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Philosophy

Quine, Davidson, and the Naturalization of Metaethics

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Recommended citation

Feleppa, Robert. 2001. Quine, Davidson, and the Naturalization of Metaethics. *Dialectica* Vo. 55, 2: pp. 145-166

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Abstract: Quine's ethical views typify what might seem to be natural sympathies between empiricism and ethical noncognitivism. Like Ayer, he sees a case for noncognitivism rooted in an epistemic discontinuity between ethics and science. Quine argues that the absence of genuine moral observation sentences, and thus the absence of empirical checkpoints for the resolution of theoretical disputes, renders ethics, as he terms it, "methodologically infirm." However, recent papers in this journal make clear that Quine appears to be voicing mutually incompatible commitments to both noncognitivism and cognitivism. Here I argue that Davidson's theory of interpretation offers promising ways to resolve these tensions. His constructive program fleshes out the implications of Quine's largely destructive critique of intensional semantics and contains a fairly well-articulated account of evaluative semantics, one which seems to combine cognitivist and noncognitivist elements harmoniously. Moreover, it is argued that Davidson's long-standing differences with Quine over the epistemological status Quine accords observation sentences do not undermine Quine's metaethical critique.

Like Hume and Ayer before him, Quine's ethical views typify what might seem to be natural sympathies between empiricism and noncognitivism. With Hume, Quine gives reasons to see the attribution of moral value as a projection of moral attitude onto nature, and not the description of natural fact; and, with Ayer, he sees a case for noncognitivism rooted in an epistemic discontinuity between ethics and science. There are no genuine moral observation sentences and thus there are no theoretical disputes. This renders ethics, in Quine's view, "methodologically infirm." However, Quine's naturalized empiricism rests on an epistemic holism that undermines the verificationist doctrines on which epistemic discontinuity is premised. Thus Flanagan (1982) is puzzled that Quine remains so close to Ayer's positivism. Yet, as Gibson (1988a: 167-172; 1998b) and Campbell (1996) argue, Quine seems quite consistent in this point since he impugns only sentence-by-sentence assignments of empirical content, while retaining a holistic notion of content which serves to warrant noncognitivism. Still, holism seems antithetical,

superficially at least, to the kind of fact/value contrast Quine maintains, and perhaps Flanagan's hope for a naturalistic moral realism can be fleshed out in other ways. Recent papers by Broach (1997), and especially Shockley (1998), force the issue, I think, in making it clear that Quine seems to voice mutually incompatible commitments to both noncognitivism and cognitivism.

Here I argue that Davidson's theory of interpretation offers promising ways to resolve these tensions. His constructive program fleshes out the implications of Quine's largely destructive critique of intensional semantics and contains a fairly well-articulated account of evaluative semantics. Moreover, his evaluative semantics seem to combine cognitivist and noncognitivist elements harmoniously. To be sure, Davidson's account does not always square easily with Quine's. Especially troublesome are Davidson's long-standing criticisms regarding the epistemological status Quine accords observation sentences, which evidently play a central role in his metaethics. However, I think these differences can be reconciled and that Quine's epistemological critique can be wedded consistently to a truth-conditional semantics for evaluative sentences, preserving certain important noncognitivist insights and integrating them with cognitivist features that truth-conditional semantics seem to require.

The case for a noncognitivist reading of Quine.

As Quine's notion of an observation sentence is a focal point not only of his , discussions of ethics but also of Davidson's critique of Quine's epistemology, a brief discussion of Quine's critique is in order. On Quine's account the observation sentence is the essential lynchpin in the explanation of scientific objectivity. Observation sentences are such that individuals will affirm them outright when and only when certain stimulation patterns are manifest in their sensory receptors, and deny them when and only when certain other patterns are. These patterns comprise, respectively, these sentences'

affirmative and negative "stimulus meanings." Also, all other competent speakers who are party to the stimulus situation should agree in their verdict concerning a particular observation sentence (1992: 3). These "occasion sentences", so-called because their affirmation or denial depend on circumstances of the occasion of utterance, in turn comprise the "observation categoricals" that constitute a theory's empirical content. These are sentences of the form 'whenever this, then that' where the 'this' and 'that' places are filled by observation sentences. These sentences are central to Quine's naturalistic empiricism in that they provide a way of making sense of the empiricist principle "that our information about the world comes only through impacts on our sensory receptors" (1992: 19). He aims to show how observation provides, as he calls it, a "towline" between nature and theory or, varying the metaphor, he wishes to show how we can view observation sentences as "anchored to sensory neural intake irrespective of their theoretical subject matter" (1993: 1).

These locutions underscore his intention to define the epistemic link between theory and nature as a causal one. The stimulation patterns to which speakers become conditioned to respond are not items of conscious awareness. Quine believes he can dispense with notions more akin to the sense-datum judgment because of his naturalistic rejection of Cartesian foundationalism. He is content that philosophical analysis assists the scientific explanation of how objective scientific knowledge results from sensory stimulation impinging on our sensory receptors. In the process, he avoids problems of fallibility and theory-ladenness that plague other empiricist doctrines. When we consider the observation sentence's function at this stage in the conditioning process, we must regard it, as Quine terms it, "holophrastically". Speakers are conditioned to respond to semantically undivided units which lack referential articulation and, consequently, lack theoretical-ontological commitments. Observation sentences are, Quine says, "Janus faced":

seen from the point view of their "inward face", they are holophrastic items in a conditioning process. When we consider their outward face, we understand them as grammatically structured and theory-laden. The desired empirical attachment to nature is established by reflection on the causal workings of the inward face. Scientific disagreements can be resolved on objective grounds because, despite diverging theoretical commitments and their attendant influence on perception and judgment, scientists are similarly conditioned to respond verbally to certain external stimuli. The holophrastic construal secures an intersubjective towline between nature and theory without imputing intersubjectively shared cognitive content (1993: 110).

By defining observational meaning in terms of what he calls "neural input" to the body, Quine seeks a theoretically neutral reference point, one neutral in two important respects: (1) the information carried in the stimulus is not influenced by the brain's stored information - influence that can be considerable even by the time the stimulus triggers conscious perception; (2) the physical entities he relies on to define stimulus meaning - neural structures - are clearly identifiable. In light of his broad criticisms of traditional semantic notions of meaning for their lacking clear empirical criteria of individuation, it is not surprising that he exercises care in this regard. "It is just at the surface receptors," he remarks, "that the great skein or sheaf of wildly multifarious causal chains from environment to behavior admits of a neat overall cross section. Each causal chain intersects the sensory surface at a sensory receptor, and the subject's sensory receptors are fixed in position, limited in number, and substantially alike" (1993: 115). No such uniformity is found elsewhere in the causal chain of stimulation. He remarks: "the pertinent neural structures and activities within the organism engender disunity and heterogeneity, much as did the things and events in the organism's environment." (Ibid.) Quine sees neural input

points as constituting the only domain that permits clear and theoretically useful description of the link of theory to what it describes.

An important qualification, especially in light of Davidson's critique, is that stimulus meanings can only be identified for individual speakers. Quine has fluctuated over the years on the matter of whether he should be content with only intrasubjective stimulus synonymy. However, his most recent definition of stimulus meaning (reminiscent of Carnap's *The Logical Structure of the World*) refers to the totality of occurrent stimulation patterns at a given moment, rather than some isolable (say, rabbit-shaped) pattern in any specific range of receptors. The affirmative stimulus-meaning of 'Rabbit' is all and only those total-stimulation patterns which one would affirm if queried about the presence of rabbits. This definition clearly precludes any intersubjective matching of stimulus meanings. However, Quine still maintains that the role of the observation sentence in an account of scientific objectivity is established. What is important is that speakers on a specific occasion will agree in their affirmations or denials. We are warranted in believing that natural selection has assured coordination of judgment in such situations, despite interpersonal diversity (1996), Each speaker will affirm a sentence S when and only under certain stimulus conditions. The proximal description of those stimulus conditions may well vary from speaker to speaker, but the account of their conformity – assenting to 'Red' when confronted with red stimulation is not evidently compromised.

Quine's account might seem unattractive in that it is so reminiscent of earlier empiricist doctrines that have fallen by the wayside, given the penetrating critiques of Kuhn and others. However, Quine's critique seems to sidestep Kuhnian strategies that establish epistemic continuity between ethics and science on the grounds that scientific observations are just as theory-laden as moral observations. The important consequence is that scientific disagreements can be resolved on objective grounds because, despite

diverging theoretical commitments and their attendant influence on perception and judgment, scientists are similarly conditioned to respond verbally to certain stimuli.

On the other hand, there are no moral observation sentences and hence no handy checkpoints for the objective resolution of ethical disputes. No common stimulus regulates the learning of evaluative expressions. Although these expressions are learnable by ostension, via a conditioning process parallel in certain respects to the learning of terms describing observable phenomena, there is an important difference: in being conditioned to apply evaluative terms, he argues, "pleasure does double duty, serving also as the similarity basis." That is, "the similarity basis of the term 'good', morally applied, is the reward itself" (1973: 49f.). (Thus emerges a distinctive mark of ethical value for Quine, the "transmutation of means into ends; the good behavior is indulged in, at first as a means to the ethereal end of parental or social approval, and only afterward comes to be valued as an end in itself.") (1981a: 60) [1]

The argument is also effective against White's efforts (1981, 1986) to make emotive factors comprise the observational towline of ethics, thus enabling us to see intuitive ethical judgments as playing an epistemic role akin to that of observation sentences in science. Regular stimulation patterns of immediately internal origin, comprising, say, reactions of revulsion, can provide part of the basis for moral observation sentences. Combined with external stimulation patterns produced by some external event, say, an act of torture, they would comprise the stimulus meaning of 'That is wrong'. Quine responds that these fall short of being genuine observation sentences, because while all occasions of observed torture might cause revulsion, it is not the case that only observed occasions will do so: "revulsion is commonly aroused also by acts that are visibly evil only in the light of collateral information, not generally shared" (1986b: 664). Sometimes neurophysiological reactions associated with revulsion can be interpersonally correlated with patterns in

external sensory receptors. But sometimes the revulsion reaction triggered in one person will not be triggered in another observing the same act, because of differences in prior conditioning or access to pertinent information. The neurophysiological wiring of emotions like revulsion to observation and to linguistic response has a significant shortcoming in light of Quine's epistemological purpose. [2]

The revulsion reaction, and thus the resulting linguistic reaction of moral approbation, will vary significantly from person to person. Differences in reaction will reflect prior differences in conditioning - i.e. differences in theoretical background. But the importance of observation sentences lies in their fit in a causal story that explains nature's ability to arbitrate theoretical disputes. [3]

Another implication is that all that can be said about moral justification is that it is a matter of coherence of principles with intuitive judgments. This is telling against moral realists, such as Boyd, who readily acknowledge that without demonstration of epistemic access to a theory-independent reality a reflective-equilibrium view of justification can sustain neither scientific nor moral realism (1988: 200f.). Methodological infirmity thus undermines an important epistemological component of the moral realism. Being without an evident neutral natural arbiter of theoretical disagreement, we are forced to conclude, Quine argues, that while science still "retains some title to a correspondence theory of truth . . . a coherence theory is evidently the lot of ethics" (1981a: 63). But this is the constructivist, not the moral realist sense of truth. [4]

Moreover, the epistemological case seems to weigh in favor of the semantic thesis of noncognitivism. Quine's exploration of language-learning reveals that learning to evaluate morally is fundamentally a process of encouraging agreement in judgment and consequent action, and not an effort to coordinate judgments about observable surroundings.

Some critics question whether this is consistent with Quine's attack on verificationism. However, Quine's naturalized empiricism consistently resuscitates much of the motivation one finds in Ayer for non-cognitivism, and it is compatible with Quine's own critiques of positivism. Quine does not reject verificationism, but rather replaces it with a more holistic notion (see, e.g., his 1991). This holistic view defines empirical content as a property of groups of interrelated hypotheses and principles rather than of individual ones. Collectives have empirical content insofar as they imply observation categoricals. So to assert "empirical meaningfulness" of a hypothesis is not to talk about its empirical content, but to assert that it plays a substantial role in generating observational categoricals. Its inclusion in a theory has an effect on the theory's observational content. Sentences containing irreducible ethical expressions lack empirical content, that is such sentences do not assist in the implication of observation categoricals. Here, again, non-cognitivism seems the natural consequence, since, for Quine, having meaning is having ascertainable truth conditions, and having ascertainable truth conditions seems to depend on the generation of theoretical empirical content.

Other critics (e.g., Moody-Adams 1990, 1997) find Quine's account unattractive in that they perceive a mistaken implicit presumption of similarity between ethics and science in the framing of epistemological discontinuity critiques. However, the methodological infirmity thesis focuses on something common to both: the existence of disputes involving the assertion of mutually conflicting descriptive sentences. The point of Quine's critique is quite straightforward: whatever the differences between these two kinds of discourse, one's disputes are, in many instances, effectively arbitrated by nature in ways not available to the other.

Quine intends us to see in the learning of evaluative language the roots of our inclinations to regard it as descriptive: both evaluative and descriptive discourse are

learnable by ostension. The child learning 'This is good' is not learning to describe anything, this account tells us, but is instead learning what the adult's attitude is, and is becoming inclined to conform to it. This suggests an account of meaning akin to Stevenson's: 'This is good' means 'I approve of this; do so as well'. This analysis combines a subjectivist description of attitude with an emotive component. Stevenson describes the latter component as a disposition "arising through the history of its usage, to produce (result from) affective responses in people"(1963: 21). It is not surprising, then, that Quine expresses affinity with Stevenson's position (1981a: 65; cf. Bergstrom and Follesdal 1994: 203). This is semantic noncognitivism in the sense that evaluation is viewed as expression of desire or emotion, not belief. It is also natural to identify noncognitivism as the thesis that ethical beliefs have no truth values: in fact, this seems the obvious consequence of denying that they are beliefs, a consequence Quine seems willing to accept (Bergstrom and Follesdal 1994: 202-3). His modified holistic verificationism still largely requires that genuine cognitive sentences assist in the generation of a containing theory's empirical content, and ethical evaluations fail to do this. [5]

The case against a noncognitivist reading.

However, it is not clear that refusal to assign truth value to evaluations is an option Quine really wants to grasp. Indeed, while the noncognitivist's epistemic attack on continuity is typically wedded to semantic theses to the effect that evaluations are not beliefs or that they do not have truth values, this may not be something Quine can easily maintain. In fact one can see tensions in a number of places arising from the verificationist aspects of Quine's account of meaning.

For one thing, if we look at his general views of truth, we find reason to think that the epistemological case against ethics may not suffice, by itself, to establish any antirealist semantics or metaphysics. For despite his well-known contention that our physical theory

of the world is all that we have for the ascertainment of truth, he does not hold an epistemic view of truth. Truth is, for him, a regulative ideal. With Davidson, Quine wants to maintain a commitment to bivalence: sentences that are unverifiable (in the ordinary sense) still have truth values; sentences that seem to hold up all empirical tests can still, nonetheless, be false.

More serious, though, is the fact that Quine is committed to a semantics that analyzes meaning in terms of truth conditions. If, indeed, as he remarks at one point, "I am with Davidson, we are learning truth conditions," (1981 b: 38) what are we learning when we learn to evaluate? Moreover, he also associates having truth conditions with contributing either directly or indirectly to the generation of empirical content, something evaluative sentences fail to do. Indeed, Quine's vestigial sympathies with Ayer seem to saddle him with one of positivism's most potentially embarrassing problems: ethics is rendered not only noncognitive, but meaningless. And if he does not articulate a distinct logic and semantics for evaluations, what account of evaluative significance is Quine prepared to offer?

Moreover, as Shockley argues, Quine seems in other contexts to treat evaluations as if they do have truth conditions and truth value (1998:322ff.). For example, holism entails that the meanings of sentences are interdependent, and while one might be able to distinguish ethical evaluations as a group for their lack of empirical content, nonetheless the acceptability of ethical sentences can be affected by changes in the truth values of scientific ones. If we are to understand this relationship as one of logical implication, then this would seem to require Quine - who has always analyzed implication in terms of the preservation of truth value - to say that ethical sentences have truth values.

Also, Quine acknowledges that ethical disagreements can be resolved if the parties to the dispute recognize that they share fundamental values and disagree only over what

actions will best realize those values. For instance, two utilitarians might find that a dispute over the sentence, S, 'It is right to keep one's promises in such circumstances', would come down to whether doing so would maximize utility (where they do not disagree theoretically over what constitutes maximization of utility). The ethical dispute over S would be, as Quine says, 'causally reduced' to a dispute over whether doing what S says would bring about circumstances both acknowledge as morally desirable. (Causal reduction would be of no use in resolving a disagreement over whether the resulting outcome was desirable, if indeed this comes down to a disagreement regarding ultimate moral values.) (1981 a: 64-5) However, it is not clear how Quine can acknowledge the possibility of such reduction while denying that 'it is right to keep one's promises' has a truth value. Isn't the italicized claim equivalent to 'the conditions under which S is true are those which bring about circumstances both acknowledge as morally desirable'?

Additionally, Shockley argues that Quine's very articulation of the methodological infirmity problem seems to presuppose that there are genuine ethical disagreements - irresolvable because of the absence of genuine moral observation sentences and the important empirical checkpoints they provide. However, Quine thus asserts that there is such a thing as genuine ethical disagreement, and if this disagreement takes the form of the assertion of an evaluative sentence by one party and its denial by another, it is not clear what Quine would say, given other positions he has taken favoring two-valued logic, other than that one of those sentences is true and the other false, or that the conjunction of them is false. At least he has given no hint elsewhere that he would tolerate the kind of logic or semantics offered by noncognitivists.

Resolution in Davidson

Quine seems in the untenable position of avowing both cognitivism and noncognitivism. This stems in large part from his moving too quickly from an epistemic

thesis of methodological infirmity to a semantic thesis about truth value, leaving unexplained the semantic relationships between evaluative and nonevaluative sentences. But I think these difficulties speak only to the incompleteness of Quine's account rather than any deeper infirmity. Davidson's comprehensive theory of interpretation offers a constructive extension of Quine's semantics that addresses these problems and, rather than resolve the cognitivist-noncognitivist tension by favoring one over the other, releases it by offering a plausible hybrid account. The capacity to accommodate evaluation is the direct result of Davidson's desire to develop a unified interpretation theory which yields a systematic account of the meaning of sentences, the propositional content of beliefs and desires, and the relative strengths of belief and desire. Interpretation consists in the identification of truth conditions of sentences, and so if it is to encompass evaluations, it must find a way to assign them truth conditions and truth values (1995: 67).

Davidson takes Quine's radical translation arguments as establishing the need for a certain kind of framework for interpretation theory, one that heeds Quine's advice that "all inculcation of meanings of words must rest ultimately on sensory evidence" (Quine 1969: 75). That is, all semantic constructs (like 'propositional content', 'belief', etc.) must be constructed from an account that begins with the behavioral evidence of a speaker's attitudes toward uninterpreted sentences. Just how the account rests on sensory evidence, however, turns out to be an important issue as we shall see.

Owing to his broader concerns to develop a theory of interpretation, Davidson's account of the evidential base for translation differs from Quine's. He is not trying to raise questions about the identifiability of propositions, as is Quine, but is concerned instead to provide a theory that shows how evidence warrants our discernment of a fuller range of propositional attitudes. The holistic interdependence of the three basic components of interpretation - meaning, belief, and desire - defines the primary challenge for radical

interpretation for Davidson, and it is here that reflection on holism can be turned, more effectively than in Flanagan's account, to cognitivist purposes. The important problem to confront, Davidson believes, is that behavioral evidence underdetermines these elements in such a way that no one of them can be ascertained before the others are. Quine acknowledges, indeed demonstrates, the interdependence of belief - construed as the affirmation and denial of sentences -and meaning, but leaves us in the dark as to how to identify either desires or probabilistic beliefs. Davidson meets these challenges by turning to Jeffrey's Bayesian decision theory. The behavioral tests of decision theory provide a way of identifying, simultaneously, a subject's desires - in the sense of relative degree of preference -and belief -in the sense of subjective probability. Putting this theory into the context of radical interpretation enables Davidson to find a way of combining Quine's strategy with those of Jeffrey and Ramsey: decision theory solves for belief and desire, radical translation solves for belief and meaning (1980, 1984b, 1990).

It turns out that the fundamental evidence of Davidson's unified theory is not what a subject holds true, a cognitive state, but a conative one: namely the subject's preferences for the truth of uninterpreted sentences:

“What the interpreter has to go on . . . is information about what episodes and situations in the world cause an agent to prefer that one rather than another sentence be true. Clearly an interpreter can know this without knowing what the sentences mean, what states of affairs the agent values, or what he believes. But the preferring true of sentences by an agent is equally clearly a function of what the agent takes the sentences to mean, the value he sets on various possible or actual states of the world, and the probability he attaches to those states contingent on the truth of the relevant sentences. So it is not absurd to think that all three attitudes of the agent can be abstracted from the pattern of an agent's preferences among sentences.” (1990b: 322)

Davidson makes no assumption that desire is more fundamental than belief, but instead sees Jeffrey's axioms, modified - like Tarski's - to help identify, not presuppose, propositional content, as enabling the determination of a subject's degrees of belief in

sentences from formulas comprising only the agent's preferences for the truth of sentences. (It is important to note that this method is not intended to reflect actual interpretive procedures, as Quine's (albeit idealized) account does. Davidson is concerned only to show that there is observable evidence on the basis of which such determinations can be made, and not to show that the subject actually proceeds in this fashion in learning a language, or that an interpreter follows these steps in constructing an interpretation. Davidson's objective is, again, to articulate behaviorally determinate semantic constructs.) The idea is derivative of Ramsey's use of gambles to scale subjective probability and desirability, Jeffrey's contribution being to eliminate reliance on gambles in favor of preference for the truth of propositions. Davidson's contribution lies in the transformation of the method into one for identifying propositional content, as opposed to presupposing it as Jeffrey does.

Briefly, radical interpretation proceeds as follows: first, the Jeffrey apparatus presumes understanding of truth-functional connectives, so Davidson must first show how these are implicit in the subject's preferences with respect to uninterpreted sentences. The fundamental step is the identification of the Scheffer stroke in behaviors that indicate a preference of some uninterpreted sentence over another (which turns out to be a tautology), and of that latter, in turn, over another uninterpreted sentence (equivalent to the original sentence's

The logical connectives can, of course, be defined in terms of the Scheffer stroke. Once logical connectives have been identified, Davidson can identify tautologies and then rely on Jeffrey's idea of ranking preferences for the truth of sentences. Once this is done, Davidson can use Jeffrey's desirability axiom which gives subjective probabilities, based on evidence of preference. Thus Davidson's broader theory rests not simply on what sentences are held true or false (paralleling Quine's determinations of assent and dissent), but on the subjective desirabilities and probabilities of all the sentences in a language

(Davidson 1990: 326ff.). On the basis of these determinations, he can articulate the quantificational structure of sentences and grammatical categories of words. The final stage consists in the observation of circumstances that cause speakers to assign probabilities (or degrees of belief) and desirabilities to sentences. The resulting theory of interpretation consists of an assignment of truth-conditions to sentences, following Tarski's account of truth. The interpretations of sentences are expressed as Tarskian T-equivalences form 'S is true if and only if p'), and for each sentence of the language, descriptive or evaluative, there must be a provable theorem stating its truth conditions. However, unlike Tarski, Davidson intends the theory to be a predictive explanation of the conditions under which a speaker will hold and desire true sentences. (The sentences a subject holds true, which comprised the evidence base in Davidson's work prior to the articulation of the unified theory, still play a role in the articulation of this Tarskian account. They are simply those sentences whose subjective probability equals or is very close to 1.)

In contrast to Quine, Davidson holds that evaluative sentences have truth values just as any other meaningful sentence does. A sentence like 'It would be good were poverty eliminated', if meaningful, is interpretable, thus it has truth conditions and can be assigned truth-value. A speaker holds the evaluative sentence true just in case he or she desires that the descriptive claim, 'poverty is eliminated' be true. Davidson sees all other alternatives as needlessly bifurcating semantics -either by employing a special deontic logic for evaluation, or by construing evaluations, as Mackie does, as systematically false. The first option fails on grounds of simplicity, the second, charity. These considerations, not to mention the problems of Quine's non-cognitivism, create strong motivations to amend Quine's account. His view that we only have coherence, not correspondence, in ethics could be viewed, as Shockley suggests (1998: 324), as acknowledging truth for evaluation in some sense,

although the difference goes somewhat deeper than in Davidson's view, where evaluations are true in just the same sense as descriptions. Quine is no doubt partly motivated by a notion of truth as correspondence to reality, a notion Davidson adamantly rejects (1990, 1996). Quine needs to give some ground here, but, as I argue below, the necessary revisions are within his reach.

Davidson's evaluative semantics also have important noncognitivist features. He is sympathetic to the concerns that drive Mackie's cognitivist error theory as well as noncognitivist expressivism: Davidson echoes Mackie's concerns with the "metaphysical queerness" of treating evaluations as beliefs about moral facts. This "makes evaluation too much like cognition," the "distortion" of treating evaluation as "a special form of belief, a belief that certain states or events have a moral or other kind of value, or are obligatory, etc. . . ." (1984b: 9; cf. Mackie 1977: 38-42). We cannot completely avoid cognitivist interpretation of explicit evaluations like 'It would be good were poverty eliminated', even though this way of speaking invites metaphysical queerness concerns. However, we can accommodate Mackie's worry, he contends, by realizing that we can also construe such claims conatively - as, for example, a desire that poverty be eliminated (1984b: 19-20). That is, we can characterize the difference between evaluative and non-evaluative language in terms of either (1) the holding true of evaluative as opposed to non-evaluative sentences, or (2) the holding true as opposed to the desiring true of non-evaluative sentences.

The latter construal of evaluations is thus better in that it is less misleading about the nature of evaluation. The conative construal also figures in essential ways in Davidson's interpretive theory. In order to construct a unified theory of interpretation, Davidson finds it necessary to begin with conative construals of basic propositional attitudes: preferences for the truth of uninterpreted sentences. Those sentences, though uninterpreted, had to be construed in nature as descriptive, in order for the Jeffrey apparatus to work, since it

requires that the very same sentences be assigned subjective probabilities and degrees of preference -that is, be the objects both of holdings-true and desirings-true. Since the theory also requires that evidence be organized, initially, as a kind of desiring-true, or evaluation, the theory necessarily treats evaluation as conative at its 'ground level'. [6]

Moreover, it is not only at the ground level, in the sense that the unified interpretive project must organize behavioral evidence in these terms. It is important to keep in mind also that the point of this theoretical exercise is to provide analyses of semantic constructs like belief and desire that fit with Quinean constraints -so that we do not invite all the philosophical difficulties that result from making assumptions about these items that are incompatible with the essentially intersubjective character of interpretation and communication. The conative account of desire Davidson gives us is his sharpest philosophical account of 'what evaluation is'. We can, and must be able to apply the theory in a way that views evaluations as things that can be true and be held true; but if the question has more to do with what an evaluation is, the conative construal provides the better answer. [7]

Reconciling differences.

However, as I indicated at the outset, this way of resolving the tensions Shockley and Broach see in Quine's metaethics introduces other difficulties. Here I want to look at these difficulties and sketch some reasons for thinking they do not present insurmountable obstacles.

Davidson rejects Quine's empiricism and, with it, apparently, any vestige of a contrast between a 'correspondence' view of scientific truth on the one hand and a 'coherence' view of ethics on the other. The root of their differences may be found in Davidson's different view of the implications of holism. Holism assures that we can always revise a hypothesis about what someone believes if we are willing to revise related

hypotheses about what they believe, mean, or desire. As a result, the entire interpretive process involves rational accommodation. Assigning content to propositional attitudes is impossible without presuming the subject is mostly right, and without assuming that largely rational relations are obtained among beliefs and desires. Although the subject can be in error about individual beliefs, or can have irrationally ordered beliefs or desires in specific circumstances, identification of such errors is impossible except against a background of successful interpretation. In short, holism compels us to be charitable if we wish to interpret at all.

This emphasis on charity is certainly in keeping with Quine, but there are important differences. When Davidson looks, as Quine does, at the most basic language-learning situation, he emphasizes the fact that all interpretation is rooted, as he terms it in more recent papers, in a fundamental triangulation of speaker and interpreter with the external world (1989a; 1989c; 1991). Davidson believes the way to characterize the interpreter's entering wedge into language is to emphasize the fact that without "charitable" assumptions of common ground between interpreter and informant, interpretation is impossible. (Moreover, the very possibility of a speaker's even having a language hinges, for Davidson, on the possibility of interpreting the speaker.). We must count an interpretive subject as largely right in his or her views and reasonable in his or her ordering of preferences. There is no way to build an interpretive theory from the preferences with respect to uninterpreted sentences without these assumptions. Quine is right to emphasize the intersubjective nature of communication in explaining the objectivity of theory, but his way of doing it, in terms of conditioning to common stimuli, is wrongheaded. The whole idea of establishing a sensory linkage between theory and reality is a vestige of sensory-state foundationalism -one more dogma that empiricism can do without (1991: 193). Thus, while Davidson's account would seem at first sight complementary to Quine's account of

ethical epistemology and semantics, and although meaning holism motivates their common commitment to make meanings behaviorally identifiable and to reject foundationalist epistemology, Davidson approaches questions of theoretical objectivity in a way that seems to call into question the philosophical value of Quine's observation sentence -thus apparently undermining Quine's basis for noncognitivism. The vestigial foundationalism brings with it a necessary acknowledgment of the possibility of global skepticism. Davidson's response hinges instead on the necessity of employing the charity principle, which guarantees not only that interpreter and subject agree on many things, but that they are objectively right about many things. As Davidson puts it at one point, if we consider that even an omniscient interpreter would be similarly bound to count us largely right in our own views when interpreting us, we realize that we are indeed largely right about things (1986). More recently, he emphasizes instead close reflection on triangulation and charity. Interpretation hinges on our ability to connect meaning to what is plainly observable to interpreter and subject. The thrust of his reflections on the centrality of the charity principle is that in cases where the cause of belief or desire is obvious, the interpreter must assume it is the same cause for the other speaker: and while we may on occasion find reason to override that assumption, we must be right most of the time. Otherwise interpretation simply fails and we have no warrant to attribute error at all. Moreover, his reflections on radical interpretation are reflections on, as he terms it, "epistemology seen in the mirror of meaning" (1984a: 169): objectivity of belief, and not simply of interpretation, depends on the fact that "in the simplest and most basic cases, words and sentences derive their meaning from the objects and circumstances in which they are learned." Indeed, he remarks:

"It is a commonplace of the empirical tradition that we learn our first words (which at the start serve the function of sentences) . . . through a conditioning of sounds or verbal

behavior to appropriate bits of matter in the public domain. The conditioning works best with objects that interest the learner and are hard to miss by either teacher or pupil. This is not just a story about how we learn to use words: it must also be an essential part of an adequate account of what words refer to and what they mean." (1989a: l63f.).

Davidson is concerned about Quine's focus on the so-called "proximal" characterization of the stimulus situation, that is, his focus on the point where the stimulus chain first impinges on the subject's sensory receptors. Davidson focuses on stimulation characterized "distally" - i.e., as shared by interpreter and subject -since his main concern is to identify propositional content initially in terms of things simultaneously experienced by both. The crucial point for him here is a semantic one, not an epistemological one. Thus Quine remarks: "Actually my position in semantics is as distal as [Davidson's]. My observation sentences treat of the distal world, and they are rock-bottom language for child and field linguist alike. My identification of stimulus with neural intake is irrelevant to that" (1993: 114n). Quine need only refer to the holophrastic signal defined in terms of surface sensory patterns to define the nature-theory correspondence that serves his purposes here: primarily to explain how nature exercises independent control over scientific but not ethical theory.

Davidson has epistemological motivations for his attitude, to be sure. He complains of a Cartesian element in Quine, as I noted. However, it is not clear just how Quine is saddled with the problems of foundationalism. Davidson worries that Quine is hinging his account on an incoherent evidentiary relationship between beliefs and sensory patterns, overlooking the fact that only beliefs justify other beliefs. However, while Quine articulates an evidentiary relationship between neural input and observation sentences, this relationship is not the purely inferential sort that characterizes the relationship of those sentences to other sentences in a theory. It is a causal account, as we have seen, that achieves its primary epistemological task, namely of establishing a towline of theory to

nature, without this worrisome consequence or the consequence that certain beliefs are epistemologically privileged or theory-neutral. Nor is it evidently susceptible to the worry, which Davidson sometimes expresses, that something may go awry - owing, say, to irregularities in the perceptual mechanisms of speakers - in the stimulus chain between distal point and proximal point. For Quine's account, as we saw, does not presuppose intersubjective stimulus synonymy.

Davidson remains skeptical of Quine's concern for tautologies. Indeed, this seems to be of a piece with his wholesale rejection of correspondence theories of truth. Truth -indeed, substantive, "objective" truth -is secured by reflecting on its role in radical interpretation; and this, again, is only Davidson's careful philosophical account of its role in our account of propositional attitudes and the agents who have them. The context of radical interpretation provides Davidson with the tools for establishing what he takes to be a number of related and fundamental insights about interpretation and truth. (1) Global skepticism is impossible, and its impossibility follows from the fact that explanation of our success in communicating must presuppose an intersubjectively shared world. (2) Since we need only understand the relationship between being correct and being interpretable in order to establish the truth, by and large, of our beliefs, the substantive concept of truth does not involve correspondence to reality in the problematic sense that proponents of substantive theories of truth often try to articulate (1996). Davidson's notion of truth emerges as part of his unified theory. He offers no definition of truth: it is a primitive concept whose substantive content is illuminated by understanding its role in radical and ordinary interpretation and in the explanation of the nature of belief and desire. Indeed, objective truth is "rather something built into the concepts of belief, desire, and meaning" (1995: 67).

Moreover, on this account, moral truth is articulated in just the way that nonmoral truth is. It depends equally on our capacity to communicate about value:

“we should expect enlightened values - the reasons we would have for valuing and acting if we had all the (non-evaluative) facts straight to converge; we should expect people who are enlightened and fully understand one another to agree on their basic values. An appreciation of what makes for such convergence or agreement also shows that value judgments are true or false in much the way our factual judgments are.” (1995: 67)

There can be real differences of opinion about norms, he remarks, "as long as the differences can be seen to be real because placed within a common framework. The common framework is the area of overlap, of norms one person correctly interprets another as sharing. Putting these considerations together, the principle that emerges is: the more basic a norm is to our making sense an agent, the less content we can give to the idea that we disagree with respect to that norm. If I am right, disputes over values (as in the case of other disputes) can be genuine only when there are shared criteria in the light of which there is an answer to the question who is right.” (1995: 68) [8]

However, while Davidson might appear to be able to dispense with anything like Quine's notion of a towline, his account nonetheless rests weight on what is obviously desired true or held true including the patently true (typically, highly observational) ones that serve as Quine's epistemic towlines. The difference of opinion is not over whether observational links to nature are important, but instead concerns the most philosophically perspicuous way of characterizing and exploiting them.

What is interesting is how the differences between the two emerge from their seemingly common reflections on language-learning. In Quine's radical translation argument, which strips the situation down to bare behavioral essentials in an effort to develop an empirically respectable notion of meaning, we are impressed with the role of the observation sentence as providing the entering wedge into language. It turns out to be the only notion of sentence-meaning for which we can find clear individuation criteria. In related discussions, the emphasis is on how people ordinarily acquire language. There is no

stripping down to behavioral evidence, but still observation sentences are central. It is from this standpoint that, I have argued, one best sees Quine's epistemological critique and his expressivist leanings.

As Davidson runs with the radical translation idea, he offers a radical interpretation argument that strips things down to behavioral essentials -and for the same reasons Quine does. Yet there starts to emerge a quite different account of objectivity, and one in terms of which a methodological infirmity case is harder to articulate. One cannot easily distinguish belief or in the basic triangulation situation holding true -from value construed as desiring true. Since Davidson's theory is a "unified" theory that "solves for" meaning, belief, and desire simultaneously, it is harder to distinguish the learning of evaluative from non-evaluative language.

One could see a much broader divide between Davidson and Quine here - a clearer delivery on holism's potential to erode facts and values: for example, Rorty (1999) aligns Davidson with Dewey (and against Quine) in "trying to break down the distinction between the knowing, theorizing, spectatorial mind and the responsible participant in social practices." Still, though, one would think that Quine has made a case in his terms that is convincing and which can be at least partially expressed in Davidson's. The cases where Quine locates the entering wedge into language are also cases where Davidson docs: situations in which the interpreter translates what seem to be sentences held true or affirmed by the subject about what is plainly obvious in the immediate environment. Moreover, although Davidson emphasizes that charity compels us to see overlap in value as well as overlap in belief, he has relatively little to say about how much agreement there must be. He is concerned with strong forms of relativism, but really says nothing to oppose the idea that unresolvable controversy is more likely to characterize ethics than science in part precisely for the reasons Quine articulates in his methodological infirmity discussion.

Finally, although Davidson raises serious questions about the coherence and function of Quine's observation sentences, I don't think he ever hits the mark straight on. Quine's point that a common stimulus figures in social conditioning to facts but not values is not susceptible to accusations that he is privileging certain claims as incorrigible, or that he is denying that the thing that justifies a belief is another belief. His account of anchoring is not an account of inferential justification: it only has to show common conditioning to stimulation. Moreover, the notion of anchoring is not entirely alien to the Davidson project. We shouldn't lose sight of the fact that anchoring to nature is obviously implicit in Davidson's account of triangulation. It is this that gives him the resources to fend off the frequent criticisms that he himself sails too close to the coherentist wind.

By combining cognitivist and non-cognitivist elements as he does, Davidson believes we can get an account of objectivity without burdening ourselves to show that moral truth consists somehow in the correspondence of a moral expression to some sort of external property. There is no need to think that we must locate values somehow in the world (or, for that matter, in the mind). To be sure, the cognitivist reading still carries the suggestion of correspondence, and one might well ask why the mere ability to state evaluations conatively suffices to dispel metaphysical queerness worries. However, here it is useful to be mindful of Davidson's position on truth, which departs considerably from the correspondence view. As we saw, truth is defined in a way that entails no imputation of 'truth-making' facts or properties to nature. Calling evaluations true need not brook any danger of metaphysical queerness. How well does this square with Quine's assertion that we have a correspondence view of truth in science, but only coherence in ethics? Quine is forced to give some ground here, but I think it is ground he can give. If I am right, much of the trouble we found in Quine stems from his too easily wedding the epistemic aspects of ethical antirealism with the semantic ones. In the context in which Quine's remarks

contrasting correspondence and coherence occur, it is easy to read the point simply as this: we don't have the epistemic for truth-attributions in ethics that we have in science. There is no 'correspondence' in just the sense that we cannot find the appropriate topline that assures that nature exercises theoretically independent control over belief in ethics as it does in science. To be sure, Quine's reflections on language-learning suggest a link between methodological infirmity and a conative view of evaluation. But it is an embarrassment for Quine to import also the rejection of evaluative truth value. Davidson provides a means of staying in keeping with the expressivist's insights without abandoning a truth-conditional semantics for evaluation. In effect, by importing Davidson, we keep moral epistemology and semantics at a healthy arm's length from each other. Despite methodological infirmity, ethical sentences may be true: the account of what it means to have truth conditions and what it means to be true is one that is quite distinct from the account of evidence conditions. There is something to be gained from attending to Davidson's careful account of truth conditions, while keeping Quine within the proper confines of his epistemological critique.

FOOTNOTES

1 Quine does not offer a sharp distinction between moral and nonmoral values. What generally distinguishes the moral values is that they are "irreducibly social": either aimed at other persons (the "altruistic values") or attached to the practices of the social group, "without regard to ulterior satisfactions accruing to oneself" (1981 a: 58),

2 One might be tempted to meet this objection by replacing 'That's wrong' with the more specific 'Torture is wrong'; but as Campbell (1996: 7-8) notes, the latter is what Quine terms a "standing sentence", that is, one whose affirmation or denial does not depend on the presence or absence of a triggering stimulus, and thus not a genuine observation sentence. This restriction of verdicts to occasions of utterance is important since 'That's wrong' cannot play the desired epistemological role if its affirmation when torture is observed is simply an expression of the general belief that torture is wrong.

3 Quine acknowledges at one point that there might be aesthetic observation sentences, say when a community of speakers affirms 'this is good music' upon recognition of a particular sense and could be construed here as leaving open the possibility that there might be comparable observation sentences (Bergstrom and Follesdal: 204). However, the contrary considerations adduced in Quine's 1986b seem the more compelling.

4 The realist target here is the nonreductive variety (See Darwall et al. 1992: 165ff.). Nonreductive moral realism asserts the reality of evaluative properties in virtue of their supervenience on natural ones, and it is thus concerned to establish epistemic continuity between ethics and science. Reductivist versions accept, and indeed, are motivated by, epistemic discontinuity. Prominent nonreductivists are Boyd 1988; Sturgeon 1988; Brink 1984, 1989. Prominent reductivists are Railton 1992 and Harman 1977, 1986. (One might argue that reductionism is tantamount to abandoning moral realism; however, I believe it squares sufficiently with the above cluster of commitments to count as an instance of this view.) In fact, Quine's critique of non-reductive realism bears significant similarities to Harman's, who rejects non-reductive moral realism on the that the convictions that form the evidence base of ethical theory fail to provide genuine evidence because, unlike physical theory, ethical theory does not provide an explanation of why its confirming observations occur (1977: 8-9). Harman contends that it is necessary to account for more than simply the capacity of ethical principles to explain why we observe that people judge certain things to be right or wrong. His point is that in explaining, for example, why gratuitous torture is wrong, the explanatory relationship in question must go beyond the indication that "features of acts that make the acts wrong sometimes explain things that can be observed": the animal's visible suffering both makes the act wrong and causes the judgment. Harman argues that what is required in order for ethical principles to do genuine work in explaining observed facts is that the features' making the act wrong explain the judgment that it is wrong. He insists that a causal connection be such that a moral property causes the judgment, and not be merely referred to in a premise justifying that judgment.

Without a naturalistic reduction of wrongness, the critic's belief can be explained entirely as resulting from the critic's moral sensibility combined with the observation of the action (1986: 62-3). Thus Harman's view is quite compatible with Quine's, although the compatibility is obscured by the fact that Harman prefers not to differentiate ethics and science in terms of observational effects instead of observational implications, because he thinks that Quine's criteria for being an observation sentence would include 'torturing that animal is wrong' provided there is community-wide agreement (1986: 59). However, as we have seen, Quine's more recent refinements on the concept of the observation sentence avoid just this consequence. Harman is, in effect, asking for the same sort of topline Quine is, although he prefers to characterize it in a different way. (He is similar to Davidson in this general regard, as I argue below.)

5 There is more to cognitive meaning than empirical meaning. Quine allows that the nonapplied areas of mathematics (e.g., the higher reaches of set theory), as well as history and sociology and perhaps theoretical physics, are comprised of many sentences that don't make any contribution to the generation of predictions, yet have cognitive meaning and truth value. They derive their cognitive in virtue of sharing vocabulary with empirically meaningful discourse, their heuristic value, and their contribution to formal elegance and theoretical fleshing out (1994: 55). Ethical sentences lack empirical content, then, because they neither contribute directly to the predictive empirical content of theories, nor share vocabulary with those theories, owing to the causal irreducibility of ethical terms. Thus they do not make any indirect contributions to descriptive theory (See e.g. Quine 1991; 1992: 16-18, 94-95; 1994; Bergstrom and Follesdal: 202-204.).

6 I am indebted in much of the present discussion to Brice's discussions of Davidson's views on evaluation (1993, 1999, 2000). I omit here Brice's fuller articulation of evaluations, which distinguishes those which implicate desires, and thus admit of conative as well as cognitive construal, from those which implicate passions, which admit of affective as well as cognitive construal.

7 The conative construal also fits nicely with Davidson's account of action, particularly, the analysis of what he calls an agent's "primary reason" for acting (1978). The primary reason combines beliefs with so-called "pro-attitudes" (more loosely speaking, a stable desire) aimed at the attainment of some outcome. Since Davidson's account requires that the primary reason also be a cause of an action, the conative construal of the pro-attitude provides us with something more intuitively appealing as a motivating element. On the other hand, the cognitive construal is also required in order to articulate explanatory arguments an agent might give in justifying an action.

8 Davidson does not here simply equate agreement with truth. In a recent paper he remarks:

"Good interpretation makes for convergence then, and on values in particular, and failure of by appeal to the gap between apparent values and real (just as we can failure to agree on ordinary descriptive facts by appeal to the distinction between appearance and reality Of course genuine disputes must concern the values of the very same objects, acts, or states of affairs. When we find a difference inexplicable, that is, not due to ignorance or confusion, the difference is not genuine; put from the point of view of an interpreter, finding a difference is a sign of bad interpretation. I am not saying that values are objective because more agreement than meets the eye, and I certainly am not saying that what we on is therefore true The importance of a background of shared beliefs and values is such a background allows us to make sense of the idea of a common standard of and wrong, true and false."

Indeed, it is important to keep in mind that his account of truth is not an epistemic one equating truth conditions with justification conditions (on this see, e.g., his 1996), and that it is a strength of his position that he makes clear why purely methodological drawbacks do not suffice to impugn moral truth. Davidson is here rather non-committal on the matter of the evidence-conditions for evaluations, and might well be able to incorporate many of the particulars of current moral realisms. His evident complaints with, for instance, Boyd and Brink have more to do with the framework of Putnam-Kripke semantics within which their realist accounts are articulated. (And Davidson's broad differences in semantic view notwithstanding, these accounts have been subjected to penetrating criticisms by Horgan and Timmons (1992, 1993) that challenge the capacity of moral properties to measure up to natural ones by Putnam-Kripke criteria.)

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