

Morton White's Moral Pragmatism

O Pragmatismo Moral de Morton White

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Abstract: This essay examines the Quine-White debate concerning the empirical status of moral judgments. Quine's later acceptance of the theory-ladenness of observation shows that he has no reason to reject the possibility of moral observation sentences or to resist White's empirical, holistic rendering of moral theory. It is further argued that feelings of moral obligation cannot ground moral beliefs in the way suggested by White, but that some moral claims can be empirically tested and rejected through having the relevant links to sensory stimulation. In this way the methodological analogy White holds between ethics and science can be maintained as can his overall empirical conception of ethical pragmatism.

Key words: Quine. White. Ethics. Epistemology. Holism. Pragmatism.

Resumo: *Este ensaio examina o debate entre Quine e White a respeito do estatuto empírico dos juízos morais. A aceitação tardia de Quine da observação permeada pela teoria mostra que ele não tem razão em rejeitar a possibilidade das sentenças de observação moral ou em resistir à interpretação empírica e holística da teoria moral de Morton. Argumenta-se ainda que sentimentos de obrigação moral não podem fundamentar crenças morais do modo sugerido por White, mas que algumas afirmações podem ser testadas empiricamente e rejeitadas por terem as conexões relevantes para estimulação sensorial. Deste modo, a analogia metodológica que White sustenta entre ética e ciência pode ser mantida, assim como sua concepção totalmente empírica de pragmatismo ético.*

Palavras-chave: *Quine. White. Ética. Epistemologia. Holismo. Pragmatismo.*

Introduction

When comparing the empirical credentials of science against those of moral philosophy Quine rather infamously affirmed a sharp methodological separation between ethics and science commenting that

[...] one regrets the methodological infirmity of ethics as compared with science. 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. (QUINE, 1981, p. 63).

Such remarks have suggested to several commentators that Quine advocates a non-cognitivist position with regard to ethical statements and that this is consistent with the naturalist orientation of his philosophy.¹ On this reading, Quine's insistence that ethical judgments fail to have observational consequences *should* result in his further denial that they possess any truth-value. Others have seen within the general framework of Quine's naturalism and pragmatism support for a cognitivist view of ethical statements and moral reasoning.² Here, the normative and descriptive elements of Quine's naturalized account of knowledge are thought to apply equally well to normative ethical reasoning concerning our moral lives. The most developed interpretation of this moral extension of Quine's epistemology is found in the largely neglected work of Morton White, Quine's one time colleague at Harvard.³ White's version of moral pragmatism is noteworthy in several respects. He defends a conception of ethical inquiry that aligns it closely with the methodological resources of empirical science, further encouraging a blurring of the boundaries between facts and values and normative and descriptive language. Those interested in what resources naturalism and pragmatism may have for addressing issues in moral philosophy (and who further think that Quine's views have misdirected what is best in these traditions) might find some value in White's attempt, both in its successes and failures.⁴

This essay examines Morton White's attempt to promote a broadly cognitivist reading of Quine's ethical views. It begins by exploring several details of the Quine-White debate on the possibility of incorporating value judgments within a holistic conception of human knowledge. Their basic disagreement turns on whether there is room to make sense of an empirical foothold or touchstone for ethical judgments in an analogous way to the empirical testability of hypotheses in science. It is precisely here that Quine highlights a divergence between ethics and science, which White thinks Quine should reject.

As we will see, their disagreement is focused on the possibility of moral observation sentences, those statements that stand closest to observation and evidence. Beyond the issue of whether there are or could be any such moral sentences, there is the further question of whether such sentences provide justificatory support for moral judgments *in the same way* as in the scientific case. I will argue that developments in Quine's own attempts to clarify observation and its links to theoretical statements demonstrate that he has no reason, in theory as least, to reject the possibility of moral observation sentences. Quine's later view does not then present any obstacles to White's attempted moral extension of his epistemic holism. I then suggest that despite the theory ladenness of observation sentences, there can be moral observation

1 See BROACH, 1997; CAMPBELL, 1996; and TERSMAN, 1998.

2 See FLANAGAN, 1982, 1988; SHOCKLEY 1998; and WHITE 1981, 2005.

3 Although there is some recent discussion of White's view in FØLLESDAL, 2005; HARE, 2007; and PIHLSTRÖM, 2003. Other references to his work can also be found in RORTY, 1991; and PUTNAM, 2002.

4 White's own general philosophical motives require this ethical supplementation, since if Quine's epistemological holism is incapable of including values then there can be no philosophy of culture in the way that he conceives it (see WHITE, 2002, 2005). For those who lament the amoral tendency of Quine's version of pragmatism, see Putnam's comments (cited in PIHLSTRÖM, 2003) and KUKLICK, 2005.

sentences tied to sensation and that here White's methodological analogy between science and ethics is preserved.⁵ However, I further argue that aspects of White's own view prevent the possibility of moral observation sentences based on feelings of moral obligation. Nevertheless, White's empirical rendering of ethical reasoning receives partial vindication since there remains a type of moral observation sentence that for most practical purposes is independent from theory and can through its links to sensory experience provide empirical support for moral claims. Moreover, feelings of moral obligation can still be viewed as contributing to the overall support of moral claims through their indirect connections to such sentences and other background beliefs. I conclude by stressing that this further demonstrates the way the Quine-White debate over the role of observation in moral theory exaggerates its role and overall importance both in the justification of ethical and scientific statements.

1. The Quine-White Debate

In a number of related works, White has defended a moral extension of Quine's epistemological holism where systems of belief are viewed as containing both the normative beliefs of ethics and epistemology, and as linking sensory experience *with* moral emotions.⁶ With this view in place, White further argues that Quine should abandon any methodological difference in the testing of normative and descriptive statements, and in the process he demonstrates how he thinks Quine's pragmatic holism should include the testing of moral beliefs and principles.

In redescribing the Quinean "web of belief", White views moral agents as dealing with a set of both normative and descriptive beliefs when attempting to organize and connect their sensory experiences. But he further emphasizes that this involves linking sensory experiences and certain emotions. In this way the sensory evidential basis of our system of beliefs is taken to include moral feelings and sentiments. We have good reason, he thinks, to endorse this position once we acknowledge that normative statements cannot be reduced to descriptive ones and, what he further takes as obvious, that we do have normative beliefs and moral feelings.

He introduces an example of ethical reasoning that is consistent with this normative and ethical supplementation of the Quinean view:

1. Whoever takes the life of a human being does something that ought not to be done.
2. The mother took the life of a fetus in her womb.
3. Every living fetus in the womb of a human being is a human being.

5 There remain, of course, significant differences between science and ethics, perhaps most readily seen with the greater cultural diversity of ethical norms and practices (also see PIHLSTRÖM, 2003, p. 306-7). MOODY-ADAMS (1990) suggests a further difference when she locates the empirical foothold of moral theory in the critical self-understanding of those individuals addressed by the moral theory. While I think White's view is compatible with such differences, they indicate that his view is not and should not be viewed as accounting for all dimensions of moral life. It is in this qualified sense that I defend his conception of moral theory below.

6 White first defends this view in his *Toward Reunion in Philosophy* (1956) developing it further in his 1981, 2002 and 2005.

Therefore,

5. The mother took the life of a human being.
6. The mother did something that ought not to be done (WHITE, 2005, 189; also see WHITE, 1981).

We are then asked to consider the possibility that the mother might be justified under certain conditions in denying statement 5, by, for example, feeling that she has not done anything wrong, which White describes as her specific feeling of moral obligation.⁷ White's moral holism suggests that several options are available in attempting to modify the resulting inconsistent set of statements. The mother could give up the logical law that allows inference from 1 to 5, or reject the ethical principle found in 1. Finally, she could deny any of the descriptive statements found in 2, 3 or 4. Any of such options will modify the original set of beliefs in response to the mother's "recalcitrant" moral feeling. Here, we can better understand White's claim concerning the importance of linking sensation with moral feeling. His view is that our beliefs are deemed acceptable when they are capable of establishing connections between our sensory experiences and our moral feelings. In this example, there are certain statements linked to sensation, which by way of a moral principle lead to a normative conclusion that is most closely linked to the relevant moral feeling. It is when such linkages breakdown, as in the above case, because of a conflict between sensations, beliefs and feeling that we must then make the needed adjustments in the manner described above (WHITE, 1981, p. 62-3).

White takes this example to be analogous to the type of scientific reasoning exhibited by the scientist who modifies a set of descriptive beliefs when they fail to produce an expected sensory experience. The scientist might deduce that under specified conditions litmus paper should appear red, but instead have the unexpected sensory experience of green. As in the moral case, he has a number of analogous options in dealing with this recalcitrant experience, which may include rejecting the logical law underlying his inference, questioning previous beliefs that contributed to his prediction, or the rejection of the appearance itself. This analogy is meant to illustrate that ethical reasoning like its scientific counterpart uses the hypothetic-deductive method in establishing links between our theoretical system of beliefs and sensations, which in the moral case include feelings of moral obligation.⁸ White describes the analogy in these terms: "The right to alter one's logic in response to certain experiences in physical experiments is analogous to the right to alter one's description of an act in response to one's moral assessment of the act." (1981, p. 31; also see 2005, p. 190).

7 White accepts that moral feeling does not provide absolute grounds for accepting or rejecting a moral claim, and he emphasizes a degree of cultural relativism in his account (1981, p. 139-40). For related discussion on why this type of cultural relativism or ethnocentrism forms a basic part of the ethical approach defended by White and others, see CLARKE (1987).

8 White talks of the confirmation of both scientific and ethical judgments (see WHITE, 1981, p. 38-40). But if he is adopting a strict Quinean view of theory testing then he should claim that observation can only refute and not confirm hypotheses (see QUINE, 1992, p. 12-13).

What this then demonstrates, White further claims, is that just as in the scientific case, ethical reasoning can involve moral principles and beliefs being holistically tested against sensory experience where this includes the experience of moral sentiments and feeling. We have seen that for White this involves using our set of beliefs to create links between sensation at one end and emotions at the other. Because moral claims have contact with experience in the form of moral emotions, it makes sense to talk of moral beliefs as having an evidential grounding in experience like scientific claims. White then concludes that Quine is wrong in claiming that the morality of an act can only be tested against our moral standards or beliefs, since the presence of moral feeling provides an independent testing ground for such judgments.

While Quine takes White's attempt to locate value judgments within epistemology as plausible on its own terms he thinks it problematic from the perspective of his own naturalized account of knowledge. Here he is more specific about his reasons for what he views as the methodological infirmity of moral reasoning. He begins by considering the case where we have two descriptive beliefs, which are in conflict with a third moral one. One of these beliefs needs to be eliminated to restore consistency to the set and by aligning emotions with sensations in the way White suggests, we can treat all three beliefs as empirical and further critically assess the "ultimate empirical evidence for each of the three" (QUINE, 1986, p. 663). This further requires examining their implied observable consequences, which for each involves a conditional statement joining observation sentences where one describes an experimental situation and the other a prediction. Framing the issue in such terms requires that there be moral observation sentences and it is precisely this claim that Quine goes on to further question.

Here, we find Quine's longtime use of the term 'observation sentence', which is introduced to highlight those statements that are most closely linked to observation. The discussion of the links between such statements and observation is, for Quine, more clearly characterized in terms of sentences causally conditioned to relevant types of sensory stimulation. What is most crucial for this debate is the dependence of observation sentences on *shared public responses* to sensory stimulation. Observation sentences are then directly and causally connected to sensory stimulation such that the relevant stimulation will result in the same response by all speakers of the language in question. Examples would include "It's raining", "It's getting cold" and "That's a rabbit" (QUINE, 1992, p. 3). Their importance for establishing evidential links to the theoretical claims that form our overarching system of beliefs is described by Quine in these terms: "The observation sentence is the means of verbalizing the predication that checks a theory. The requirement that it command a verdict outright is what makes it a final checkpoint. The requirement of intersubjectivity is what makes science objective." (QUINE, 1992, p. 5).

Quine then asks us to consider the moral occasion sentence "That's outrageous", a sentence that is true or false on its occasion of utterance, to see if could be considered an observation sentence. Imagine a best case scenario where everyone in the linguistic community would assent to "That's outrageous" when an evil act, such as cripple beating or wreath stealing, could be condemned on sight without interference from collateral information (that is, other background beliefs). Even so, "That's outrageous" would still fail to qualify as an observation sentence since it further applies

to other acts that do depend on collateral information that is not generally shared by other witnesses of the act. The acceptance or rejection of other sentences such as “It’s raining” or “That’s a rabbit” rarely depends on information not shared by others, although Quine here admits that the observational status of sentences is a matter of a degree. Still, as his best case example is meant to illustrate, moral sentences do not qualify as observation sentences, revealing that they differ from cognitive ones in their relation to observation (QUINE, 1986, p. 664).

The key difference here, for Quine, further turns on a difference between sensation and emotion. Sensations are, he tells us, reliably coordinated with publically accessible stimulation (the observable evil acts themselves) such that the having of the relevant stimulation produces the sensation. This is not the case with emotions. A shared moral condemnation of an action does not result from simple stimulation, but from sensory stimulation and additional unshared information. We saw that for Quine the objectivity of science derives from the intersubjective checkpoints found with observation sentences, precisely because the relevant stimulation *and it alone* results in shared assent by all members of the linguistic community. However, he further claims that moral statements cannot be exclusively keyed to sensory stimulation in this way, and that ethical judgments must then fail to have such objective checkpoints. As a result, ethics lacks the empirical objectivity of science resulting in what Quine calls its “methodological infirmity”.

Responding to these critical remarks, White focuses on Quine’s claim that the observational status of sentences is itself a matter of degree. This he suggests makes room on Quine’s own account for the observational status of moral judgments as well as the objective empirical testing of moral principles and judgments that he promotes. First, he argues that if we weaken Quine’s standard of observability from *all* speakers of the linguistic community to *most* then the best case example of “That’s outrageous” would count as observational since most speakers would under relevant conditions assent to the sentence. White notes that Quine himself qualifies linguistic communities in similar ways when discussing the observational status of statements used by smaller groups of working scientists. The kind of relevant stimulation needed for the observational status of a sentence is then tied to the scope of the linguistic community in question and the specific background knowledge of that community.⁹ If we restrict the scope of the moral community in the way suggested by White, then “That’s outrageous” would qualify as an observation sentence. However, White does not address Quine’s claim about the reliable coordination between stimulation and sensation and its alleged absence in the case of emotion. Yet, he seems to be committed to the claim that certain types of sensory stimulation, or more specifically, what can be readily detected through the senses, *are* more or less reliably coordinated with feelings and emotions. But, as we have seen, on White’s own account, this connection is dependent on theoretical beliefs that link sensations with feelings of moral obligation. And while Quine will further qualify his view along related lines, and accept the theory ladenness of observation, we will later see that this raises some difficulties for White’s claim that moral observation sentences can be tied to the having the relevant moral feelings.

9 HYLTON also stresses this point (2007, p. 127).

Quine also argued that because moral judgments depend on unshared collateral information they cannot be observation sentences. White responds by claiming that the same can be said of observation sentences such as "That's green", when as in the case of scientists measuring wavelengths they are disposed to utter "That's green" when their instruments detect a specific wavelength. In this case, they are disposed to assent to "That's green" on the basis of information that is not widely shared by others in the linguistic community (WHITE, 2005, p. 206).

These remarks point to some of the difficulties Quine faces in trying to clarify exactly why certain sentences are 'closest' to observation in virtue of being theory-free, while others are unavoidably dependent on prior theoretical beliefs. The alleged crucial difference between "That's a rabbit" and "That's outrageous" is that the former can be accepted largely without depending on the acceptance of other beliefs while the latter cannot. Extending this difference to ethical judgments White remarks that, "Quine's observation sentences are usually not dependent on accepting other statements in the Duhemian conjunction to be tested, whereas my feeling sentences often are" (2005, p. 207). Once again, however, we have seen that this is itself a matter of degree, as Quine himself claims that the acceptance of observation sentences often does depend on our having other beliefs. This suggests that observation sentences are not then completely free from other sentences, and this in turn might be used to question the observational status of "There's a dog", as Quine does to question moral statements such as "That's outrageous".

More importantly, observation sentences cannot be completely free from our body of beliefs since this would prevent the testing and revision of our belief system. White notes that it is in virtue of this dependence that observation sentences can be rejected when compared to these beliefs. Here he appeals to Nelson Goodman's argument for this claim which questions the certainty of observation statements and he extends it to feeling sentences in an effort to further break down the disanalogy between ethics and science (GOODMAN, 1952). Just as the observation sentence, "This looks red" can be later rejected because other statements question the accuracy of this report, feeling sentences that run contrary to certain moral conclusions can be rejected when we conclude that there are stronger reasons for maintaining the conclusion. The mutual dependence of observation sentences on prior beliefs, both in the case of science and ethics, can result in the rejection of an observation sentence in light of our prior set of theoretical beliefs.

2. Observation, Theory and Moral Judgment

White's critical remarks then highlight some general issues for Quine's account of observation sentences. To what extent are they dependent on other beliefs, or theory-laden, and how does this impact Quine's understanding of the relationship between a theory and its observable consequences?

In addressing such questions, we should note that in his later writings, Quine fully accepts that observation sentences are corrigible, and that they are not simply shared responses to relevant stimulation. Observation sentences are then theory-laden on his account and he then comes to fully accept Goodman's and White's main point

(QUINE, 1992, 2000, 2008; HYLTON, 2007, p. 142). This further means that observation sentences when used by adult speakers of a language are never completely theory free. We can come to reject such sentences on the basis of new evidence and this requires appealing to theory that goes beyond any single observation sentence. Nevertheless, observation sentences can still serve in their role as empirical checkpoints, since there remain observation sentences that are ‘highly observational’ having little dependence on other beliefs. Such observation sentences have few deceptive situations where we might be in error, and they can be significantly learnt by a child on the basis of relevant stimulation (for details see HYLTON, 2007, p. 136-142). For most practical purposes these highly observational sentences are largely unaffected by background beliefs, and can then play their dual role in providing science with links to observation and serving as an entry way into acquiring language. There then appears to be no reason for Quine to deny the possibility of moral observation sentences. If all observation sentences are infected by theory, then Quine cannot use the theory ladenness of moral sentences to simply deny their observational status. And if such status is itself a matter of degree then there is no sharp observation-theory criterion one could use to rule out the possibility of such moral observation sentences.

Is it then possible to have such moral observation sentences? Consider once again Quine’s best case example of “That’s outrageous” as a moral occasion sentence that all members of the linguistic community would assent to when witnessing an evil act (cripple beating or wreath stealing) that can be condemned without other collateral information. Flanagan comments that this example can hardly be thought of as a best case since the stimulus conditions on offer vary considerably across these two cases, and even more significantly, “outrageous” is a very general judgment category that we have empirical reason to think is less consistent among speakers than other less general categories like “cruelty” (FLANAGAN, 1988, p. 545). Even so, Quine can stand firm in his claim that sentences like “That’s outrageous” apply mostly to acts that depend heavily on additional information that is not widely shared. Following Flanagan’s further suggestion we can then modify Quine’s example and offer the following as a possible moral observation sentence: “It is cruel of that man to torture that cripple”. This sentence, Flanagan claims, is in the vicinity of “That’s a rabbit” in terms of its observational status and then should count as a moral observation sentence (1988, p. 546).

However, in defense of a non-cognitivist reading of Quine’s position, Campbell has objected that Flanagan’s example is not an observation sentence. This example is a compound predication combining “That’s cruel” and “That man is torturing that cripple”, which means that it is an observation sentence only if both these elements are observation sentences. Campbell then further questions whether “That’s cruel” is an observation sentence citing as his main reason a reiteration of the basic Quinean point that its assent is sensitive to differences among speakers with regard to collateral information (1996, p. 6). Even if all speakers would agree to the cruelty of a specified act, the dependence of further assent to such acts on other beliefs rules it out as an observation sentence. Observation sentences must be, as Campbell remarks, insensitive to such differences in collateral information, so Flanagan’s suggestion fails (1996, p. 4). But given Quine’s acceptance of the theory-ladenness of observation

sentences this type of point cannot be used to rule out the example given by Flanagan since all observation sentences are influenced by collateral information. What needs to be shown is that it cannot serve as a "highly observational" sentence of the sort described above.

We have seen that Quine's view still needs such 'highly observational' sentences that can be partially learnt on the basis of responses to relevant stimulation and which then further acquire an adult use where for most practical purposes they remain unaffected by other beliefs (see HYLTON, 2007, p. 142). The issue then is not whether there are moral observation sentences insensitive to differences in collateral information, since Quine's considered view is that no observation sentences have such theoretical immunity. Rather, the question now turns to whether there are highly observational sentences that are also moral statements, and here the key issue concerns whether one could take significant steps in learning how to correctly use such sentences solely on the basis of the appropriate stimulation.

When the issue is framed in such terms, "That's outrageous" would seem to fail as an example of a highly observational sentence, since appropriate stimulation by itself would not take the child very far in learning the full adult use of these sentence. Moving to Flanagan's suggested example, "It is cruel of that man to torture that cripple", is perhaps not much better, since it is difficult to see how this sentence could be partially learned simply on the basis of the relevant stimulation. If we follow Campbell and focus on "That's cruel", we can, I think, safely say that this is more observational than "That's outrageous". However, perhaps this too is incapable of being significantly learnt through sensory stimulation. If we begin with simpler cases such as "That's bad" we can, I think, reasonably view this sentence as an example of a highly observational moral sentence on par with "It's raining" or "There's a rabbit". This is because the child can take significant steps in learning the correct usage of this claim solely on the basis of responses to relevant stimulation. We might then construe such sentences as "That's bad" as highly observational moral sentences where the child can learn the partial mastery of its use when accompanied by the appropriate parental stimulation. Further language learning and additional stimulation over time would result in the full mastery required of correct adult usage.¹⁰ This conclusion is not only in line with Quine's final position concerning the way collateral information informs all observation sentences. But also with his further claim that the high degree of social uniformity found in our moral values is the result of careful instruction and teaching (1981, p. 61). A fuller account of the learning of such sentences would then suggest that the possibility of moral observation sentences is less of a problem for White's view than Quine thinks. We are led to the plausible suggestion that there remains in the ethical case, a number of "invariant observation reports" that help guide the construction of ethical convictions and theory, and which also provide an empirical touchstone for ethical evaluations concerning, say, the goodness or badness of certain actions, or ways of life (FLANAGAN, 1988, p. 547).

10 Quine's recent emphasis on the role of empathy in language learning might further the learning and justification of moral occasion sentences. See SHOCKLEY, 1998 for some useful discussion of this connection in Quine's later work.

These remarks need to be more directly related to White's own view, specifically with his use of moral sentiment and feeling as an empirical touchstone for ethical judgments. White's critical responses to Quine's denial of the possibility of moral observation sentences depend mostly on his softening up the observation-theory distinction in ways that Quine himself came to accept. However, he offers no constructive account that explains how he thinks feelings of moral obligation can themselves provide a sensory basis for moral observation sentences. Our discussion of the possibility of moral observation sentences has depended on specifying their connections to sensory stimulation, but not moral feeling. But without this connection, White fails to clarify exactly what role feeling plays in providing an empirical foothold like that seen with the connection of observation sentences to sensory stimulation. Quine argued that emotions unlike stimulations are not reliably coordinated with sensations. There is then, a direct causal link between a stimulation, the resulting sensation and further assent to a specific observation sentence. Emotions can only provide such connections through other beliefs and collateral information that is not widely shared. White seems to think that moral sensations can be reliably coordinated with emotions and then with certain moral conclusions, but in his response to Quine provides no explicit reason for why this is so, and therefore no account of a type of moral observation sentence that is directly tied to feeling and moral sensation. Even with the modifications to Quine's own view resulting from his full acceptance of the theory-ladenness of observation, more needs to be said on this point. If White is to maintain the view that moral sentiment can provide an empirical touchstone on par with sensation he must do more than appeal to the theory-ladenness of all observation sentences, he must give us some positive reason for why there remain "highly" observational statements that are reliably tied to moral feeling and the relevant sensations.

On this issue we need to consider White's claim that moral beliefs serve as a kind of bridge between sensations and moral feeling. His description of the reasoning involved in ethical cases emphasizes that certain premises are tied to sensory experiences, while moral conclusions are more closely associated with feelings of obligation. In between these two are moral principles that from a bridge which takes us from sensory experiences to our moral feelings.¹¹ This is the important element of his moral extension of Quine's holistic view of human knowledge where he emphasizes the importance of linking sensation to feelings of moral obligation. On this account, it is through its connection to sensation and other systematic interconnections of statements that the conclusion is ultimately tied to the relevant moral feeling. White's own view then, presents moral feelings and their associated "feeling sentences" as heavily dependent on background beliefs, and because of this they cannot be significantly learned through relevant stimulation and are generally more susceptible to error. This then disqualifies them as being 'highly' observational ones and White's analogy between science and ethics breaks down, since moral feeling cannot provide the same sort of empirical basis for ethical judgments that we saw with sensory stimulation.

11 This aspect of his view is not fully explained in his exchanges with Quine, and only finds explicit expression in WHITE, 1981, p. 36-67.

This should not, however, be taken to undermine White's moral extension of Quine's view since we have seen that the analogy between ethics and science is preserved in several key ways. First, there is good reason to accept a certain type of moral observation sentence, which is tied to relevant sensory stimulation and for most practical purposes remains independent of other background beliefs. Second, this serves as an empirical foothold for moral reasoning and deliberation, which is then further connected through other background theoretical beliefs to our feelings of moral obligation. Interpreted in this way, White's addition of moral feeling does not provide resources for establishing moral observation sentences, but through its connections to relevant sensations and observation sentences, feelings of moral obligation can help to provide further justificatory support for the moral judgments that we hold. To think otherwise, is to wrongly conclude that moral feelings offer evidential support only if they can be adequately characterized as largely independent of our theoretical beliefs and convictions, as in the case of the 'highly' observational sentences required for Quine's view. Rather than serve as a rock-bottom empirical basis for our ethical views, moral feelings serve as additional material that needs to be taken into account through its general coherence with our other moral convictions, beliefs and related sensory experience. Here, I think it is important to note one negative side of the debate between Quine and White on ethical observation sentences. The debate places too much importance on observation as the central topic with regard to the justification of our beliefs or statements.¹² Many of our beliefs, ethical or otherwise, will be dependent on collateral information not widely shared by others. But this need not be taken as presenting a serious epistemic problem, since in many cases this information is in easy reach and once available can be used in the evaluation of the sentence or belief in question. If the lack of observation is thought to undermine the common ground needed to resolve disagreements, then similar points can be made. Other sentences can be found that serve as common ground providing further opportunities to address differences of opinion and disagreement. And this would also apply to the case of moral disagreement and general moral evaluation.¹³ For these reasons and the others discussed above, White's ethical pragmatism is largely vindicated.¹⁴

References

- 12 This point is usefully discussed by FLANAGAN, 1988, p. 547 and TERSMAN, 1998, p. 95-96. Quine has also emphasized how the so-called "softer" sciences of economics, sociology and history, often lack observational checkpoints, yet still contribute to our understanding of things (1995). The lack of observational checkpoints in ethics does not then mean it cannot provide moral understanding.
- 13 Even those moral sentences that are more dependent on background beliefs and less "observational" can still be seen as providing evidence for moral judgments. For an attempt to use Quine's emphasis on empathy as a way to socially verify such sentences, see SHOCKLEY, 1998. Because all observation sentences are theory laden, I differ from Shockley in wanting to maintain that some moral sentences have a significant claim to being observational.
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