some reference will be made to Wittgenstein's later works, the primary emphasis will be on his early and middle periods, during which he devoted a significant amount of time to ethics and set down his most important thoughts on the subject. A comparison of Quine and Wittgenstein on ethics not only reveals many components of the general philosophical positions of two of the most important thinkers of the twentieth century, it also clarifies their respective philosophies and the deep differences between them.

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[2] Ibid.

[3] Owen J. Flanagan's claim that Quine's ethical views are inconsistent with his philosophical system will be considered in Chapter 4.

## I *Philosophy and Science: Friends or Foes?*

The relationship between philosophy and science is fundamental to the views of Quine and Wittgenstein. Both philosophers agree that the only genuine propositions are the propositions of science and as a result resist incorporating ethics into scientific theory. Interestingly, this point of agreement motivates two fundamentally different ethical views.

Science figures in significantly different ways in Quine's "On the Nature of Moral Values" and Wittgenstein's "Lecture on Ethics". For Quine, philosophy of science is philosophy enough.[4] He denies that there is any distinctive philosophical subject matter or method and views philosophy as continuous with science. Accordingly, every philosophical matter of enquiry, as well as science itself, must be investigated in a scientific manner. This is Quine's view of the world and everything he says must be understood from this standpoint. For Wittgenstein, the Quinean scientific approach to philosophy is anathema. The division between philosophy and science is basic to his standpoint and central to his views on ethics. Once we understand Quine's and Wittgenstein's respective attitudes towards science, and the role that it plays in their ethical views, we will be in a better position to understand the fundamentally different ways in which they approach ethical questions. Both philosophers have a well-worked out philosophical stance and they see everything from their own philosophical standpoint. An accurate understanding of their ethical views thus requires that we position ourselves within their respective viewpoints. I shall begin with an investigation into the relationship between philosophy and science.

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[4] W.V. Quine, "Mr. Strawson" in *The Ways of Paradox and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976) 151.

Quine is an avowedly scientistic philosopher. He espouses philosophical naturalism. Reality is to be described within science since for the naturalist, nothing which is of philosophical interest resists explanation using the methods typical of the natural sciences. Because Quine denies that there is any special philosophical subject matter or method, and views philosophy as continuous with science, philosophy is guided by the pragmatic virtues intrinsic to the scientific method, notably, simplicity and consistency. This approach commits him to a behaviourist and materialist view of the world.

Quine's criticism of the two dogmas of empiricism --the analytic/synthetic distinction and the dogma of reductionism-- both supports and is assumed by his philosophical naturalism. Firstly, his critique of the analytic/synthetic distinction is the denial of the idea that some sentences are necessary and some contingent. There is no fundamental division between sentences which are analytically true, that is, true by virtue of the meanings of the words alone, and sentences which are justified empirically -- all statements are of the same character. Quine argues that in order to maintain the distinction, we would need extensional definitions of analyticity, necessity, or synonymy, definitions which he claims cannot be given in a non-circular way.[5] This being the case, an extensional definition of analyticity is impossible according to Quine, and the analytic/synthetic distinction is dispensable. Every sentence is to be treated equally; analytic statements are true in the same sense as synthetic statements. The elimination of this distinction has important consequences for philosophy. To call something "analytic" is to imply it is a necessary truth, something which cannot be revised. However, if

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[5] See W.V. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" in *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961).

there is no distinction between analytic and synthetic statements, and if there is no "special" kind of truth which distinguishes analytic statements from synthetic ones, then nothing in principle is immune to revision -- even the laws of logic.

Secondly, Quine argues against *reductionism*, which he describes as "the belief that each meaningful statement is equivalent to some logical construct upon terms which refer to immediate experience."[6] Against this dogma, Quine argues that knowledge is a body of doctrine or "man made fabric" impinged at the edges by experience. Nothing within this body is intrinsically immune to revision and all theoretical, or non-observational knowledge is underdetermined by experience. Recalcitrant experiences merely cause readjustments within our body of knowledge; each change of statement prompts changes to other statements to which it is logically connected. In light of adverse empirical evidence, we do not have to reject any single hypothesis as long as we are prepared to make adjustments elsewhere in our system. The meaning of a sentence is not reducible to immediate experience; rather it is determined by its interconnections with language. Quine's rejection of the "two dogmas" thus allows that *any* statement can be a fixed statement, and it is solely a matter of convenience which statements we accept as "analytically" or "necessarily" true:

> It becomes folly to seek a boundary between synthetic sentences which hold contingently on experience, and analytic statements which hold come what may. Any statement can be held true come what may, if we make drastic enough adjustments elsewhere in the system.[7]

It is only for the sake of simplicity and convenience that we refrain from making such drastic

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[6] Ibid., 20.

[7] Ibid., 43.

changes.

Framing Quine's philosophical picture are simplicity, economy of thought, consistency, and the test of evidence. These criteria are central to his philosophical investigations. The strategy for ethics, then, is apparent: it too is to be accounted for in scientific terms. From Quine's point of view, everything, including science itself, must be done from the standpoint of twentieth century science; every statement, whether ethical, or mathematical, or logical, is made within science:

> The naturalistic philosopher begins his reasoning within the inherited world theory as a going concern. He tentatively believes all of it, but believes also that some unidentified portions are wrong. He tries to improve, clarify, and understand the system from within. He is the busy sailor adrift on Neurath's boat.[8]

For Quine, there is no first philosophy. There is no vantage point outside science from which to judge statements -- ethical or not-- true or false. For the naturalist, everything seeks smooth incorporation into the scientific world view. Accordingly, there is no realm of values which exist on a different level than from the realm of phenomena describable using the language of science.

Unlike Quine, Wittgenstein is not a scientific or scientistic philosopher:

> Philosophers constantly see the method of science before their eyes, and are irresistibly tempted to ask and answer questions in the way science does. This tendency is the real source of metaphysics, and leads the philosopher into complete darkness.[9]

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[8] W.V. Quine, "Five Milestones of Empiricism" in *Theories and Things* (Cambridge: The Belkap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981) 72.

[9] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958) 18.

According to Wittgenstein, the only genuine propositions are the propositions of science; natural science is the totality of true propositions. Whether a proposition is true is determined by the facts, by how things are. Because we can only have knowledge of facts, any enquiry which attempts to answer questions which go beyond facts is an attempt to answer a nonsensical question. And when we try to find answers to nonsensical questions we begin to do metaphysics:

> The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science-- i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy-- and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions. Although it would not be satisfying to the other person --he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy-- *this* method would be the only strictly correct one.[10]

At the forefront of the *Tractatus* and reflected in the "Lecture", is always Wittgenstein's distinction between what can and what cannot be talked about. He is intolerant towards metaphysics because it "obliterates the distinction between factual and conceptual investigations."[11]

The attempt to find factual explanations for philosophical problems is, for Wittgenstein, the confusion of metaphysicians. He combats any attempt to say anything about philosophical questions by setting limits to thought, and since thoughts are expressed in language he seeks to draw limits to the linguistic expression of thought. By drawing a limit to meaningful discourse,

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[10] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, trans. D.F. Pears & B.F. McGuinness (New York: The Humanities Press, 1961) 6.53. Hereafter abbreviated as *Tractatus*.

[11] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, eds. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright (Oxford: Basil Blackwell: 1981) § 458.

every expression beyond the limit is nonsensical. In the *Tractatus*, he puts the idea this way:

> The aim of this book is to set a limit to thought, or rather -- not to thought, but to the expression of thoughts.... It will therefore only be in language that the limit can be set, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense.[12]

Language is a tool for representing reality, and because ethical expressions do not represent any part of the natural world, they are nonsensical:

> Our words as we use them in science, are vessels capable only of containing and conveying meaning and sense, *natural* meaning and sense. Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts; as a teacup will only hold a teacup full of water [even] if I were to pour out a gallon over it.[13]

The metaphor of the teacup full of water highlights the fundamental cleavage between nonsense and a domain of scientifically describable facts. The water in the teacup represents all possible facts, while the water which spills outside the teacup are statements which are nonsensical. The nonsensical does not fit inside the teacup. The metaphor distinguishes those judgments of value which do not pertain to facts.

Wittgenstein's early view of science is corroborated in the *Philosophical Investigations*.[14] He says of the *Tractatus*:

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[12] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, pg. 3.

[13] Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Lecture on Ethics" in *The Philosophical Review* 74 (1965) 7. Hereafter abbreviated as *LE*.

[14] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998) § 109. Abbreviated hereafter as *PI*.

Although Wittgenstein changed some of his views in his later period, his views on science and its irrelevance to philosophical questions remains constant. Because he clarifies many of his views in the *Philosophical Investigations*, it is illuminating to look at what he has to say about science there.

> It was true to say that our considerations could not be scientific ones. It was not of any possible interest to us to find out empirically 'that, contrary to our preconceived ideas, it is possible to think such-and such' -- whatever that may mean.[15]

He goes on to say:

> And we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place. And this description gets its light, that is to say its purpose, from the philosophical problems. These are, of course, not empirical problems; they are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize those workings: *in despite of* an urge to misunderstand them.[16]

If the aim of philosophy "is to remove *particular* misunderstandings; not to produce a real understanding for the first time"[17], then clearly, for Wittgenstein the aim of philosophy is anathema to the aim of science. If we are doing science, we cannot be doing philosophy and vice versa. In order to refrain from the temptation to generalize, and thereby blur the distinction between philosophy and science, in the *PI* Wittgenstein turns to language and uses examples to describe how language is used. In particular, it is by looking at *examples* of how we use ethical language that we can focus on how ethical expressions are used rather than asking nonsensical questions like "Do values exist?" In this way, we turn our eye towards the particular and away from the temptation to misuse language. Once discourse is confined to the expression of what can be said, i.e. the propositions of science, our desire to go beyond the facts becomes

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[15] Ibid., § 109.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar*, trans. Anthony Kenny, ed. Rush Rhees (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974) 115, italics added.

less urgent. Once we recognize our tendency to go beyond the limits of language, we see that we must resist the temptation to speak of value as if it were factual.

It is clear that insofar as Quine rejects a transcendental account of ethics, so too does Wittgenstein. Still, they have two different attitudes towards ethics. Quine is interested in what science can tell us about the world --this is his philosophical naturalism-- and whether or not this is considered to be philosophy is inconsequential: "All scientific findings, all scientific conjectures that are at present plausible, are...in my view as welcome for use in philosophy as elsewhere."[18] For Wittgenstein, the distinction between science and philosophy is fundamental and the answers to empirical problems are of no interest to philosophy. Answering empirical questions is the task of science, not philosophy:

> We feel that even when *all possible* scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched. Of course there are then no questions left, and this itself is the answer.[19]

For Wittgenstein, scientific explanations are of no importance. What are important are rather the questions that science is, in principle, incapable of answering. However, in the "Lecture on Ethics", and similarly in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein asserts that many of the questions we find important or meaningful are nonsensical. This is the case with ethical questions.

Wittgenstein expresses a deep respect for the questions he takes to be nonsensical. At the end of the "Lecture" he describes ethics as "a document of a tendency in the human mind

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[18] W.V. Quine, "Natural Kinds" in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969) 127.

[19] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 6.52.

which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it."[20] However, he emphasizes that we must resist the urge to talk about nonsensical questions, ethical questions included:

> I think it is definitely important to put an end to all the claptrap about ethics -- whether intuitive knowledge exists, whether values exist, whether the good is definable. In ethics we are always making the attempt to say something that cannot be said, something that does not and never will touch the essence of the matter. It is *a priori* certain that whatever definition of the good may be given -- it will always be merely a misunderstanding to say that the essential thing, that what is really meant, corresponds to what is expressed.[21]

Here we see Wittgenstein pointing to the importance we associate with nonsensical questions while at the same time emphasizing that we must remain silent about such questions in order to avoid misunderstandings.

Quine does not recognize a limit to what can be talked about. He uses the scientific method and strives for results as far as science allows. For Quine, there are no questions which we cannot attempt to answer. He talks about what can be talked about and ignores the rest. He tries to provide the best explanation for the causes of absolute judgments of value he thinks possible. Further, he does not think that construing ethics naturalistically belittles its importance.

Wittgenstein is completely different. He would deny that Quine is doing philosophy or anything important. Quine's approach does not get at, what is for him, a deep issue. What is

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[20] Wittgenstein, *LE* 12.

[21] Friedrich Waismann, *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, trans. Joachim Schulte and Brian McGuinness, ed. Brian McGuinness (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979) 69. Hereafter abbreviated as *WVC*.

important about ethics is that it transcends scientific explanation. For Wittgenstein, the very *attempt* to explain ethics scientifically is to miss the point:

> And now I must say that if I contemplate what Ethics really would have to be if there were such a science, this result seems to me quite obvious. It seems to me obvious that nothing we could ever think or say should be *the* thing. That we cannot write a scientific book, the subject matter of which could be intrinsically sublime and above all other subject matters.[22]

In this way, it is essential to Wittgenstein's ethical views that we must not advance any kind of theory in ethics:

> If anybody offers me a *theory*, I would say: No, no, that doesn't interest me. Even if the theory were true that would not interest me -- it would not be *what* I seek. The ethical cannot be taught. If I needed a theory in order to explain to another the essence of the ethical, the ethical would have no value at all.... For *me* the theory has no value. A theory gives me nothing.[23]

An ethical theory is useless for Wittgenstein. When we are confronted with ethical problems, a scientific theory does not provide the answers we want -- in fact, it does not help us in any way at all.

In the next chapter, I shall discuss Quine's "On the Nature of Moral Values" and Wittgenstein's "Lecture on Ethics" in detail. We will see that despite their different views about the role of science in answering philosophical questions, they arrive at many similar conclusions about ethics. These similarities are important because they will help us to understand their deeper differences, which are the subject of the final three chapters. What makes a comparison

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[22] Wittgenstein, *LE* 7.

[23] Waismann, *WVC* 117.

of Quine and Wittgenstein interesting is that while their ethical conclusions are similar, the distance between them could hardly be greater. This theme will run through everything I shall be saying.

## II *The Two Essays: Quine and Wittgenstein on Ethics*

Quine's "On the Nature of Moral Values" and Wittgenstein's "Lecture on Ethics" demonstrate two different approaches to ethics. As a naturalist, Quine does not aim to provide a foundation for ethics, but rather explains (in rough outline at least) the acquisition and the handing down of moral values. His discussion of ethics is thus limited to a description of moral behaviour. For Quine, this leaves out nothing worth discussing. Wittgenstein similarly does not aim to provide a foundation for ethics but his focus is different from that of Quine's. His "Lecture on Ethics" centres not on what is scientifically describable, i.e. the acquisition of moral values, but rather on the ineffable nature of ethics. As he sees it, an explanation of our moral behaviour tells us nothing about the nature of ethics. These different focal points notwithstanding, both conclude that ethics lacks the objective checkpoints available to science.

In his essay "On the Nature of Moral Values" Quine offers a naturalistic account of ethics. Moral values are natural phenomena and should be studied in an empirical spirit. Values are described beginning with their innate phase, followed by their gradual development assisted by accumulated experience, into what we take to be our ultimate moral values. This description of moral values holds for all values, both moral and non-moral; aesthetic and sensual values are placed on the same ground as moral ones.

Quine's essay begins by outlining the innate mechanisms which allow for a duality of motivation: *belief* and *valuation*. This is explained in the fashion of Pavlov's dog:

> The duality can be traced back to the simplest conditioning of responses. A response was rewarded when it followed stimulus *a*, and penalized when it followed *b*; and thereafter it tended to be elicited by just those stimulations that were more similar to *a* than to *b* according to the subject's inarticulate standards of similarity. Observe then the

> duality of belief and valuation: the similarity standards are the epistemic component of habit formation, in its primordial form, and the reward-penalty axis is the valuative component.[24]

Our moral values have innate beginnings. We have an innate ability to (1) recognize similar objects and associate them with similar situations, and (2) rank episodes on a valuation scale, i.e., as valuable, less valuable, more valuable, etc. Our ranking of values at this stage is undeveloped; we begin with innate likes and dislikes, which, when accompanied by our subjective similarity standards lead us to worthwhile acts. At this stage, a worthwhile act consists in our learning to repeat actions which have allowed us to obtain the object of value, and to refrain from actions which impede our acquiring of the desired object. Rewards and punishments lead us to or lead us away from certain actions. Quine describes the rewards and punishments by which good behaviour is inculcated, as including a slap or a caress from a parent, or the fear of hell-fire or the salvation of heaven for the Christian. For Quine it is "instructive to dignify the lowly neural phenomenon of reinforcement and extinction in these subjectivist terms, for it represents that neural phenomenon as technology in the small: the use of inductive science for realizing values."[25]

The method of induction allows us to predict what kind of impact our actions will have on future events. Through experience, we learn to rely on similarity standards which led to successful predictions, and to readjust those standards which led to unsuccessful ones. In this way, our inductions become increasingly more accurate and intentional. In turn, good behaviour

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[24] W.V. Quine, "On the Nature of Moral Values" in *Theories and Things*, 55. Hereafter abbreviated as *NMV*.

[25] Ibid., 56.

becomes more than just the result of the mechanical induction of generalizations from accumulated experience. As learning proceeds, we rise above induction to the hypothetico-deductive method, whereby a hypothesis is set up and conclusions are deduced and tested against experience.

Our ranking of values similarly changes progressively with experience. We come to value means not just as means, but as ends; we come to prize one sort of action and take pleasure in performing it, even though we initially valued it only because it was a means to something else that we prized. As long as an action is done as a means and not as an end it is not moral, but merely prudential. As we become more experienced, we begin to act not just as a means to get the reward or to resist the punishment, but for the end of the action itself. Although we may not always want to behave well, and despite our initial indulgence in a certain behaviour with only the consequences in mind, by an association of means with ends we come to value that behaviour as an end. In this way, our actions become moral and are no longer merely prudential. According to Quine, this transmutation of means into ends underlies all moral training. This describes how we come to perform good acts.

For Quine, the distinguishing feature of moral values is that they are irreducibly social, that is, "values that are implemented by social sanctions, plus any further values that are moral values for most of the members individually."[26] He explains the social character of moral values by representing them as falling into two overlapping classes: the *altruistic* and the *ceremonial*. The former are actions that are performed without the ulterior motive of satisfying oneself; they are done with others in mind. The latter are "values that one attaches to practices of one's

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[26] Ibid., 59.

society or social group, again without regard to ulterior satisfactions accruing to oneself."[27] The two sets of values overlap in two ways: altruistic values become institutionalized to a certain extent, so that they may take on "an added ceremonial appeal"[28], and there is altruistic value in refraining from offending others' ceremonial values. Altruistic and ceremonial values may stem from innate capacities such as sympathy, or they may be inculcated by precept. We become fully moral when means get transmuted into ends and we come to value people for their own sake. Still, our morality ultimately reflects the effectiveness of the training provided by society.

Quine's naturalistic approach, which explains the acquisition and the handing down of moral values, does not interest Wittgenstein. His approach is not naturalistic. Rather, he considers value to be transcendental and this requires that we adopt a transcendental point of view towards value, not a scientific point of view. The focus of his "Lecture on Ethics" centres not on the acquisition of moral values, but rather on the ineffable nature of ethics.

Following G.E. Moore, Wittgenstein defines ethics as "the general enquiry into what is good." [29] Interestingly, just as Quine places moral values on the same ground as sensual and aesthetic values, Wittgenstein expands his definition of ethics to include "the most essential part of Aesthetics."[30] But for him, the reason aesthetic and moral values should be placed on the same footing is quite different from the reason Quine places moral values in among aesthetic ones. For Quine, the sensual, the aesthetic, and the moral all stand on the same ground, namely,

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[27] Ibid., 58.

[28] Ibid., 60.

[29] Wittgenstein, *LE* 4.

[30] Ibid. See also *Tractatus*, 6.421.

as modes of behaviour caused by an outcome of irritations to our surfaces, our innate beginnings, and the transmutations of means into ends. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, thinks of values in a different way, one in which we are involved in looking at the world from the outside.

In the *Notebooks*, Wittgenstein says the aesthetic point of view towards an object is identical to the point of view of the happy man towards the world because both are seen "*sub specie aeternitatis*."[31] He also says: "Ethics and aesthetics are one."[32] Taken together, these remarks suggest that Wittgenstein identifies the moral person with the happy person. But what is meant by the idea that the aesthetic point of view and the moral point of view are views from the outside? "The view from outside" is not to be construed as a place from which we can judge ethics or aesthetics. The good life, like a work of art, is the adoption of a certain attitude: "the will is an attitude of the subject to the world."[33] An ethical attitude is a way of looking at things, not something that reflects something in the world. In this way, "The world of the happy man is a *different* world from the world of the unhappy."[34] So, if I am unhappy about the world, the only way in which I can remedy my unhappiness is by changing myself, my attitude.

Good or bad willing, that is, the attitude we adopt towards life, cannot change anything in the world. If we are to live moral lives, we must change ourselves and not the facts. Ethics is beyond the world in the sense that it affects something about our lives that has nothing to do

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[31] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, ed. G.H. von Wright and G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968) 83.

[32] *Notebooks*, 77. See also *Tractatus*, 6.421.

[33] Wittgenstein, *Notebooks* 87.

[34] Wittgenstein, *Notebooks* 77. See also *Tractatus*, 6.43.

with facts. So, unlike matters of fact, ethical or aesthetic valuations cannot be expressed by meaningful propositions, rather, they are shown through attitudes, actions, or works of art. Thus, an attempt to express an ethical or an aesthetic point of view is an attempt to go beyond the facts, and hence beyond meaningful discourse. As a result of their transcendental nature, Wittgenstein tries to block any attempt to define ethics or aesthetics. Any attempt to talk about what goes beyond the world can only result in many ineffective attempts to say what cannot be said.

In the "Lecture on Ethics", Wittgenstein tries to bring us to see the ineffable nature of ethics by showing us that all ethical expressions are a misuse of language. In order to do this, he first illustrates the subject matter of ethics by using an analogy. Just as Galton took a number of photographs of different faces and put them on the same photographic plate in order to get a general picture of the typical features they all had in common, Wittgenstein uses a number of ethical expressions in order to show how we can say many things about Ethics, and when we put these all together, we get a general picture of what Ethics means. To articulate this Wittgenstein says, "Ethics is the enquiry into what is valuable", or "an enquiry into the meaning of life", or into "what makes life worth living."[35] He then draws an important distinction. He notes that we can use these expressions in two different senses: the *trivial* or *relative* sense of "good", and the *absolute* sense. The former sense encompasses statements like, "That man is a good pianist" (this is Wittgenstein's example). When we say that someone is a good pianist, our meaning of "good" is relative to predetermined standards or requirements of what it is to be a good piano player. To the extent that "that man" fulfills those predetermined standards, he

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[35] Wittgenstein, *LE* 5.

is a "good" player. Thus, certain statements containing "good" are relative to a particular definition or pre-determined standard. Such statements are not ethical statements in any interesting sense for Wittgenstein; they are trivial and not "deep" in any way. On the other hand, to use "good" in an ethical statement is to use the word "good" in an *absolute* sense. This usually involves an *ought* imperative. Further, the ought statement must be significant. For example, if Jones plays a terrible game of cards, and I tell him that he plays terribly, he can easily respond that he does not want to play any better. Jones will then simply continue to play cards badly. This does not present us with any serious difficulties. However, if Smith is a serial killer, and I tell him that his behaviour is inhuman, a response such as "I do not want to be any more human" is unacceptable. I would tell Smith that he *ought* to want to be more human and that he *should* stop killing. In this case, we feel as if Smith has no other alternative. As Rush Rhees says, value judgments have "nothing to do with what would be intelligible in a description of facts. It is a question of what is intelligible in this game of ethical judgments."[36] Conversely, "Every judgment of relative value is a mere statement of facts and can therefore be put in such a form that it loses all the appearance of a judgment of value."[37] Further, "no statement of fact can ever be, or imply, a judgment of absolute value."[38]

Statements of relative value, then, are uninteresting for Wittgenstein. If something is good because it measures up to a pre-determined standard, "goodness" is simply something which refers to facts. When Wittgenstein speaks of ethics, he is not interested in facts but rather

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[36] Rush Rhees, "Some Developments in Wittgenstein's View of Ethics", in *The Philosophical Review* 74 (1965) 20.

[37] Wittgenstein, *LE* 5-6.

[38] Ibid., 6.

in absolute value, what it is nonsensical to talk about. He is preoccupied with those ethical expressions which we feel are absolute, and which have no objective standard against which we can determine their truth or falsity. In order to make this clear, let us take something which is unequivocally agreed upon to be wrong. If we consider a murder, for example, we can cite a number of facts about it -- that it took place at 5:45 a.m., in a park, on a snowy day, etc. However, nowhere in the facts describing the murder is a fact which corresponds to the statement, "It was wrong." For Wittgenstein, all we can know are facts. To know something makes sense only if we can determine its truth or falsity. There are no facts in the world for "wrongness" to represent. Ethics lies outside the world, outside sense and outside truth and falsity. There is a tendency to treat ethics as if it existed alongside other facts in the world. But Wittgenstein is unfailing in maintaining a distinction between judgments of value and statements of fact. To blur this distinction is, he thinks, to treat ethics as if it were something trivial.

Quine is using ethics in the trivial sense as explicated by Wittgenstein. Moral acts, being inextricably bound to social values, imply that what is good are the values that society has inculcated. Quine does, however, address the tendency to ascribe absoluteness to moral values:

> The moral values tend by virtue of their social character to be more uniform from person to person, within a culture, than many sensual and aesthetic values. Hence the tendency with regard to the latter to allow that *de gustibus non disputandum est*, while ascribing absoluteness and even divine origin to the moral law.[39]

Because moral values are irreducibly social, their uniformity or "absolute" character is no mystery for Quine:

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[39] Quine, *NMV* 61.

> Hypotheses less extravagant than that of divine origin account well enough for such uniformity as obtains among moral values, even apart from possible innate components. It is merely that these values are passed down the generations, imposed by word of mouth, by birch rod and sugar plum, by acclaim and ostracism, fine, imprisonment. They are imposed by society because they matter to society, whereas aesthetic preferences may be left to go their way.[40]

Both aesthetic and moral values are matters which vary from person to person. Both types of values are individual to a certain extent; both gain personal significance from individual sentiment or opinion. Despite the diversity of individual sentiment, however, both aesthetic and moral values are often uniform, especially among particular cultures, because of social customs, or cultural heritages etc. In this way, values can be explained anthropologically and we do not have to go beyond social circumstances to account for the significance of morality. Everything apparently mystical or deep about our possession of morals is explained away behaviourally. Values only exist in a trivial sense. Moral values are important for Quine because they are social and thus affect all of society. This is not to suggest that Quine has not provided an accurate account of how we follow societal rules in order to get along with our neighbours; it is to suggest that his explanation of how we do so trivializes what "good" is according to Wittgenstein. However, unlike Wittgenstein, Quine does not recognize "What is goodness?" as an interesting or meaningful question.

It is clear from our discussion so far, that Quine is attempting to provide a scientific account of ethics; he has tried to show us where values come from and how we come to use them. He tries to account for values, but realizes no less than Wittgenstein that ethics can never

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[40] Ibid.

*be* a science:

> ...one regrets the methodological infirmity of ethics. The empirical foothold of scientific theory is in the predicted observable event; that of a moral code is in the observable moral act. But whereas we can test a prediction against the independent course of observable nature, we can judge the morality of an act only by our moral standards themselves. Science, thanks to its links with observation, retains some title to a correspondence theory of truth; but a coherence theory is evidently the lot of ethics.... It is a bitter irony that so vital a matter as the difference between good and evil should have no comparable claim to objectivity.[41]

Ethics can never be a science because value claims cannot be tested in the same way as predicting hypotheses. Unlike scientific evidence, the evidence we have for any given ethical proposition is a matter of the coherence of the propositions which support it. However, this evidence does not add up to an objective test of truth. Quine laments that we lack the empirical checkpoints needed in order to formulate some kind of scientific theory about ultimate values: "we do what we can with our ultimate values, but we have to deplore the irreparable lack of the empirical check points that are the solace of the scientist."[42]

Similarly, Wittgenstein says, "If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do.'"[43] This applies equally to ethics: we get to a point where we observe that people do certain things and avoid other things, and this is where explanation must come to an end. Although both philosophers agree that we lack the means for providing an explanation of the phenomenon of

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[41] Quine, *NMV* 43.

[42] Ibid., 45.

[43] Wittgenstein, *PI* § 217.

ethics, they have different things in mind. Quine laments that we lack the empirical checkpoints needed in order to formulate an objective theory about ethics but insists on the lack of objective moral checkpoints. He takes a behavioural description of the acquisition of moral values to be adequate. For Wittgenstein, on the other hand, a cognitive theory about the origin and social utility of our moral laws and why they have been handed down deprives moral judgments of their importance. Such a description is not an adequate treatment of the subject of ethics. As he puts it:

> The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: *in* it no value exists - and if it did exist, it would have no value.[44]

Ethics is not concerned with contingent matters of fact, but with what could not be otherwise -- this is what is transcendental or absolute about ethics. What makes ethics non-accidental and important is that it is not a feature of the world of facts. Nowhere in the world can we find something which represents it. Ethics is transcendental.

Despite the different standpoints from which Quine and Wittgenstein derive their ethical conclusions, they agree that science is incapable of establishing any ethical or valuational conclusions. Both Quine and Wittgenstein think we lack the means of expressing absolute value. Indeed, both philosophers can be seen as talking about what *can* be talked about and stopping there. Where they disagree, is with respect to the role of science in ethics. Their disagreement is one of emphasis. Quine emphasizes the scientifically describable aspect of ethics, Wittgenstein emphasizes the ineffable aspect of ethics. Quine is filling out what Wittgenstein takes to be the unproblematic (and uninteresting) part of ethics, and Quine would agree with

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[44] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 6.41.

Wittgenstein that no transcendental account of ethics can be given. In one way this may seem a trivial agreement, but in another way it is anything but insignificant. The different points of emphasis are fantastically different, reflecting their very different ways of doing philosophy. For Quine, we lack the means of explaining absolute values because ethics lacks empirical check points; ethics cannot be smoothly incorporated into scientific theory. For Wittgenstein, ethics is important because it is ineffable. He wants to put a stop to the way in which Quine approaches philosophical questions. Quine determines ethics to be impervious to scientific explanation only after he discovers that it fails to have any empirical checkpoints. Wittgenstein resists any attempt to theorize about ethics from the outset; ethics fails to have any empirical checkpoints by virtue of its being inaccessible to scientific explanation. This is fundamental; it underlies the differences of their approaches.

Although Quine and Wittgenstein agree on certain characteristics of ethics from their respective standpoints, neither philosopher sees what the other is doing as intelligible. They are a paradigm example of two antithetical philosophical temperaments. Wittgenstein is not interested in Quine's attempt to explain the acquisition of moral values, and from Quine's point of view, it makes no sense to look at the "water which flows outside of the teacup". Wittgenstein's account is an attempt to point to the mysticism of ethics, to the extraordinary feeling we get when we wonder at the existence of the world or think about what makes life meaningful. Mysticism, however, has no place in scientific theory.

## III *The Absolute and the Relative*

In a conversation with Friedrich Waismann, Wittgenstein said: "For me the facts are unimportant. But what men mean when they say '*The world is there*' lies close to my heart."[45] The attempt to express one's astonishment that anything exists is an attempt to go beyond significant language. It is an attempt which characterizes all ethical discourse, and which inspires a feeling of absolute value. For Quine, the notion of absolute value arises not at an individual level, but at a societal level. By virtue of their social character moral values tend to be uniform within a culture; this uniformity leads to a tendency to ascribe absoluteness to the moral law. These different vantage points notwithstanding, both Wittgenstein and Quine reject the idea that there is a single truth about ethics. Where there is a judgment of absolute value, truth and falsity mean nothing. For Wittgenstein, this is a crucial point; for Quine, this explains away the notion of absolute value.

In the early and middle periods of his philosophy, Wittgenstein is drawn between his desire to put a limit to all meaningful discourse and his desire to transgress those limits. This pendulation is revealed most clearly in passages where Wittgenstein speaks about ethics:

> I regard it as very important to put an end to all the chatter about ethics.... In ethics, one constantly tries to say something that does not concern and can never concern the essence of the matter.... But the tendency, the thrust, *points to something*.[46]
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> Man has the urge to thrust against the limits of language. Think for instance about one's astonishment that anything exists. This astonishment cannot be expressed in the form of a question and there

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[45] Friedrich Waismann, "Notes on Talks with Wittgenstein", trans. Max Black in *The Philosophical Review* 74 (1965) 16.

[46] Ibid., 13.

> is no answer to it. Anything we can say must, a priori, be only nonsense. Nevertheless, we thrust against the limits of language.... This thrust against the limits of language is *ethics*.[47]
>
> My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to talk or write about Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless.[48]
>
> Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.[49]

In each of these passages, Wittgenstein both admits the nonsensicality of the verbal expression of ethics, and at the same time expresses his reverence for the tendency to give expression to ethics. A source of much confusion for many commentators of the "Lecture" has been Wittgenstein's ascription of *nonsense* to ethical discourse. "Nonsense" is mainly interpreted in a pejorative sense and is therefore often taken to be a denunciation or ridiculing of value judments. However, the passages make it clear that ethics was deeply felt by Wittgenstein, and that he recognized the "thrust" against the limits of language as an important feature of human nature. It is significant that in the "Lecture" he does not deny our having experiences which give rise to ethical expressions, nor does he deny that these experiences are nonsensical. What he says about experiences which give rise to expressions of absolute value is rather that "the *verbal*

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[47] Ibid., 12.

[48] Wittgenstein, *LE* 11-12.

[49] Ibid., 12.

*expression* which we give to these experiences is nonsense" (emphasis mine).[50] Wittgenstein wants to resist all attempts to talk about anything that is not a part of natural science, even though what interests him are not the propositions of natural science but what transcends them. Here, we feel a tension which runs throughout the "Lecture", between our natural human tendency to go beyond ordinary language and the hopelessness of doing so. Most importantly, Wittgenstein does not exempt himself from the tendency to transgress the boundaries of language. He speaks of this tendency not only as a tendency of "all men", but as "my whole tendency". The task of resisting the temptation to transgress the limits of language, then, is something which is deeply felt by Wittgenstein. Indeed, the very drawing of a firm boundary around what can be meaningfully said in order to curb nonsense becomes for him an ethical task.

Wittgenstein anticipates an objection to his view that we cannot meaningfully express absolute or ethical value:

> You will say: Well, if certain experiences constantly tempt us to attribute a quality to them which we call absolute or ethical value and importance, this simply shows that by these words we *don't* mean nonsense, that after all what we mean by saying that an experience has absolute value *is just a fact like other facts* and that all it comes to is that we have not yet succeeded in finding the correct logical analysis of what we mean by our ethical and religious expressions.[51]

In response to this objection, Wittgenstein asks: "...what have all of us who, like myself, are still tempted to use such expressions as 'absolute good', 'absolute value', etc., what have we in mind

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[50] Ibid., 8.

[51] Ibid., 11.

and what do we try to express?"[52] He then tries to explain how we use expressions describing "the absolute" by noting that they seem to be just *similes*. In other words, when we talk about ethics, there is an analogy between the way in which we use words in a trivial sense and the way in which we use words in an absolute sense. In order to make the analogy clear, Wittgenstein gives two examples of expressions which we might use to try to convey a feeling we get from an ultimate experience. The first is the feeling experienced when walking on a fine summer's day. In order to describe this experience, he uses the phrases "I wonder at the existence of the world", and "how extraordinary that anything should exist." (Of course, this feeling can be had from other kinds of experience, but it is the feeling that is important here, and not the actual experience which elicits the feeling.) His second example concerns the feeling of being absolutely safe. To describe this, one might say, "I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens."[53]

When we use a simile, we attempt to make the description of one thing more vivid by comparing it with another thing. Thus, if we are able to describe a fact by means of a simile, we should be able to drop the simile and describe the facts without it. Similarly, if we are able to describe "the absolute" by means of a simile, we should be able to drop the simile and describe "the absolute" or "the ethical" without it. However, according to Wittgenstein, in the case of ethical expressions, when we try to take away the simile we find that *there are no facts*. That is, there are no facts which accurately represent the extraordinary feeling which lies behind a particular experience. He concludes that the expressions used in these examples are nonsensical,

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[52] Ibid., 7.

[53] Ibid., 8.

and that they are linguistically deviant. What we end up with is something paradoxical, namely, an experience, a fact, that has absolute value. Most importantly, he concludes that *all* ethical and religious statements are a misuse of language.

Wittgenstein has a solution to this paradox, one that requires a discussion of miracles. He invites us to suppose that we see a man growing a lion's head. We can react to this experience in one of two ways: we can describe it as a miracle, or we can try to explain it scientifically. The former seems the more tempting option; if we chose the latter, we could only say that the fact is simply one which has not yet been explained by science. When we see something extraordinary, something that goes beyond all experience, trying to "find" the miracle scientifically would be to lose the miracle. As Wittgenstein says, "The truth is that the scientific way of looking at a fact is not the way to look at it as a miracle."[54] This highlights a distinction which persists throughout the "Lecture", namely, the distinction between looking at ethics in a trivial way and looking at it in an absolute way. Essentially, it is the difference between a shallow and a deep way of thinking.[55]

In "Wittgenstein and Ethics", Theodore Redpath asks whether it is true to say that ethical expressions, for example, "wonder", or "good" are really similes.[56] He argues that if they do not

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[54] Ibid., 11.

[55] M. O.'C. Drury notes that Wittgenstein frequently used the words "deep" and "shallow". He says: "For myself if I had to give a brief definition of this distinction I would say that a shallow thinker may be able to say something clearly but that a deep thinker makes us see that there is something that cannot be said." See "Some Notes on Conversations with Wittgenstein" in *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Personal Recollections*, Rush Rhees, ed., (New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1981) 96.

[56] Theodore Redpath, "Wittgenstein and Ethics" in *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein* v. 14, ed. J. Canfield (New York: Garland, 1986). See also E.D. Klemke's "Lecture on Ethics" in *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 9, (1975) 118-27. Here, Klemke remarks that "Wittgenstein provides no good reasons for the claim that in all ethical discourse involving absolute value we

even *seem* to be similes, then Wittgenstein's claim that "what at first appeared to be a simile now seems to be mere nonsense"[57] loses its relevance. Secondly, Redpath argues that even if ethical expressions seem at first sight to be similes, but turn out *not* to be nonsensical, then Wittgenstein fails to show that these expressions are similes. When Wittgenstein asserts in the "Lecture" that an ethical expression such as "I wonder at the existence of the world" is a simile, he is somewhat unclear in his explanation of how such expressions are in fact similes. In order to better understand what Wittgenstein means, it will be useful to examine Redpath's argument.

Redpath undertakes to show that if the ethical expressions described by Wittgenstein are not similes, then ethical expressions are not nonsensical. This is an important endeavour, for if ethical expressions do not turn out to be nonsensical, then Wittgenstein's distinction between what can and cannot be talked about becomes blurred, thus paving the way for ethical theorizing. Redpath acknowledges that he recognizes, and that many other people probably recognize as well, the experiences expressed by ethical expressions. Essentially, Redpath wants to say that if we all know what we mean when we utter these expressions, then it does not seem as though we are using them to describe something else.

In order to discover whether or not ethical expressions are *really* similes, it is useful to consider, as Redpath does, a typical or explicit example of a simile, like "His face was as pale as a sheet." Here, the comparison being made is explicit. When this simile is contrasted with "I wonder at the existence of the world", this latter example does not explicitly state a comparison as the former does. It is difficult to see why "I wonder at the existence of the world" is a simile,

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are using similes" (124).

[57] Wittgenstein, *LE* 10.

unless, as Redpath claims, Wittgenstein regards an ethical statement to be a simile because it uses words like "wonder" analogously to the way in which we use words like "wonder" in an ordinary sense. For example, "wonder" in the ethical statement "I wonder at the existence of the world", is being used similarly to "wonder" in the ordinary statement "I wonder at the size of this horse", where we could easily imagine a horse of a smaller size at whose size we would not wonder.[58] Redpath supports this interpretation with a passage from the "Lecture":

> Thus it seems that when we are using the word *right* in an ethical sense, although, what we mean, is not right in its trivial sense, it's something similar, and when we say "This is a good fellow," although the word here doesn't mean what it means in the sentence "This is a good football player" there seems to be some similarity. And when we say "This man's life was valuable" we don't mean it in the same sense in which we would speak of some valuable jewelry but there seems to be some sort of analogy.[59]

It seems, then, that Wittgenstein is using "simile" to characterize a kind of similarity. So, according to Redpath, even if "I wonder at the existence of the world makes no *explicit* comparison, it can be reworded to show an *implicit* comparison, i.e., "I wonder at the existence of the world rather like I might wonder at the size of an enormous horse."[60] Now that we have a simile, we must be able to drop the simile and state the facts without it, according to Wittgenstein. If we take our typical simile, "His face was as pale as a sheet", we can drop the simile and state the facts, namely, that his face was very pale. Similarly, if we take Wittgenstein's simile, Redpath claims we can express this without the simile simply by stating,

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[58] Redpath, "Wittgenstein and Ethics" 110.

[59] Wittgenstein, *LE* 9.

[60] Redpath, "Wittgenstein and Ethics" 110.

"I wonder at the existence of the world." This is because, as Redpath points out, it is "rather like I might wonder at the size of an enormous horse" that is the simile, and not "I wonder at the existence of the world." It seems, then, that ethical expressions are not really similes after all and Wittgenstein's claim that ethical expressions are nonsensical misfires. Further, even if we do use ethical expressions as similes, it does not follow from Wittgenstein's criterion --"we must be able to drop the simile and describe the facts without it"-- that we can describe or express an ethical experience or judgment in any other way than by those expressions themselves. Presumably, it seems that *even if* we do use ethical expressions as similes, because these expressions convey a commonly understood sentiment --that is, we all have a feel for what it means to say "I wonder at the existence of the world"-- they do not seem to be nonsensical in the commonly understood sense of "nonsense", that is, as gibberish or drivel.

If Wittgenstein is using "simile" in the way that Redpath describes, then the claim that ethical expressions are nonsensical does not seem to hold. The supposed ambiguity of Wittgenstein's characterization of ethical expressions as similes notwithstanding, he would be distressed at the idea that there is something to be said about ethics. When Wittgenstein takes ethics to transcend ordinary discourse, he is saying it is profound. Because the nonsensicality of ethical expressions is fundamental to Wittgenstein's ethical view, we should enquire into whether there might be another way in which he is using the term "simile".

Wittgenstein's push to show that all ethical discourse is nonsensical is a crucial point in the "Lecture". The following passage makes this clear:

> And now I must say that if I contemplate what Ethics really would have to be if there were such a science, this result seems to me quite obvious. It seems to me obvious that nothing we could ever think or

> say should be *the* thing. That we cannot write a scientific book, the subject matter of which could be intrinsically sublime and above all other subject matters.[61]

If we look at Wittgenstein's notion of "simile" against this passage, we begin to see both what Wittgenstein is after when he claims that all ethical expressions are just similes, and what he means when he says that all ethical expressions are nonsensical. If we are to give a description of ethics, then this description must be scientific since our words will only express facts. Wittgenstein has provided examples of what a description of ethics would look like: "I wonder at the existence of the world", "I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens". Let us consider again the two similes which Redpath discusses, namely, "His face was as pale as a sheet", and "I wonder at the existence of the world rather like I might wonder at the size of an enormous horse." In the former simile, when we take the simile away, we can state the fact behind the simile, that is, that his face was very pale or white. If a simile functions to make a description more emphatic or vivid by comparing one thing to another thing of a different kind, then we can drop the comparative component of the simile, "white as a sheet" and be left with a description of something, i.e., an empirically verifiable fact. When we try to compare "the absolute", or "the ethical" on the other hand, with the feeling of wondering at the existence of the world, it is absurd to think that we can drop the comparative component, "I wonder at the existence of the world", and be left with the description of *something*:

> ...the *absolute good*, if it is a describable state of affairs, would be one which everybody, independent of his tastes and inclinations, would *necessarily* bring about or feel guilty for not bringing about. And I

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[61] Wittgenstein, *LE* 7.

want to say that such a state of affairs is a chimera.[62]

In the "Lecture", Wittgenstein tries to show that when we attempt to give a verbal response in answer to "What is absolute good?" or "What is the meaning of life?", we use a variety of expressions. We cannot say what ethics is. All we can say is that the absolute good or absolute value is like the feeling one gets when one wonders at the existence of the world, or when one feels absolutely safe. The verbal expressions which first appeared to be similes, are actually nonsensical because when we drop the simile, the expressions that are left do not describe anything that is represented in the world. Essentially, when we attempt to describe absolute value, we are attempting to use ordinary language --which we use to speak about ordinary facts, in an extraordinary way-- to speak about something that transcends facts. Wittgenstein wants to demystify language; when we attempt to use ethical expressions we are using language in an extraordinary way. To use language in this way is a major source of confusion. This is the main point of the "Lecture": there is nothing that corresponds to "ethics", rather, ethics is the expression of an attitude. Ethics must be looked at in a "deep" way. The transcendental nature of ethics resists any clear expression; only by looking at ethics in this way does it become significant. Thus, because ethical expressions turn out to be just similes, they are nonsensical. The term "nonsensical" is used to stop the reader from imposing *one* thought or definition of ethics. For Wittgenstein, what can be said, can be said clearly and ethics *cannot* be clearly expressed. Wittgenstein explains this by saying that all ethical expressions are only similes. There is nothing in the world which corresponds to "value". We should not look for

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[62] Ibid.

monsters under the bed where there are none.[63]

In "On the Nature of Moral Values" Quine argues that ethics cannot be a science because it lacks evidential support. To this extent, Quine is in complete agreement with the main point of the "Lecture", namely, that there is no fact which corresponds to "absolute value". Like Wittgenstein, Quine wants to limit enquiry and analysis to what can be firmly established, and this involves using only the language of science. Both philosophers want to purify the language of science -- Wittgenstein in order to avoid all metaphysical and dogmatic philosophy, and Quine in order to determine what there is. Although both motives for achieving a clear scientific language share the idea that we can only talk about describable facts, where Wittgenstein starts with a notion of how the world is, i.e. as made up of facts, and then draws a distinction between fact and value, Quine sees no immediate distinction, but rather accepts in his ontology whatever it is necessary to quantify over when speaking about the world. Thus, he approaches the question of ethics not from beyond the limits of the world, but rather from the level of sense data. A central question for Quine is how we get from our sensory stimulations to our scientific theory of the world. Because scientific theories consist of sentences about the world, and because there is a gap between the external world and our immediate input from the external world, we need to look for sentences which are directly associated with our sensory stimulations. Not being interested in anything that cannot be said scientifically, Quine looks at

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[63] There is an interesting remark that Wittgenstein made to Rush Rhees in which he reveals his discontent about criticisms like the one given by Redpath. Rhees paraphrases Wittgenstein's remark as follows: "He says in the later examples that he would reject any analysis which showed that [ethical expressions] were not nonsense --that they describe such and such experiences-- because in those expressions he wishes to 'go beyond the world...that is to say, beyond significant language.' (See Rhees, "Some Developments in Wittgenstein's View of Ethics", 20.)

the link between language and the world in order to determine how we manage to speak about the world:

> From impacts on our sensory surfaces, we in our collective and cumulative creativity down the generations have projected our systematic theory of the external world. Our system is proving successful in predicting subsequent sensory input. How have we done it?[64]

According to Quine, our discourse about the world is the result of irritations to our physical surfaces caused by the forces of the physical world:

> I am a physical object sitting in a physical world. Some of the forces of this physical world impinge on my surface. Light rays strike my retinas; molecules bombard my eardrums and fingertips. I strike back, emanating concentric air waves. These waves take the form of a torrent of discourse about tables, people, molecules, light rays, retinas, air waves, prime numbers, infinite classes, joy and sorrow, good and evil.[65]

This passage is a crystalline expression of Quine's physicalism.[66] He thinks that all of our scientific statements can be translated into statements about the triggering or stimulation of our sensory receptors. He takes as the evidential support of science, then, the relation of stimulation to scientific theory. According to Quine:

> All I am or ever hope to be is due to irritations of my surface, together with such latent tendencies to response as may have been present in

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[64] W.V. Quine, *Pursuit of Truth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) 1. Hereafter abbreviated as *PT*.

[65] W.V. Quine, "The Scope and Language of Science" in *Ways of Paradox*, 228.

[66] It should be noted that Quine's physicalism is not a narrow physicalism. While he thinks that everything that can be said can be said in the language of physics, this must be understood within Quine's naturalistic framework. For example, he assigns ontological status to classes because they are necessary in order to successfully talk about nature. We decide what things there are by considerations of simplicity and consistency of the overall system.

> my original germ plasm. And all the lore of the ages is due to irritation of the surfaces of a succession of persons, together, again, with the internal initial conditions of the several individuals.[67]

Because this is Quine's view, if we are going to see how we get from our surface irritations to scientific theory, then we need to look at those sentences of scientific theory which are directly associated with our stimulations. For Quine, the link between language and the world is provided by *observation sentences*. These sentences are "the vehicle of scientific evidence"[68] and the link between language and the real world. A closer look at observation sentences will reveal why ethics lacks observation sentences and hence lacks the objective checkpoints available to science.

Quine defines an observation sentence as "an occasion sentence on which speakers of the language can agree outright on witnessing the occasion[69], occasion sentences being sentences which are true on some occasions and false on others, for example, "It is raining". There are two requirements of observation sentences which allow them firstly, to be a final checkpoint, and secondly, allow science to be objective. The first requirement is that these sentences "should command the subject's assent or dissent outright, on the occasion of a stimulation in the appropriate range [of one's stimulations], without further investigation and independently of what he may have been engaged in at the time."[70] The second requirement is that they be intersubjective: "unlike a report of a feeling, the sentence must command the same

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[67] Quine, "The Scope and Language of Science" 228.

[68] Quine, *PT* 5.

[69] Ibid., 3.

[70] Ibid.

verdict from all linguistically competent witnesses of the occasion."[71] So, observation sentences verbally communicate sensory information which is shared by everyone on a certain occasion. It is important that observation sentences are established by publicly shared stimulation and independently of collateral information; this is what gives them their objective status. In the case of "It is raining", impacts on a certain range of surface receptors produce a sensation, and the sensation occurs only when these receptors are triggered.

By contrast, Quine sees ethical occasion sentences as being reports of a feeling. In his "Reply to Morton White" he says: "Moral judgments differ from cognitive ones in their relation to observation. The difference is due to a difference between sensation and emotion."[72] Moral judgments involve emotional responses to situations (i.e. revulsion and approval) whereas cognitive ones do not. As Quine succinctly states:

> Sensation is nicely coordinated with concurrent, publicly accessible stimulation. Impacts on a certain range of surface receptors produce the sensation, and conversely, apart from occasional illusion, the sensation occurs only when thus produced. It is not so with emotions.[73]

Further, he recognizes that unlike observation sentences, ethical judgments almost always depend on collateral information not shared by all witnesses of the occasion.[74] Ethical sentences thus fail to fulfill the two requirements needed to qualify as observation sentences.

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[71] Ibid.

[72] W.V. Quine, "Reply to Morton White" in *The Philosophy of W.V. Quine*, eds. Lewis Edwin Hahn and Paul Arthur Schilpp (La Salle: Open Court, 1986) 664.

[73] Ibid.

[74] Ibid.

Observation sentences are the most directly associated with sensory stimulation, thus providing the most objective link between observation and theory. They are the "means of verbalizing the prediction that checks a theory."[75] Essentially:

> An observation sentence is an occasion sentence that the speaker will consistently assent to when his sensory receptors are stimulated in certain ways. If querying the sentence elicits assent from the given speaker on one occasion, it will elicit assent likewise on any other occasion when the same total set of receptors is triggered; and similarly for dissent. *This and this only is what qualifies sentences as observation sentences for the speaker in question, and this is the sense in which they are the sentences most directly associated with sensory stimulation.*[76]

The most important thing about observation sentences for Quine's theory, is that they are not a report of private sense data, but rather, they contain references to physical objects. So, because observation sentences are most directly associated with sensory stimulations, and sensory stimulations lead us to our discourse about the world, they are able to tell us what there is. They provide science with an objective checkpoint for determining what is true and what is false. Ethical sentences, however, have no such claim to objectivity.

Quine makes a distinction between cognitive science and non-cognitive arts. To cognitive claims, Quine applies Tarski's disquotation principle, which asserts that to say a sentence is true is just to reaffirm it. "It is raining" is true if and only if it is raining. In the case of non-cognitive arts, in this case ethics, Quine still applies Tarski's principle. So, we can say "Stealing is evil" is true if and only if stealing is evil. When we are in a situation where it is

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[75] Quine, *PT* 4.

[76] W.V. Quine, "Empirical Content" in *Theories and Things*, 25. Emphasis added.

raining, it makes no sense to ask, "Is it really raining?" but when we are in a moral situation, say when we are experiencing a theft, we can still ask "Is stealing really evil?" As a result, Quine tends to withold truth claims about questions of ethics except where we can develop cognitive theories, i.e., in investigations about the origin and social utility of our moral laws. We can develop cognitive theories explaining moral laws in terms of natural selection or our innate tendencies. Further, Quine also claims that we can:

> do a good deal of cognitive persuasion in ethics by depending on deep-lying agreements, ethical agreements, between people, depending on there being such agreements reaching out to most people and just stopping short of the utterly depraved. And if there is a disagreement as to the ethics of some particular act or situation, sometimes we can clear it up by appealing to cognitive connections on the scientific side between such an act's causal connections and other events which can agree on as to their moral status, good or bad. And this certainly is the way we do persuade people of the morality of a deed.[77]

Explaining how we come to arrive at moral values, and explaining what the absolute good is are two different enterprises. Quine is only interested in the former, because we can develop cognitive theories about it, appealing to Darwin for instance. Anything outside of these cognitive theories is poetry:

> What I have been discussing under the head of philosophy is what I call scientific philosophy, old and new.... By this vague heading I do not exclude philosophical studies of moral and aesthetic values. Some such studies, of an analytical cast, can be scientific in spirit. They are apt, however, to offer little in the way of inspiration or consolation.... Inspirational and edifying writing is admirable, but the place for it is the novel, the poem, the sermon, or the literary essay. Philosophers in the professional sense have no peculiar fitness for it. Neither have they

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[77] "Interview With Willard van Orman Quine" in *Theoria* 60 (1994) 203.

> any peculiar fitness for helping to get society on an even keel, though we should all do what we can. What just might fill these perpetually crying needs is wisdom: *sophia* yes, *philosophia* not necessarily.[78]

Essentially, Quine is saying that the task of philosophy is not to do poetry. Anyone looking for an inspirational account of ethics must look to the poet, or to literature, not to the philosopher. This is something with which Wittgenstein would be in agreement. He himself found ethical inspiration from the writer Tolstoy. An investigation into the origin and social utility of our moral values is as far as science will allow us to talk about ethics.

Quine wants Tarski's disquotation principle to apply to statements of moral values, despite the profound difference between cognitive utterances and moral utterances. However, in the case of ethics, this principle only holds where there is something to say scientifically, such as enquiring into the origin and social utility of our moral laws, or when using cognitive persuasion to convince someone of the morality of an action. Outside of an anthropological approach to ethics, cognitive claims are not applicable to ethical statements. Quine will say nothing about ethics not because ethical judgments are indicative of something "deep" about ethics, but because there are no ethical observation sentences. Like Wittgenstein, Quine's standard of acceptable scientific enquiry is natural science. Unlike Wittgenstein, however, the fact that ethics cannot be subject to scientific discourse does not entail resisting the temptation to treat ethics scientifically. Rather, we want scientific explanations of ethical judgments; unfortunately, ethical sentences lack the evidential support required by science. In this way, the observation sentence is key because it is not a report of private sense data but rather contains

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[78] W.V. Quine, "Has Philosophy Lost Contact with People?" in *Theories and Things*, 193.

references to physical objects. Wittgenstein also acknowledges that "If I describe reality, I describe what I find among men"[79], that is, what is describable is what is empirically verifiable. Both Wittgenstein and Quine agree that ethics cannot be a science. For both, this conclusion is an important consequence of their respective philosophical positions.

There are also important differences, however. There is no tension for Quine between what we can and cannot talk about. To say that there is anything beyond what is scientifically observable is not nonsensical, but simply false. What pushes Quine and Wittgenstein apart are not subtle differences, but fundamental ones. This difference is most clearly understood by a comment that Wittgenstein made to Friedrich Waismann:

> Schlick says that theological ethics contains two conceptions of the essence of the Good. According to the more superficial interpretation, the Good is good because God wills it; according to the deeper interpretation, God will the Good because it is good. I think that the first conception is the deeper one...for this cuts off the path to any and every explanation 'why' it is good...The first conception says clearly that the essence of the Good has nothing to do with facts and therefore cannot be explained by any proposition. If any proposition expresses just what I mean, it is: Good is what God orders.[80]

Quine would regard such an opinion as utterly false. For him, "There simply are values, and unfortunately they are not entirely shared although the basic ones are almost universally shared, one thinks, hopes."[81] The Quinean and Wittgensteinian arguments against a notion of absolute value are a consequence of their recognition that ethics is not subject to the objectivity of science. Clearly, the proximity of these two views, nonetheless, stems from two entirely

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[79] Waismann, "Notes on Talks With Wittgenstein" 15.

[80] Ibid., 15.

[81] "Interview with Willard Van Orman Quine", 203.

different veins.

The preceding discussion suggests an important difference between the ethical views of Quine and Wittgenstein. Namely, where Quine discusses morality as a social convention, Wittgenstein places much emphasis on the self, and more importantly, self-awareness. He says:

> At the end of my lecture on ethics, I spoke in the first person. I believe that is quite essential. Here nothing more can be established, I can only appear as a person speaking for myself.[82]

Further, he says:

> I can only say: I don't belittle this human tendency; I take my hat off to it. And here it is essential that this is not a sociological description but that I speak *for myself*.[83]

The personal attitude we have towards ethics is the desire to find the sense of life. For Wittgenstein, this is what cannot be put into words. This is the heart of Wittgenstein's claim that all ethical and religious expressions are just similes. Compare this viewpoint to Quine's statement, "I am a physical object sitting in a physical world.... All I am or ever hope to be is due to irritations to my surface, together with such latent tendencies to response as may have been present in my original germ plasm." The difference between these two conceptions is striking. Where Wittgenstein values the personal aspect of ethics, Quine makes no mention of this personal aspect and thinks it adequate to say that we are socially conditioned beings with innate preferences and dislikes.

On Quine's view, the problem of ethics is construed naturalistically. We come to value things by being conditioned through punishments and rewards. Conversely, for Wittgenstein,

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[82] Waismann, "Notes on Talks with Wittgenstein" 16.

[83] Ibid., 16.

there is no factual criteria to move us to a moral judgment. Thus, morals cannot be confined to the earth. It is crucial that a description of ethics not be given from a sociological perspective, but rather from a personal perspective. The sublime nature of ethics cannot be captured in a sociological explanation, but can only be recognized by the tendency to say something which is essentially unsayable. Where Wittgenstein makes the ethical transcendental, Quine tries to provide the best explanation for absolute judgments of value he thinks is possible.

## IV *Quine: Facts of the Matter, Epistemology, and Ethics*

**"In science there are no 'depths'; all is on the surface."**

**-"The Scientific Conception of the World"**

As we saw in the last chapter, Quine argues that moral judgments differ from cognitive ones in their relation to observation. As a result of the lack of ethical observation sentences, ethics is methodologically infirm compared to science. Consequently, ethical sentences cannot be regarded as sharing the same claim to objectivity as sentences of science. Quine states his thesis for the methodological infirmity of ethics as follows:

> The empirical foothold of scientific theory is in the predicted observable event; that of a moral code is in the observable moral act. But whereas we can test a prediction against the independent course of observable nature, we can judge the morality of an act only by our moral standards themselves.[84]

This thesis has been criticized by Morton White and Owen J. Flanagan Jr, both ethical naturalists. By rejecting Quine's view of the methodological infirmity of ethics, White and Flanagan try to argue for a normative ethics. Quine defends the infirmity of ethics in his "Reply to Morton White" which is, in turn, criticized by Flanagan. By assessing Quine's thesis in light of Flanagan's criticisms, we can achieve a better understanding not only of Quine's ethical position, but also of his philosophical naturalism.

In his "Reply to Morton White", Quine talks about moral occasion sentences in order to critically assess their ultimate empirical evidence. Essentially, as previously mentioned, he holds that there is a distinction between ordinary observation sentences and moral occasion

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[84] Quine, *NMV* 63.

sentences which rests on a difference between sensation and emotion. Given that an observation sentence "is an occasion sentence that commands the same verdict from all witnesses who know the language"[85], a moral occasion sentence is, similarly, a sentence to which all witnesses present to an act are disposed to assent or dissent. To illustrate the distinction, Quine gives an example of a moral occasion sentence which he calls a "best-case assumption". The assumption is that all the speakers of a given linguistic community are disposed to assent to the moral occasion sentence 'That's outrageous' upon seeing a cripple being beaten or seeing someone steal a wreath from someone's door. He claims that although such a sentence prompts the same verdict from all the witnesses who know the language, it cannot qualify as an observation sentence. This is because the sentence 'That's outrageous' "applies also and indeed mostly to other acts whose outrageousness hinges on collateral information not in general shared by all witnesses of the acts."[86] This is like 'He's a bachelor', which does not qualify as an observation sentence because the verdict always depends on auxiliary information. By contrast, 'There's a rabbit' will occur only when our surface receptors are stimulated by seeing a rabbit (aside from occasional illusion or hallucination). Moral occasion sentences lie between a sentence like 'That's a rabbit', which almost never depends on collateral information not shared by the witnesses, and 'He's a bachelor', which almost always relies on collateral information not widely shared by the witnesses. Moral occasion sentences, then, do not provide a direct link between stimulus and science, and thus fail to be observational.

Owen Flanagan responds to Quine's best-case scenario, arguing that:

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[85] Quine, "Reply to Morton White" 664.

[86] Ibid.

> It is a well-known finding in cognitive science that categories of a high degree of generality are subject to less consistency of use across speakers than terms of more intermediate levels of generality. One would expect therefore less firmness in judgments of outrageousness than in, for example, judgements of cruelty. Furthermore, one can easily amplify differences in usage by picking contentious or nonprototypical cases. The issue of collateral information nothwithstanding, wreath stealing is not a prototypically 'outrageous act' for many speakers. But surely cripple beating is.[87]

Flanagan wants to say that there are some moral occasion sentences which fulfill the two requirements of observation sentences,[88] so that ethics is not methodologically infirm as compared to science. He claims that if we pick less general sentence-types, we can arrive at certain moral sentences which will command the same verdict for all witnesses who know the language, independently of collateral information. For example, the sentence "It is cruel of that man to torture that cripple"[89] would qualify as observational, since all witnesses would agree on the cruelty of the act independently of collateral information. Such an occasion sentence, according to Flanagan, is not like 'He's a bachelor', but rather lies in proximity to sentences like 'There goes a rabbit'. Thus, Flanagan concludes that:

> ...it is not an implausible view to think that there is a certain small class of relatively invariant observation reports, for example, about deep-seated aversions --physical abuse and torture are bad-- which in the first instance guide the construction of ethical theory and then later provide an epistemically significant 'empirical foothold' for judgments about the goodness or badness of certain acts, or about the

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[87] Owen J. Flanagan Jr., "Pragmatism, Ethics, and Correspondence Truth: Response to Gibson and Quine" in *Ethics* 98 (1988) 545. (Hereafter referred to as "Reply to Gibson and Quine".)

[88] See Chapter 3, pg. 38.

[89] Flanagan, "Reply to Gibson and Quine" 546.

> overall quality of some life forms over the alternatives. To be sure, such footholds will underdetermine almost all interesting ethical judgments; but that is equally true for most interesting scientific statements.[90]

Despite Flanagan's attempt to use less general sentence-types in order to show that we can have moral observation sentences, these more specific sentence-types do not qualify as observational. To see why, we need to take a closer look at the difference between cognitive judgments and moral judgments.

For Quine, the difference between cognitive judgments and moral judgments which rests on a difference between sensation and emotion is an important difference. In the case of sensations Quine focuses on the triggerings of surface receptors rather than on the sensations themselves. This means that observation sentences are not reports of *private* sense data, but are statements about physical objects. Instead of talking about sensation, Quine can replace "sensation" with "triggerings of surface receptors", thus permitting him to avoid talk about subjective sense data. In this way, he can focus on publicly accessible stimulation.

In the case of emotions, by contrast, the subject's assent or dissent on the occasion of a moral sentence requires investigation of emotions. Where observation sentences are grounded in sensation, moral occasion sentences "are conditioned not to distinctive ranges of sensory intake (there is no distinctive range of sensory intake associated with a *moral* occasion sentence) but to emotional responses to that intake."[91] Quine gives no definition of emotion, and mentions emotion with respect to moral values only in his short response to Morton White. Since both

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[90] Ibid., 547.

[91] Jay Campbell, "Quine on Cognitive Meaning and Normative Ethics" in *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 34 (1996), 8-9.

observation sentences and moral occasion sentences involve conditioned responses to stimulations, it is important to see how the two cases really do differ according to Quine. He does contrast emotion with sensation, revealing how emotions differ from non-emotive perceptions. The two conditions which allow sensation to be coordinated with publicly accessible stimulation are that (1) impacts on a certain range of surface receptors produce the sensation and (2) the sensation occurs only when that specific range of surface receptors is stimulated. Regarding emotions, the first condition may be true, but the second condition fails: emotional responses to moral or immoral acts are aroused also by other moral or immoral acts whose morality is discernable only in the light of collateral information not generally shared. In this way, moral occasion sentences are not predicated on publicly shared stimulation and thus lack the intersubjective checkpoints that are available for sensation.

Although Flanagan argues that there will be certain acts which will consistently and invariantly be condemned among all who witness such acts, even judgments about such acts can be affected by collateral information relevant to the act. For example, in the case of physical abuse, although all witnesses would assent to the sentence "Physical abuse is wrong" on every occasion of physical abuse, knowledge that the abuser was mentally insane may cause a significantly different emotional response from someone who lacked such knowledge. In the same way, varying emotional responses are possible among all moral situations in a way that varying responses to triggerings of surface receptors are not possible.

So, although conditioned responses to stimulations are at work in the case of both sensation and emotion, and although Quine acknowledges that there is an overall uniformity among moral values much like our unvarying response to stimulation, there remains the

important issue of collateral information. Even if we are conditioned to give responses like "What a jerk!" or "What a monster!", unlike the response "There's a rabbit!" these remarks require more than a mere glance; their correct evaluation often requires knowledge of circumstances which may not be present to all witnesses of the occasion. Understanding moral utterances involves knowing when to affirm them. Since moral utterances contain emotive elements, they are not congruous with publicly shared stimulation:

> Setting aside emotive or poetic meaning, and looking only to the cognitive meaning of declarative sentences, we may say that the meaning of a sentence consists in its truth conditions. We know the meaning of a sentence in so far as we know in what circumstances the sentence counts as true. To understand a sentence is to know when to affirm it.[92]

Shifting talk from "sensations" to "triggerings of surface receptors" allows an objective way of determining the intersubjectivity of private sensations, but there is no similar way of determining the intersubjectivity of emotions. There is, then, no objective way for us to check whether or not a moral sentence is true or false. Consequently, there can be no moral observation sentences; in this way, ethical occasion sentences are prevented from sharing the same claim to objectivity that observation sentences enjoy.

Flanagan attempts to bypass the issue of observationality. He claims that even if ethical observation sentences do not stand in the same justificatory relation to moral theory as ordinary observation sentences stand in relation to scientific theories, "it is still conceivable that something besides observation sentences could be found which could play the right justificatory

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[92] W.V. Quine, "Symbols" in Richard L. Gregory ed., *The Oxford Companion to the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) 764.

role."[93] In an earlier paper entitled "Quinean Ethics"[94], Flanagan had argued that this justificatory role can be played by practice. There, Flanagan contests Quine's thesis of the methodological infirmity of ethics by claiming that it is inconsistent with Quine's philosophical naturalism. He tries to provide a naturalistic reformulation of Quine's ethics in order to show that ethics, like epistemology, contains both a factual side and a normative side.

The heart of Flanagan's argument is that "the two characteristics of ethics which lead Quine to contrast scientific and moral discourse, namely, (1) that 'we can judge the morality of an act only by our moral standards themselves', and (2) that 'there must remain some ultimate ends unreduced and so unjustified' are attributes which [Quine] has shown are characteristic of all significant discourse and thus do not serve to distinguish ethics from science at all."[95] As Flanagan sees it, (1) and (2) are not open to Quine as a way of distinguishing ethics from science because they rest on dogmas of empiricism that Quine rejects. For him "Once the theory of meaning is expanded in holistic and pragmatic directions, ethical discourse counts as meaningful if anything does. Nor is its normative side dissolved by the naturalistic turn."[96]

Flanagan recognizes that Quine sees epistemology and ethics as being on par on a factual level. In Quine's theory, the factual side of both epistemology and ethics includes learning theory and evolutionary biology. The same principles of learning theory and evolutionary biology are deployed to develop a genealogy of both epistemological and instrumental (ethical)

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[93] Flanagan, "Reply to Gibson and Quine" 544.

[94] Owen J. Flanagan Jr., "Quinean Ethics" in *Ethics* 93 (1982).

[95] Flanagan, "Quinean Ethics" 56.

[96] Ibid., 65.

values. However, while Quine has no quarrel with the possibility of normative epistemology, he rejects the possibility of a normative ethics. It is here, at the normative level, that the parallel between epistemology and ethics, which Flanagan defends, ceases for Quine. According to Quine, ethics lacks the objectivity of science on account of its lack of observation sentences.

In response, Flanagan attempts to reformulate Quine's ethics so that where science corresponds to observation, ethics corresponds to practice:

> The corresponding role to observation, of course, is played by practice. The theory of the *summum bonum*...is the theory of the form(s) of life which most comprehensively maximizes our aims, our interests. The best way to find out whether some particular hunk of the theory of the good life is correct is to try it, to practice it....So Quine is wrong that the empirical foothold of a moral code is 'in the observable moral act.' It is in the consequences of the observable moral act. These consequences break the hold of the system, and they undercut the thesis that we can judge our values 'only by our moral standards themselves'.[97]

Flanagan turns to practice in order to overcome the problem of testability in Quine's ethical account. If we can judge moral acts only by our own moral standards, then all ethical justifications will be circular.

According to Flanagan, practice allows ethics "to escape the bind of absolute intersystemicity"[98]:

> The ethical theory I have proposed undermines Quine's thesis of the methodological infirmity of ethics, while retaining the thoroughly naturalistic and pragmatic tenets of his overall philosophy. Unlike

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[97] Ibid., 71.

[98] Ibid.

> Quine's, my theory counts normative ethics as meaningful and as a legitimate part of an overall naturalistic theory. Metaphilosophically, it highlights the need for, and the tenability of, a double-aspect ethical theory which, like epistemology naturalized, will have both a factual and a normative side.[99]

Despite the underdetermination of our theory of nature, science still has some claim to objectivity by means of observation sentences. Similarly, ethics has a claim to objectivity by way of practice. Flanagan's argument for the possibility of a normative ethics, then, rests on the claim that epistemology and science are no less underdetermined than ethics. But even Flanagan's appeal to practice as a way of conferring objective status to ethics fails to bypass the issue of observationality. A closer look at some other aspects of Quine's philosophy will make this clear.

The way to understand Quine's ethical view is to recognize that he sees ethics much in the same way as he sees translation. Quine questions the very notion of a determinately correct translation or an intersubjective meaning corresponding to different languages, or even between two speakers of the same language. This he calls "the indeterminacy of translation". The indeterminacy of translation is a thesis which deals with the methodology of science, and thus epistemology. Essentially, Quine is telling us how he thinks epistemology should be done. He argues to the effect that in epistemology we should not assume that propositions are being preserved when we translate from one language to another. Quine does not deny that translation can be done. For Quine there is no problem with translation. Rather, he denies that translation

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[99] Ibid., 74.

can be explained by reference to sentential meanings:

> It is not a problem of untranslatable sentences. Some will be clearly untranslatable. 'Neutrinos lack mass' is untranslatable into the English of 1930. Nor is it a problem of multiple translatability. Whenever there is an English translation at all, holophrastically acceptable by whatever standard as yet undefined, there will normally be many -- namely, all the other English sentences that agree holophrastically in meaning with that one, again by whatever standard as yet undefined. No, it is just the lack of a standard of sameness of meaning itself, within our language or between languages....[100]

In the translation of one language to another, there is no realm of propositions which each sentence of a language refers to. As a result, the linguist must rely on behaviour in order to translate, not on propositions.

Quine expresses an analogous attitude towards ultimate values:

> When we set about comparing moralities from culture to culture, assessing variations and seeking the common core, we may begin by considering how to separate the native's moral values from his other values, how much of what he does or refrains from doing is attributable to mistaken notions of causal efficacy on his part, and accountable therefore to misguided prudence rather than to moral scruples? He may believe in so full a complement of supernatural sanctions as to leave no scope for moral values as distinct from prudential ones. In this event we can do no better than recur to our derivative concepts of the morality of a society, as distinct from that of an individual. The question then becomes that of determining what behavior is implemented by socially established rewards and penalties. This standard will fail us too, however, if the society is so successfully indoctrinated regarding supernatural sanctions that no social enforcement is called for. At this point the most we can do is compare the native's acts with ours in situations where ours qualify as

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[100] W.V. Quine, *From Stimulus to Science* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995) 78-9.

moral acts by our own lights.[101]

When making ethical evaluations, all we can do is observe others' behaviour and compare it with ours in what we take to be similar moral situations. We can only applaud or reprehend others' actions according to our own moral standards. There is no objective realm of values that we can refer to in order to tell us what is right and wrong, any more than there is an objective realm of propositions to which we can appeal in order to discriminate between good and bad translation.

Just as we are able to expect smooth communication despite the fact that we lack a standard of sameness of meaning, so we are able to expect uniformity in moral values, despite a lack of objective standards of morality:

> There must remain some ultimate ends, unreduced and so unjustified. Happily these, once identified, would tend to be widely accepted. For we may expect a tendency to uniformity in the hereditary component of morality, whatever it may be, and also, since the basic problems of societies are much alike, we may expect considerable agreement in the socially imposed component when it is reduced to fundamentals. Even in the extreme case where [moral] disagreement extends irreducibly to ultimate moral ends, the proper counsel is not one of pluralistic tolerance.[102]

So Quine thinks that despite their lack of justification, there are some ultimate values which should be endorsed while others should be condemned:

> One's disapproval of gratuitous torture, for example, easily withstands one's failure to make a causal reduction, and so be it. We can still call the good good and the bad bad, and hope with Stevenson that these epithets may work their emotive weal. In an extremity we can fight,

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[101] Quine, *NMV* 62-3.

[102] Ibid., 64-5.

> if the threat to the ultimate value in question outweighs the disvalue of the fighting.[103]

This passage is important because it reveals that even in the case of ultimate moral ends, our approval or disapproval of certain values rests ultimately on emotive considerations and our own moral standards.[104] In the case of moral disagreement, we can express our approval or disapproval of certain values, and try to convince the other person that we are right (or "in an extremity" we can fight). This is what Quine means when he says that we can only judge the morality of an act by our own moral standards.

For Quine, the difference between ethics and physics, like the difference between translation and physics, is that there is no ultimate parameter in ethics whereas in physics there is one. Consider what he says about physics:

> There is no legitimate first philosophy, higher or firmer than physics, to which to appeal over physicists' heads. Even our appreciation of the partial arbitrariness or under-determination of our overall theory of nature is not a higher-level intuition; it is integral to our under-determined theory of nature itself, and of ourselves as natural objects. So we go on reasoning and affirming as best we can within our ever under-determined and evolving theory of nature, the best one that we can muster at any one time; and it is usually redundant to cite the theory as parameter of our assertions, since no higher standard offers.[105]

In science, theory is the ultimate parameter, everything is done for the sake of some ulterior end

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[103] Ibid.

[104] Note that Quine's notion of "our own moral standards" differs from Wittgenstein's notion of a personal moral attitude in the sense that where Wittgenstein sees ethical attitudes as transcendental, Quine construes moral standards behaviourally, as a result of innate preferences plus any moral training we may have received.

[105] W.V. Quine, "Reply to Chomsky" in *Words and Objections*, eds. Donald Davidson and Jaakko Hintikka (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company) 303.

-- truth or prediction. By contrast, in ethics, there is no ulterior end. We could express the normative element of ethics if, as Quine notes, we could view it as aimed at reward in heaven. The lack of any such ultimate checkpoint for ethics, however, distinguishes ethics from science. We can check the truth of scientific statements against the facts of scientific theory *via* observation statements. But there is no ultimate checkpoint for ethics aside from our own moral standards.

Ethics is also like the indeterminacy of translation in that it occurs within science, but it endures an additional underdetermination:

> Thus, adopt for now my fully realistic attitude toward electrons and muons and curved space-time, thus falling in with the current theory of the world despite knowing that it is in principle methodologically under-determined. Consider, from this realistic point of view, the totality of truths of nature, known and unknown, observable and unobservable, past and future. The point about the indeterminacy of translation is that it *withstands even all this truth, the whole truth about nature* (added emphasis). This is what I mean by saying that, where indeterminacy of translation applies, there is no real question of right choice; there is no fact of the matter even to *within* the acknowledged under-determination of a theory of nature.[106]

Translation undergoes an additional underdetermination because in linguistics there is no ultimate parameter -- there is no realm of propositions to which the linguist can refer in order to get the objective meaning of a sentence. And likewise for ethics. There is no ultimate parameter to which we can refer in order to determine ultimate values. If we consider again the judgment "That's outrageous", or other moral judgments like "That's cruel", or "That's evil", we want to say that they are expressions which say of something, that it is bad. However, there

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[106] Ibid.

is no way for us to construct a normative theory about morals unless there is something higher for us to appeal to.

Since Quine sees ethics in much the same way as he sees translation, as being doubly underdetermined, it becomes clear that there cannot be, as Flanagan wants, a parallel between ethics and epistemology at the normative level. For Quine:

> ...normative epistemology is a branch of engineering. It is the technology of truth seeking, or, in a more cautiously epistemological term, prediction. Like any technology, it makes free use of whatever scientific findings may suit its purpose....There is no question here of ultimate value, as in morals; it is a matter of efficacy for an ulterior end, truth or prediction. The normative here, as elsewhere in engineering, becomes descriptive when the terminal parameter is expressed.[107]

In ethics, on the other hand, no such parameter is available, and the parallel between ethics and epistemology that Flanagan wants to uphold breaks down.

Flanagan does not consider the difference of parameters in science and ethics to be a convincing case for Quine's contrast between science and ethics.[108] In his view:

> ...it is hard to see why allowing one part of our ethical conception to bottom out in such a bald fact engenders lack of justification -- especially since science's bottoming out in similarly bald facts is taken by Quine...to ground its justifications.... It seems simply stipulative to suggest that the values that guide science and normative epistemology, as we know them, are unproblematic 'ulterior ends' -- some sort of 'descriptive terminal parameter' specified by nature in the way our values would be specified by God if there was a God.[109]

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[107] Quine, "Reply to Morton White" 665.

[108] See Flanagan, "Reply to Gibson and Quine" 548-9.

[109] Ibid., 549.

However, on Quine's behalf, we might note that the contrast between ethics and science is no more stipulative than the contrast between translation and physics. Quine's discussion of the indeterminacy of translation is negative in intention. It is meant to clear the ground for epistemology. Quine is telling us how he thinks epistemology should be done, specifically, without appeal to the notion of "meaning". Because there is no ultimate realm of propositions to appeal to, translation becomes indeterminate. Unlike science, translation is doubly underdetermined. And similarly in the case of ethics. It is doubly underdetermined. (There is no ultimate parameter to appeal to in order to determine ultimate values.) Just as translation cannot be done by appeal to meanings, so ethics cannot be done by trying to appeal to something more objective like practice. Quine blocks off the route that Flanagan attempts to take in order to establish normative ethics. According to Quine, Flanagan is similar to the person who would do epistemology using the notion of meaning.

It seems, then, that there is in fact a way open for Quine to contrast scientific and ethical discourse. By looking at ethics in light of Quine's thesis of the indeterminacy of translation, it is clear that both translation and ethics lack an ultimate parameter and are doubly underdetermined. Most importantly, the thesis of the indeterminacy of translation reveals how Quine thinks epistemology should be done, thus ruling out ethics in the style of Flanagan. Flanagan's reformulation of Quine's ethics fails to undercut the thesis that we can judge our values "only by our moral standards themselves." Quine was aware of a possible misinterpretation of his indeterminacy of translation thesis. This led him to ask: "May we conclude that translational synonymy at its worst is no worse off than physics?"[110] Flanagan in

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[110] W.V. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press) 75.

effect asks the same question of ethics: Can we conclude that the methodological infirmity of ethics is no worse off than the underdetermination of physical theory? The response Quine provides answers not only his own question, but Flanagan's as well: "To be thus reassured is to misjudge the parallel."[111]

[111] Ibid.

## V *Wittgenstein: From a Transcendental Point of View*

Don't *for heaven's sake*, be afraid of talking nonsense!
But you must pay attention to your nonsense.

-Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*

Regarding Wittgenstein's and Quine's ethical views, there is a tendency to resist the picture that there are no ethical facts, and to take ethical sentences and scientific sentences to have equivalent epistemological status. We have just seen that for Quine ethics undergoes an additional underdetermination on top of the underdetermination of our theory about the world, one that blocks ethics from the objective status that science enjoys. For him, the difference between ethical statements and scientific statements is one that "develops and defines itself only with the systematic further development of science. As our scientific theory is constructed, and we're finding that we can predict all sorts of observables, we find that these particular [ethical or aesthetic] observation sentences aren't figuring in that network. It's after the construction of the theory that we are drawing the invidious line that puts them beyond the pale."[112]

Wittgenstein, on the other hand, rejects the very *attempt* to assimilate ethics into a theory: "I would", he says, "reject every significant description that anybody could possibly suggest, *ab initio* on the ground of its significance."[113] This has been challenged by many commentators on the grounds that Wittgenstein gives no good reasons for thinking ethics ineffable. Thus, P.M.S. Hacker writes: "The argument for the ineffability of ethics is tenuous

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[112] "Interview with Willard Van Orman Quine", 204.

[113] Wittgenstein, *LE* 11.

to say the least, it hangs on nothing more than the non-contingency of the ethical, a point asserted rather than argued."[114] In the same vein, E.D. Klemke writes that: "Wittgenstein's 'Lecture on Ethics' is of no worth whatever for ethical inquiry, and that the manner of philosophizing which it exhibits is despicable."[115]

Against this view, I will argue that to look at Wittgenstein's view of ethics *as an argument* is to trivialize its importance. Wittgenstein's view of ethics is an example of a special sort of philosophical reflection. It is not the minor details that interest Wittgenstein, but a philosophical perspective. If we look at him as giving an ethical theory, we will get very little out of what he says. Wittgenstein is trying to get us to see ethics in a non-scientific way. The uncovering of confusions involved in the search for an ethical theory and in the puzzlement that gives rise to this search lies deep within Wittgenstein's view of ethics and his refusal to give ethics a factual standing. This is where, for Wittgenstein, the source and the profundity of ethics lies. The "Lecture" is an attempt to help us recognize the feelings which give rise to ethical speculation and to show that the speculations to which they give rise are utterly nonsensical.

In "Wittgenstein's Lecture on Ethics", E.D. Klemke formulates and criticizes what he takes to be Wittgenstein's argument for the ineffability of ethics. He takes Wittgenstein to be arguing as follows: (1) No statements of fact can ever be or imply statements of absolute value. Moreover (2) all significant judgments are factually descriptive. Hence (3) there can be no significant ethical propositions. In three pages, Klemke examines what he takes to be the premises which support this view, and claims that they "contain silly views, rest on erroneous

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[114] P.M.S. Hacker, *Insight and Illusion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972) 83.

[115] Klemke, "Wittgenstein's Lecture on Ethics" 127.

conceptions or reveal confusion."[116] As a result, his main contention is that:

> ...if it is true that no reasons can be given for absolute judgments of value, then it is up to the philosopher who maintains this to argue for his position and to provide good reasons for this philosophical thesis. But as I have emphasized throughout, Wittgenstein does not provide any arguments or reasons.[117]

Klemke contends that Wittgenstein's "Lecture" rests upon two main assumptions "both of which are unfounded dogmas, albeit among the most widely held dogmas of our time."[118] The first is a superficial and narrow criterion of meaningfulness according to which a statement is meaningful if and only if it is factual; the second is the assumption of a rigid dichotomy between fact and value, where value statements cannot have factual content or imply factual statements and conversely, factual statements cannot contain value or imply value statements. By arguing against these two 'dogmas', Klemke concludes that "Wittgenstein's 'Lecture on Ethics' is of no worth whatever for ethical inquiry, and...the manner of philosophizing which it exhibits is despicable."[119]

Wittgenstein would surely regard Klemke's objections as shallow.[120] His view of ethics is motivated by a deep concern for the source and significant nature of ethical problems; he is

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[116] Ibid., 118.

[117] Ibid., 126.

[118] Ibid., 124.

[119] Ibid., 127.

[120] A remark made by Wittgenstein reveals his attitude towards philosophical discussion very clearly: "A good objection helps one forward, a shallow objection, even if it is valid, is wearisome.... The objection does not seize the matter by its root, where the life is, but so far outside that nothing can be rectified, even if it is wrong." Quoted in Ray Monk, *The Duty of Genius* (New York: Vintage, 1991) 259.

trying to show us how confusion arises when we look for explanations in ethics. His point in the "Lecture" is not that expressions of absolute value are trivial and therefore should be brushed aside. Rather, he is urging that absolute value is altogether different from scientific facts. He is not dismissing real ethical quandaries, but is attempting to do something deeper, namely, put an end to metaphysical speculation about ethics. If we regard him as putting forth a theory or an argument for the ineffability of ethics, rather than as trying to expose the nonsensicality of ethical discourse, we miss an important component of his philosophy and are likely to land in the confusions against which he cautions us. To appreciate the root of the problem that Wittgenstein is addressing in his attempt to avoid theorizing about ethics, we need to look past the details and try to grasp his philosophical stance.

In the "Lecture", as in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein is trying to compel us to see the metaphysical temptations to which we are inclined, and how they lead us to say nonsensical things. As Wittgenstein writes in a letter to von Ficker, the Preface and the concluding remarks of the *Tractatus* are key: "The book's point is an ethical one.... I would recommend you to read the *preface* and the *conclusion*, because they contain the most direct expression of the point of the book."[121] In the preface of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein expresses his intentions this way:

> The book deals with the problems of philosophy, and shows, I believe, that the reason why these problems are posed is that the logic of our language is misunderstood. The whole sense of the book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.[122]

This sheds important light on the views expressed in the "Lecture". For Wittgenstein, the task

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[121] Engelmann, *Letters to Ludwig Wittgestein: With a Memoir* 143-4.

[122] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, pg. 3.

of philosophy is to show what cannot be said by stating clearly what can be said. The limiting of language to what can be said, that is, to propositions of natural science, is not done to belittle the ethical expressions which transcend the boundary of facts. It is done in order to bring us to realize the inadequacy of factual discourse with respect to our deepest impulses. The feeling that prompts us to thrust against the limits of language is what resists factual expression. This is where the depth of ethics lies and what we must remain silent about if we are to avoid lapsing into incoherence. Wittgenstein expresses this point most clearly at the end of the *Tractatus*:

> The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science -i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy- and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions. Although it would not be satisfying to the other person -he would not have the feeling that we were teaching him philosophy- *this* method would be the only strictly correct one.[123]

This passage is revealing. It is indicative of the method Wittgenstein uses in the "Lecture" to show the nonsensicality of ethical propositions. He tries to make us aware of our desire to thrust against the limits of language and thus to engage in metaphysical discourse. Once we are aware of this tendency, he shows us that all ethical propositions are a misuse of language. In the "Lecture", Wittgenstein makes many attempts to say something metaphysical about ethics, only to show that there is nothing in the world, no fact, that corresponds to these propositions. Most importantly, he recognizes that when we engage in metaphysical discourse, that is, when we attempt to transcend the limits of language, we feel that we are talking about something important and something meaningful, as in the case of ethics. He realizes that it is not satisfying

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[123] Ibid., 6.53.

to learn that there is nothing which corresponds to our ethical utterances, because we feel that we are talking about something significant. But if we are to avoid confusion about ethics we must avoid running up against the limits of language. We must therefore say nothing except what can be said.

At the beginning of the "Lecture" Wittgenstein expresses a difficulty which "adheres to most lengthy philosophical lectures":[124]

> [T]hat the hearer is incapable of seeing both the road he is led and the goal which it leads to. That is to say: he either thinks: 'I understand all he says, but what on earth is he driving at' or else he thinks 'I see what he's driving at, but how on earth is he going to get there.' All I can do is again to ask you to be patient and to hope that in the end you may see both the way and where it leads to.[125]

The way in which Wittgenstein leads us to recognize the nonsensicality of ethical expressions in the "Lecture" is important for an accurate understanding of "what he's driving at", and hence his ethical standpoint. Wittgenstein wants to get us to appreciate a particular philosophical view. He tries to show us the nonsensicality of ethical expressions by demonstrating how we misuse language. He does not attempt to provide an argument for the inexpressibility of ethics. Given Klemke's reading of the "Lecture", the objections he raises do indeed seem valid; if we look at the "Lecture" as an argument, we shall have to concede that Wittgenstein does not provide positive reasons for resisting ethical theorizing. But if we recognize that he is trying to show us what goes wrong when we do attempt to give explanations in ethics, we shall see that Klemke's objections miss the point Wittgenstein is trying to express. These objections will then seem

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[124] Wittgenstein, *LE* 4.

[125] Ibid.

shallow because they do not get at the root of the problem of ethics. They fail to come to grips with the way in which Wittgenstein attempted to express his views.

An important aspect of Wittgenstein's ethical view which can be overlooked if we simply read him as denying that some fact or state of affairs constitutes an absolute good, is his interest in our *tendency* to thrust against the limits of language, a tendency which gives rise to the search for explanations of ethics. Although Wittgenstein wants to put an end to metaphysics, he has a deep respect for what motivates metaphysical discourse. This is revealed in a remark he made to M. O'C. Drury: "Don't think that I despise metaphysics. I regard some of the great philosophical writings of the past as among the noblest works of the human mind."[126] This feeling is very clearly revealed at the very end of the "Lecture" when Wittgenstein says:

> Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.[127]

Klemke acknowledges this remark in his summary of the "Lecture" but makes no further reference to it. Failing to take into account the significance of this remark, he misses an important aspect of Wittgenstein's ethical standpoint. If we do not acknowledge the reverence that Wittgenstein held for ethics, his ethical view begins to take on a positivistic tone. In particular, Klemke seems to regard Wittgenstein as a positivistic thinker when he claims that Wittgenstein is using the term "factual" in an outdated and restricted sense, "according to which

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[126] Rhees, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: Personal Recollections* 93.

[127] Wittgenstein, *LE* 12.

a statement is meaningful if and only if it is factual (where 'factual' encompasses both ordinary statements designating states of affairs as well as the statements of science)."[128]

It is clear that there is an important difference between Wittgenstein's view and the positivist's view. As Engelmann says:

> Positivism holds -and this is its essence- that what we can speak about is all that matters in life. *Whereas Wittgenstein passionately believes that all that really matters in human life is precisely what, in his view, we must be silent about.* When he nevertheless takes immense pains to delimit the unimportant [i.e. the scope and limits of ordinary language], it is not the coastline of that island which he is bent on surveying with such meticulous accuracy, but the boundary of the ocean.[129]

In this connection it is worth noting the parable Norman Malcolm mentions in his memoir of Wittgenstein as told by Wittgenstein. This illustrates clearly Wittgenstein's distance from positivistic views:

> Imagine that there is a town in which the policemen are required to obtain information from each inhabitant, e.g. his age, where he came from, and what work he does. A record is kept of this information and some use is made of it. Occasionally when a policeman questions an inhabitant he discovers that the latter does not do *any* work. The policeman enters this fact on the record, because *this* too is a useful piece of information about the man![130]

Malcolm explains the parable as follows:

> The application of the parable is, I think, that if you do not understand a statement, then to discover that it has no verification is an important

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[128] Klemke, "Wittgenstein's Lecture on Ethics" 124-5.

[129] Engelmann, *Letters From Wittgenstein: With a Memoir* 97. Engelmann's italics.

[130] Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984) 55.

> piece of information about it and makes you understand it better. That is to say, you understand it *better*; you do not find out that there is nothing to understand.[131]

This makes it clear that Wittgenstein's attempt to show that ethics is non-factual is not just the result of his holding a narrow and restricted criterion of factual meaningfulness. That ethical statements cannot be verified is essential to understanding ethics. By trying to show us that there are no ethical facts, Wittgenstein is trying to help us to understand ethics better. In the "Lecture", Wittgenstein brings us to see that we *cannot* speak of ethics in a clear way. This is why he makes ethics supernatural: it is a way of cutting off all explanation. This same idea also occurs in *Culture and Value*: "What is good is also divine. Queer as it sounds, that sums up my ethics. Only something supernatural can express the Supernatural."[132] Ethics cannot be explained by ordinary discourse, because ordinary discourse can only describe facts. Wittgenstein wants to bring us to accept this view by showing us how confusion results when we blur the distinction between fact and value. So, Wittgenstein does accept a distinction between fact and value. But it is something he tries to bring us to see, rather than something for which he gives arguments.

Klemke points out that:

> [E]ven if there are certain statements of absolute value which must be known to be true by intuition or rational inspection, it would not follow that these propositions are without significance. Nor would it follow that these propositions are non-factual, unless one uses the term 'factual' in a narrow and unwarranted sense, a sense which perhaps rests upon an out-dated and restricted criterion of factual

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[131] Ibid.

[132] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch, ed. G.H. von Wright (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980) 3.

meaningfulness. [133]

Wittgenstein does not provide arguments for his distinction between fact and value, but given the importance he places behind this distinction, his ethical view must not be dismissed as 'silly' solely on this ground. The eviction of ethical propositions from the realm of factual discourse is not just the result of 'an out-dated and restricted' view of factual meaningfulness. The force behind the fact/value distinction comes rather from the recognition that when we speak about a fact and when speak about value, we are speaking about two different kinds of things, two different kinds of discourse, and there is confusion in the attempt to assimilate them.

Given the fact/value distinction, we can speak about two different kinds of sentences: descriptive and evaluative. Descriptive sentences describe how things are, they are justified by empirical evidence. Truth and falsity, then, are paramount to factual discourse. Evaluative sentences, on the other hand – in this case sentences about absolute value – are justified by judgments and evaluations. Here, truth and falsity have no purpose. Wittgenstein resists granting factual status to evaluative statements because it makes no sense to do so. Our ethical utterances do not describe how things are, they are rather attitudes rooted in how things *should* be. They describe our emotions, evaluations, or judgements towards how things are. The force behind the fact/value distinction stems from this difference between facts and values. If we were to treat ethical statements as facts, then those statements would fail to be ethical statements at all. That is, if ethical statements were put on a factual level, then there would be no room for judgment or evaluation; ethical statements, like scientific statements would merely be describing how things are, rather than how we feel or judge they should be.

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[133] Klemke, "Wittgenstein's Lecture on Ethics" 126.

If the distinction between fact and value is blurred, then we put expressions of value on a level where evaluations and judgments are irrelevant. In this way, the very essence of our ethical utterances is undermined. This is what Wittgenstein means when he says that expressions of value involve going beyond significant language or that we run up against the limits of language.[134] Our justifications for our ethical utterances involve something that cannot be found on the level of scientific facts, but rather consist in our judgments and evaluations. If we recall one of the examples Wittgenstein uses in the "Lecture" to illustrate what he means by absolute or ethical value, this becomes very clear. Wittgenstein shares a common experience: the feeling that we get when we 'wonder at the existence of the world'. For Wittgenstein, this feeling is aroused by a walk on a fine summer's day; for others, the feeling may be inspired by a different situation. Clearly, it would make no sense to ask the truth value of the statement "How wondrous that anything should exist!" We use ethical expressions in situations where it makes sense to do so. Evaluative discourse is not a description of how things are, but rather reflects our feelings, judgments and evaluations *about* a particular state of affairs. Because it only makes sense to talk about scientifically verifiable facts with reference to truth or falsity, Wittgenstein restricts significant language to factual discourse. Ethical judgments, on the other hand, are justified in a completely different way. Wittgenstein believes that this is where philosophers begin to run into confusion. By attempting to assimilate ethical discourse to a factual level, philosophers are burdened with trying to assess the truth value of ethical expressions in the same way as scientific statements. Because facts and values are two different kinds of things, what results are many confused theories about ethics. The fact/value distinction

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[134] Wittgenstein, "Lecture on Ethics" 11.

acknowledges these different methods of justification, and so by limiting discourse to facts alone, Wittgenstein attempts to stop the confusion between different kinds of discourse.

Klemke, on the other hand, wants to use "facts" in a wider sense than Wittgenstein will accept because he takes ethical utterances to have significance just as factual statements do. He states that ethical utterances may have meaning in the same way that factual ones do in that they state facts of an ethical kind. As a result, Klemke denies the distinction between descriptive and evaluative discourse:

> We are told that in factual or descriptive discourse we are able (1) to describe in statements and then (2) to give reasons for our statements. But, one might ask, is this not true in evaluative discourse too? Do we not also (1) describe and (2) give reasons for our statements? For example, suppose *A* says "Jones is a good man" and *B* asks "Why?" Then *A* answers "Because of such and such." Or if *A* says "That was not the right thing to do" and *B* says "I don't see why not," then *A* might answer "Because of the following reasons..." Since *A* is able to both describe and give reasons, I fail to see why his utterances must be condemned as outcasts from the realm of factual discourse.[135]

Klemke claims that both types of sentences involve describing the statement and giving reasons for the statement. Yet while we may grant that this is true of both types of sentences, it is still not clear that we can justify or give reasons for factual statements and evaluative statements in the same way.

Klemke's expansion of Wittgenstein's notion of "factual" does not require that a fact depend on scientific explanation. He says:

> Even if there are some propositions of absolute value which must be known to be true by intuition or rational inspection, it would not follow that these propositions are without significance. Nor would it follow that these propositions are non-factual....[136]

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[135] Klemke, "Wittgenstein's Lecture on Ethics" 126.

[136] Ibid.

So, we may discern the truth value of evaluative statements in ways other than the traditional scientific method. In this way, by claiming that we can both describe and are able to give reasons (scientific or otherwise) for both descriptive and evaluative statements, Klemke allows evaluative statements to be significant just as descriptive statements are.

We could perhaps, as Klemke allows, accept intuition or rational inspection rather than scientific evidence as a reason to believe"Stealing is wrong", but the question becomes whether we can accept intuition or rational inspection as an authority about the truth or falsity of statements of absolute value. We would need some kind of account of how intuition works. If we were to say "My intuition tells me there is a book on the table", no one would accept the statement "There is a book on the table"; we would expect to be able to verify that statement with empirical evidence. Even if an account of intuition could be given, if there is no distinction between factual and evaluative sentences, as Klemke claims, then the methods of reasoning should be interchangeable between the two sentences, which clearly they are not. If the two kinds of sentences must be treated differently, that is, if they do in fact require different methods of justification, then Klemke's attempt to get rid of the fact/value distinction does not seem convincing.

In addition, the objection that certain statements of absolute value *can* be significant helps us to understand Wittgenstein's view because this objection displays the very tendency that Wittgenstein is attempting to combat. According to Klemke, even if there are no corresponding scientific facts which can tell us that an expression of absolute value is true or false, we could arrive at its truth or falsity through intuition or rational inspection. He claims that ethical utterances may have meaning in the same way that factual ones do, i.e., they state facts of an ethical kind. This is anathema to Wittgenstein's anti-scientistic point of view. For him, reference to intuition or rational

inspection gets us nowhere. There are no objective procedures for arriving at conclusions in matters of ethics. Ethical utterances cannot say anything about objective reality because there are no ethical facts: the ethical facts that Klemke offers have not been thought out, nor can they be. Further, to try to assimilate ethics to facts is to misconstrue the significance of ethics. Hence Wittgenstein's confinement of ethics to the supernatural; it blocks off any way of theorizing about ethics.

Whereas Klemke talks as if there *are* absolute values, Wittgenstein thinks "nothing we could ever think or say should be *the* thing."[137] When we attempt to give an explanation of absolute value, we lapse into incoherence. The idea that there is some one particular thing corresponding to our expressions of absolute value is, Wittgenstein is saying, nonsensical. By claiming that expressions of absolute value say something true or false about objective reality, Klemke ends up transgressing what Wittgenstein takes to be the limits of language. This is precisely what Wittgenstein wants to avoid, what he would say is nonsensical.

I have been suggesting that Klemke's criticisms of Wittgenstein's "Lecture" do not warrant the conclusion that the "Lecture" is one of the shoddiest things ever written about ethics.[138] This conclusion is unwarranted because it is a result of reading Wittgenstein's "Lecture" as an argument whereas Wittgenstein is not interested in arguing for his point of view, but in insinuating a different philosophical perspective. To illustrate this point, it is interesting to consider this passage from *The Duty of Genius*:

> To one who did not share his fundamental outlook, his utterances -- whether on logic or on ethics-- would, as likely as not, remain unintelligible.... When Russell told him he ought not simply to state

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[137] Wittgenstein, *LE* 7.

[138] Klemke, "Wittgenstein's Lecture on Ethics" 118.

> what he thought, but should also provide arguments for it, he replied that arguments would spoil its beauty. He would feel as if he were dirtying a flower with muddy hands.[139]

It is clear that Wittgenstein thought about ethics as too important a subject to debate about with arguments. This must be read into everything that Wittgenstein says about ethics. If we only consider the minor arguments, we miss the importance of the view.

The problem of ethics is a deep one for Wittgenstein and he is interested in getting at the root of it. By showing that ethics cannot be solved by the methods of science, he aims to put a stop to the confusions that result from ethical theorizing. In this way, Klemke's objections are shallow objections. They do not "seize the matter by its root, where the life is". Wittgenstein is adamant about rejecting any theory about ethics, and this idea must also be applied to the "Lecture" -- that here Wittgenstein is not putting forth a theory of ethics. This is very important. Wittgenstein is trying to show us that we cannot approach the subject of ethics scientifically. Ethics is transcendental and must be considered from a transcendental standpoint. It is essential that we do not take *this* to be a theory either. Wittgenstein is not trying to put forth a mystical ethical philosophy. We must recognize the importance of ethics and the significance of its transgression of the bounds of ordinary language. But this is where Wittgenstein stops. We must remain silent about ethics because to try to describe it would be to go beyond ordinary discourse. When we begin to talk about ethics we confuse matters; we begin to speak as if there really is something which corresponds to absolute value.

I have tried to show that although Wittgenstein does not seem to provide arguments for

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[139] Monk, *The Duty of Genius* (New York: Vintage, 1991) 54.

his views, they do not simply rest on unfounded dogmas as Klemke claims. It is not clear that Wittgenstein assumed a restricted and out-dated criterion of meaningfulness, nor is it clear that he simply assumes a rigid dichotomy between fact and value. His ethical views should not therefore be rejected on the grounds that he has not provided any good reasons for his view. Klemke's article is helpful in understanding Wittgenstein's ethical view because we see him attempting to do the very thing Wittgenstein questions. If we try to pick out arguments in what Wittgenstein says and attempt to show that they do not work, it is easy to simply put his views aside and declare them to be erroneous. I have tried to show that this is not the way to read Wittgenstein's views on ethics, and that if we look beyond the minor points and look at ethics from his philosophical perspective, we achieve a better understanding of the purpose of his remarks. When looked at in this way, we see the depth and the importance of his ethical stance.

## *Conclusion*

Quine and Wittgenstein represent two extreme ways of doing ethics. The common themes that have run through the last five chapters, while revealing points of affinity, have at the same time revealed profound differences in temperament. Both Quine and Wittgenstein have complete philosophical systems, with which their ethical views are remarkably consistent, and it is only when we look at their whole philosophical frameworks that we can see they are doing something entirely different. Wittgenstein is concerned with the pseudo-activity of seeking philosophical explanations. In a sense, that is also what Quine is concerned with. But where Quine's interest is in the explanations that are possible within a behaviourist, physicalist and naturalistic framework, Wittgenstein's preoccupation lies in the exposure of the confusions involved in the search for explanations and in the problems that give rise to them. This is nonsensical for Wittgenstein, and simply false for Quine.

There are many points of similarity in Quine's "On the Nature of Moral Values" and in Wittgenstein's "Lecture on Ethics". I have attempted to show that if we take the two essays on ethics, and compare certain points, it is easy to pick out many comparable conclusions. But what is most interesting is not these similarities but rather the deep differences which exist between Quine and Wittgenstein, despite the similarity of some aspects of their ethical views.

According to both philosophers, the only genuine propositions are the propositions of science, aesthetic values are placed in among moral values, there are no absolute ethical values, and ethics lacks the objective status of science. I'll go through these points.

Quine's and Wittgenstein's respective views on science bear importantly on their ethical views. Both take the only genuine propositions to be those of science, and as a result, resist

incorporating ethics into scientific theory. But what is more interesting is that although their views about ethics coincide in this respect, their common ideas anchor a departure of two extreme philosophical directions.

Underlying Quine's conceptual scheme is simplicity and economy of thought. There is no distinctive philosophical subject matter or method, hence, philosophy is continuous with science and philosophical problems are to be dealt with in scientific terms. Ethics, then, is also treated scientifically. There is no realm of values which exist on a different level than the realm of phenomena. Everything is described using the objective language of science. For Quine, philosophy of science is philosophy enough.

For Wittgenstein, on the other hand, the division between philosophy and science is fundamental. The answers to scientific questions are of no interest to philosophy. What is important is not science, but rather the questions science cannot explain. However, Wittgenstein asserts that many of the questions we find important or meaningful are nonsensical questions. This is the case with ethics. Scientific answers to empirical problems about ethics are of no interest to philosophy -- how such questions are answered is of no concern to the philosopher. The attempt to solve ethical questions scientifically is only a source of confusion because there are no facts which correspond to ethical propositions. In this sense, ethics is transcendental. When we attempt to go beyond the facts and to theorize about ethics, we begin to do metaphysics and Wittgenstein resists this.

Secondly, both Quine's and Wittgenstein's notion of ethics includes aesthetics. For Quine, aesthetic and moral values stand on the same ground because both are an outcome of the irritations to our surfaces and of our innate moral and aesthetic beginnings. Moreover, both are

subject to the transmutation of means into ends. Quine places the individual within the world, and offers a naturalistic account of the causes of our absolute and moral judgments. Wittgenstein, by contrast, sees the aesthetic and the moral point of view as "views from the outside". The good life, like a work of art is the adoption of a certain attitude towards the world. It is a way of looking at things, and is not something that refers to something in the world. In this sense, ethical and aesthetic judgments are transcendental.

Thirdly, there are no absolute values. For Quine, values are irreducibly social. Moral acts are inextricably bound to social values -- what is good is what is inculcated by society. By virtue of their social character, moral values are typically uniform from person to person and by virtue of this uniformity we tend to ascribe an absolute quality to moral values. In this way, values can be explained anthropologically. Because values are irreducibly social for Quine, their uniformity or "absolute" character is no mystery.

Wittgenstein agrees that we can explain the acquiring of moral values anthropologically, but this is only to explain values in a trivial sense. Unlike Quine, he places tremendous value on our tendency to ascribe absoluteness to moral values. This tendency is something mysterious for Wittgenstein, something of the greatest importance. The tendency is not simply one which results from the harmonious nature of moral values. Rather it arises from an extraordinary feeling; it is prompted by questions which reflect on the meaning of life or the amazement that the world exists. All that is meaningful about ethics is precisely our inability to describe this extraordinary feeling. In this way, Quine and Wittgenstein are talking about two sorts of ethics. Of course for Quine, there is no level beyond the level of facts.

Finally, in "On the Nature of Moral Values", Quine argues that ethics cannot be a

science because it lacks evidential support. To this extent, Quine is in complete agreement with the main point of the "Lecture", namely, that there is no fact which corresponds to "absolute value". Like Wittgenstein, Quine wants to limit enquiry and analysis to what can be firmly established, and this involves using only the language of science. Both philosophers want to purify the language of science -- Wittgenstein to avoid all metaphysical and dogmatic philosophy, Quine to determine what there is. Both envision a clear scientific language and assert that we can only talk about describable facts. But where Wittgenstein starts with a notion of how the world is, i.e. as made up of facts, and then draws a distinction between fact and value, Quine sees no immediate distinction, but rather accepts in his ontology whatever it is necessary to quantify over when speaking about the world. He approaches the question of ethics not from beyond the world, but from the level of the world (and stimulation). For Quine, the link between language and the world is provided by observation sentences. These sentences are the vehicle of scientific evidence. Ethics lacks the objective checkpoints available to science because it lacks observation sentences.

The Quinean approach to philosophical problems is, of course, anathema to Wittgenstein's approach. The problem of ethics is a deep problem for Wittgenstein and he is interested in getting at the root of it. By placing ethics outside of scientific discourse, he aims to put a stop to the confusions that result from ethical theorizing. He adamantly rejects all theories of ethics in order to prevent the lapse into metaphysics. But despite his desire to put an end to metaphysics, he has a deep respect for what motivates metaphysical discourse. His philosophical temperament is entirely different from that of Quine. One could not say of Quine as Carnap says of Wittgenstein:

> His point of view and his attitude toward people and problems, even theoretical problems, were much more similar to those of a creative artist than to those of a scientist; one might almost say, similar to those of a religious prophet or a seer. When he started to formulate his view on some specific philosophical problem, one often felt the internal struggle that occurred in him at that very moment.... When finally, sometimes after a prolonged arduous effort, his answer came forth, his statement stood before us like a newly created piece of art or a divine revelation...the impression he made on us was as if insight came to him as through a divine inspiration, so that we could not help feeling that any sober rational comment or analysis of it would be a profanation.[140]

Both philosophers, then, come at ethics from different philosophical standpoints. What is important for Quine is what science can explain. What is important for Wittgenstein is what science cannot explain and hence what we cannot speak about. Quine strives for simplicity and consistency in all matters of enquiry, and makes no distinction between what can and what cannot be talked about. As a self-proclaimed scientistic philosopher, he has little if any feel for what Wittgenstein is after. His ethical point of view is scientific, whereas Wittgenstein approaches ethics from a transcendental standpoint. Despite sharing the goal of accuracy and clarity, Wittgenstein's motivations for clarity are not those of the scientist. Whereas Quine's aim is to distill scientific discourse in order that we can tell what there is, Wittgenstein's commitment to scientific discourse is a commitment to what lies outside scientific discourse. That is, his drawing of clear boundaries around what can be clearly thought serves as a stimulus for showing what cannot be clearly thought, i.e. ethics. The limiting of discourse to the propositions of science is important for Wittgenstein, not for the sake of science, but for the sake of what lies beyond science. He has a deep respect for our tendency to speak about ethics

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[140] *The Duty of Genius*, 244.

and to go beyond the boundaries of ordinary language. Ethics is a philosophical question, not a scientific one, and for Wittgenstein, the job of the philosopher is not to reduce anything to anything, or to explain anything. It is to limit enquiry to what can be firmly established in order to prevent confusion.

Looking at Quine's and Wittgenstein's ethical views from their respective philosophical standpoints not only makes clear their ethical views, but also helps us to learn something of their respective philosophical frameworks. A comparison of the ethical views of these two thinkers is important not only because it illuminates the thinking of two of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century, but because they both present a pristine view of ethics. Neither Quine nor Wittgenstein have a vision of the human condition, and neither are ethical philosophers. Yet, they both offer an interesting philosophical perspective on ethics.

Neither Quine nor Wittgenstein addresses other arguments from a different point of view and in this sense they are both radical philosophers. It is of no interest to look at their ethical views in isolation and attempt to determine which is the right or the wrong view. The interest is in seeing two great minds at work, and in seeing two extremely different ways of looking at ethics. Neither philosopher provides a solution to our ethical problems but each articulates a distinctive philosophical way of looking at ethics. Where their views coincide, that is, in their agreement on what can be said, their differing philosophical dispositions make no difference. In ethics, which resists incorporation into scientific theory, their differing ways of philosophizing makes all the difference.

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