

Research Article

# An Exposition of W. V. O. Quine's Ethics and the Nature of African Moral Value

**Babatunde Olatunji Oni\*** 

Department of Philosophy, Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomoso, Nigeria

## Abstract

This paper discusses an exposition of W. V. O. Quine's ethics and the nature of African Moral Value. The paper explores Quine's naturalized epistemology and rejection of traditional notions of morality. It examines Quine's ethical methodological infirmity that rest on observation and relate it to African moral values that emphasize community harmony and relational ethics which can be attained through observation. Through critical and analytical methods of philosophical inquiry, the paper argues that Quine's naturalised ethics can be aligned with African communitarian moral structures that depend on empirical validation. The paper, while acknowledging Quine's skepticism regarding the scientific grounding of ethics, African traditions, through communal experience and oral transmission, validate moral norms via social processes. The paper concludes that both Quine's ethics and African moral values suggest that morality is an evolving, context-dependent and social phenomenon, underpinned by cultural and experiential factors rather than abstract rationalism concept. The paper will contribute to the ongoing discussions in African philosophy, ethics, and cultural studies, highlighting the importance of contextualizing moral inquiry within diverse cultural framework.

## Keywords

Quine, Ethics, African Morality, Cultural Identity and Moral Value

## 1. Introduction

Ethics involves standards of conduct that help to distinguish between behaviours that are considered right and that which are considered wrong. It is thus, one of the traditional branches of philosophy that involves in the study and the justification of moral standard. In its cognitive manner, Felix Olatunji [1] gives a concise three definitions of Ethics as a foundational branch of philosophy that is concerned with the standard by which actions are judged right or wrong when he argues that:

- (i) Ethics signify a general pattern of ways of life. In this approach, ethics studies and regulates both human

(human ethics) and animal (animal ethics) moral behaviours in a society. It asks the question of what "ought to" instead of "what is".

- (ii) Ethics is the rules of standards of human conducts. In this approach, the study of ethics by philosophers defines ethics as a rational tool of professionalism. For instance, we talk about medical ethics, teaching ethics, legal ethics, etc.
- (iii) It is a word used to denote inquiry about ways of life and rules of standard. In this view, ethics as a philosophical discipline juxtaposes the right and wrong of

\*Corresponding author: booni24@lautech.edu.ng (Babatunde Olatunji Oni)

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moral standards.

From the Olatunji's approach of what Ethics is, it can be inferred that, ethics deals with moral, duties and obligation of man in his physical environment. Although, Olatunji's argument socialized ethics which it shall be taken as a footnote to Quine's cognitive ethics as model to African moral values.

Quinean Ethics therefore in this paper, will be considered as the way Quine himself conceives ethical or moral values ought to be. That is, it would be validly argues that Quinean Ethics is Quine's conception of Ethics which is intra-human and not extended to other sub-category of ethics like, Environmental ethics, Business ethics, Medical ethics [2], etc. if this is so, then, Quinean theory of moral methodological infirm can be sufficiently justifiable. Be that is may, Quinean idea of naturalizing philosophy which is evidently succeed in his naturalized epistemology pave way for moral values reconsideration in African content. However, unlike naturalized epistemology, Quinean ethics though not holistic, seems not to have been successful because, ethics does not belong to the category of naturalism.

In the traditional Western philosophy, ethics has focused on abstract moral reasoning which was later challenged by W. V. O. Quine by advocating for a naturalised approach. Quine holds that ethics lacks the empirical grounding of science and is inherently social in nature. This paper examines Quine's views alongside African moral philosophy, which similarly emphasizes communal harmony, moral instruction and culturally situated ethical standards. Through this juxtaposition, the study will explore how Quine's insight can illuminate the methodology and content of African moral values.

## 2. Ethics and African Social Order

In African philosophy, moral values are often rooted in religious and communal life. That is, moral behaviours are traditionally seen as divinely inspired, aligning with the belief that God or the gods are the ultimate source of good conduct. While some western traditions scholars like Immanuel Kant, etc were of the opinion that, it is the moral law that brings God into being, and not the other way round [3]. That is, moral law necessitates the postulation of God, African often invert this relationship by asserting that, morality emerges from the divine order. In African context, every good behaviours are morally right and which can only come from God. The task of this paper at this juncture is not to give a univocal definition of Ethics nor construct a system of ethics which had already been done in the West. The position that will be maintained in this paper will rest heavily on Hume's argument who had earlier maintained that: "there is a difference between *what is* and *what ought to be*" [4]. This suggests that African ethics, in relation to Quine's view, leans towards a naturalized and social understanding of morality. Simply put, attempt in this conceptual analysis will socialized or naturalise ethics as Quinean contended. Here, the metaphysical presupposition in ethics

and the source of a perennial problem in the justification of ethical principles in African social order will be juxtaposed vis-à-vis the western tradition.

Ethics, as a branch of philosophy deals with issues that relate to moral obligations, duties we owe to our fellow human beings. Ethics in this regard is concerned with morality of human conduct. In the same view, Popkin and Scroll submitted that "ethics is a code or set of principles by which men live" [5]. Thus, the concern of ethics from Popkin and Scroll argument is to unravel the problems which arise in the relations of people with one another. It is appropriate to note that, ethics is a science of human conduct that examines questions such as: what is the good life for man? Why should one be moral? What is good? What is bad? What constitutes a right action? And, what makes a wrong action to be wrong?

In this content, discussion on ethics will be relatively reduced to ethical moral value. That is, moral conduct which can be evaluated or judge against the backdrop of moral standard.

## 3. A Review of Quinean's Social Nature of Morality

In Quinean Ethics, there are basically two main points: one, that Ethics is irreducibly social and two, ethics compare with science is methodological infirm. Quine raises three fundamental questions as guide to understand his Ethics:

- (i) How do we come to value the things we value?
- (ii) What is the highest good (*summum bonum*)?
- (iii) What procedures help instantiate these values in life?

In this view, explanation of the first question affirms the origin of moral standard and which can be traced to the innate ideas. That is, moral standards that are believe to be present in the mind from birth which is independently of experience or sensory input. For Quine, ethical theories or moral standards are in-built. That is, the reward-punishment bipartite is understood in line with what have been acquired innately. It is therefore essential to ask Quine which one comes first in the mind, is it belief or value? Quine outrightly argues that, for man to learn any moral behaviours, moral is being acquired by induction that one sort of event leads to another. That is, acquire any disposition of discriminatory behaviours, requires a similarity space and some ordering of episodes along valuation axis [6].

Quine, from the above argument attempt to trace our moral values; first, from the psychological point of view that is socially inductive. Social inductions in this content are "some moral behaviour that have been observed and which are deliberately acted upon" [7]. By so doing, some moral behaviour must have been tested, sorted with good and bad into another and which leads to beliefs that are open for further evaluation. Hence, these moral values are from individual to the society at large. The question is how does this moral behaviour come from individual to the society? Individual experiences lead to

moral values, and in turn contributes to the larger society. This assumption is evidence in Karl Cooper as espoused by Singer's concept of autonomous morality which is concerned about "moral beliefs and principles of individuals" [8].

This morality is, however, not independent, although, it serves as the genesis of morality, given by Quine's analysis of process of moral values. One of the problems arising from autonomous morality is that morality in this regards is not self-sufficient. It has to be actualized by another kind of morality, which is positive morality. For Quine, "morality is irreducibly social" [9]. That is, the processes of moral values from individual to societal moral values are explained detailed. Owen Flanagan [10] expatiates further by the use of mother's milk. To Flanagan, while a baby is born, it does not have the epistemic knowledge of mother's milk, whether good or bad. As far as the baby is concerned, it only values mother's milk innately not that it has the belief that mother's milk is good. Therefore, given this example, it is a primary unconditional reinforcer.

In considering the above, there are two things that need to deduce from Quineans' ethics and these are: *belief* and *valuation*. The relationship that exists between these two concepts is a *sine-qua-non* to moral actions as a social phenomenon in human behaviour. Hence, learning of moral values and behaviours by man's innate. This most perhaps inform Yoruba (African cultural ethnic group) to submit that "*inu ni iwa wa* [11] meaning, behaviours are inbuilt. That is, individual get to know moral values and behaviours over times and pass judgment through induction. By this inductive process, moral behaviours are classified either good or bad, like or dislike. In summary, moral inductive methodology helps to identify acts that are worthwhile. In Quine philosophy, constant use of different process of moral evaluation becomes "hypothetico-deductive method" [9]. By implication, it is experimented in the social realm. However, the process of this induction to hypothetico-deductive tends to realize some acts which are means to a particular end, and some are ends in themselves. This further leads to detecting the consequences of some actions, thereby leading to moral training and to some avoidance of some things and embracing some others. Hence, going by Flanagan's illustration of mother's milk, one can argue that values precede beliefs. Thus, the primary unconditional reinforcer is *infinimum bonum*, which is the lowest good.

While this process continues, beliefs about some things are known as well as their values. For Quine, "belief is the relationship between the capacities to make rational and informed choices and the value of the choices that have been made" [10]. This is what informs the concept of likes and dislikes, and most importantly moral values. This further informs doing some acts which are moral or prudential. It is important to note that while some moral values are innate, some are passed from generations to generations through mouth, that is, moral instructions, imposed by society "because they are matter to society" [9]. On a critical note,

Makinde is on the view that: "although African have not developed in written form any systematic view on ethics in a way that is comparable to that of the Western tradition of philosophy, it is obvious from the way they think and talk that there exists a basis for moral principles in their oral tradition" [7]. The implication of Makinde's argument is that, the principle of taboo in African belief for instance, was developed because it spells out some moral behaviours that are acceptable or unacceptable. In this wise, Quine is right that morality is irreducibly social as it is evidence in African moral valuation.

It is apparent to note that, morality could not have been otherwise because, it involves more than one person. Thus, a person may not make moral judgment unless he/she makes a judgment which is prepared to apply universally. By universal, we mean micro universe and not the macro universe. By implication, the definition that one can propose here for universal moral value system will be justified on the premise of ethical naturalism as an offshoot of ethical sociological. According to the definition, 'X is right' means the same thing as 'the majority of people approve X' [9]. The majority in this wise maybe context bound which is vary such as, social group, country, the world or generations to come. This however, perhaps, leads Quine to distinguish between altruistic value and ceremonial value.

Altruistic values are values that "one attaches to satisfactions of other persons, or means to such satisfactions, without regard to ulterior satisfactions accruing to oneself while, on the other hand, ceremonial values are values that one attaches to practices of one's society or social group ... without regard to ulterior satisfactions accruing to oneself" [9]. Thus, it can be deduced that the similarity between Quineans altruistic values and ceremonial values is that both appeal to behavioral dispositions, explicitly that one's interest or satisfaction is not taken into consideration. In other words, what matters is the value attached to the satisfaction of another party. Either the values attached to the satisfaction of another individual or the one attached to the practices of one's social group or society, what is important is that the value is attached not as means but an end in itself.

Quine maintains that the two classes of moral values overlap into ways. According to Quine, altruistic values are in part institutionalized and so; many take on an added ceremonial appeal. Conversely, there is altruistic value in so behaving as not to attend against a neighbour's ceremonial values. Both altruistic and ceremonial values can be related to the 'morality of a society', the practice of requiring or banning certain types of actions and praising or blaming certain types of action and praising or blaming certain dispositions of character. The implication of the above is evidence in Robert Site's argument when he submitted that; "morality is concerned with standard of conducts which are to be supported by common consensus" [12]. Morality must necessarily be supported by common consent and by this consent; this paper will, at this point, agree with Quine that morality is irreducibly social.

## 4. The Methodological Infirmity of Ethics and African Moral Standard

One of Quine's most debated claims is that ethics, unlike science, is methodologically infirm. Although, there is likely going to be little or no controversy on the fact that morality is social both in western and African traditions, for it is best appreciated among people. Put differentially, morality presupposes that there is a society that comprises people. Morality is also seen as pillar upon which such society rest. Despite this significant role of morality, and its nature, as given by Quine, morality is still not without problem both in the western tradition and African worldview. The problem identified by Quine is that Ethics is methodologically infirm, if compare with science. That is, if scientific theories can be tested against observable facts therefore, moral judgment can also rely on test findings and observable fact. This argument is succinctly put forward by Quine when he submitted that:

Disagreements on moral matters can arise at home, and even within oneself. When they do, one regrets the methodological infirmity of ethics as compare 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. Science, thanks to its links with observation, retains some little to a correspondence theory of truth; but a coherence theory is evidently the lot of ethics [9].

The above claim is grounded on two premises. One, no moral judgments qualify as observation sentence. Two, no meaningful contribution from moral judgment can be regarded as testable theories against non-moral observation sentences. By observation sentence we mean, occasion sentences that are both acceptable and rejectable in different occasion. Furthermore, a sentence is observational for a group if it is observational for each member, and if each member would agree in assenting to it, or dissenting on witnessing the occasion of utterances. This perhaps, has informed the Yoruba tradition to submit that, *Ile laa wo, ka to so omo loruko* meaning, morality starts from home. It is on this premise that the African subjected the evaluation of morality to observational justification just as Quinean submitted.

Moral values are irreducibly social; these moral standards are derived the same way scientific theories are derived. This has been explained earlier. What, however, differentiates ethics from science is the "method". The other reason is that Ethics belongs to the normative discourse. Quine's position is that there is no empirical standpoint or laid down procedures or observable principles to resolve moral disagreements and conflicts, which are evident in science. This suggests that there is a wide gap between ethics and science which may be difficult to close. Maintains that extrapolation in science, however, is "under the welcome restraints of stubborn facts;

failure or prediction" [9], and, so, extrapolation in morals has only unsettled moral values themselves to answer, and this is what the extrapolation is meant to settle. This can be interpreted to mean that there is no availability of observable facts in ethics. This is seen as a problem that denies ethics as a member or part of natural enterprise. Ethics is, to a large extent, normative, while science is descriptive. The lack of descriptive method via facts is what denies it to being a member of natural enterprise. In the same way, every moral behaviours in African are product of observational enterprise. No moral standards are out of past experiences. That is, every moral behaviours are testable and objectified before such a moral value can be regarded as ethical right and wrong.

Taking a cue from Quine's perspective of methodological infirm of the nature of ethics, our argument can be validly inferred within the context of interactions and contact amongst natural beings. This, however, is succinctly agreed by Kola Abimbola of Nigeria when he asserts that: "issue of ethics as a naturalized entity come into discussion when we consider the implications of human and/or animal actions vis-à-vis other humans and animals" [13]. The implication of this argument is that, African naturalize moral valuations are basically view in three-way relationship in both traditional and contemporary:

- (i) morality is measure in natural beings and other natural beings;
- (ii) natural beings and spiritual beings; and
- (iii) spiritual beings and other spiritual beings.

In the same view, Kwasi Wiredu of Ghana submitted that: "morality in this sense involves not just the *de facto* conformity to the requirements of the harmony of interest, but also that conformity requirements which is inspired by an imaginative and sympathetic identification with the interests of others even at the cost of a possible abridgement of one's own interests" [14]. Be that it may, Quine is correct when he argued that the empirical foothold of scientific theory is in the predicted observable event; that of a moral code is in the observable moral act. That is, moral values are experimented within the society that the moral value is being applied.

## 5. Conclusion

The paper has expounded the specific points raised by Quine as regards ethics. While his notion of ethics as irreducibly social may not be problematic, his notion concerning the methodological infirmity of ethics is problematic. As a result, scholars may not take him on the first part. This is so because, science can be seen in two forms: formal and empirical science. While he needs not to compares ethics with (empirical) science, he seems compare it with formal science.

This paper had argued at this point that, just as Quinean compared ethics to science in the western moral tradition, so also is African moral standard can be methodological infirmed in its practice and application. As such, it is evidence in this paper that; just like method of experiment and obser-



vation are applicable to science so also, ethics, especially when moral values are subjected to logical and mathematical analysis, using the methods of formal science.

From the above, one can see the power of reasoning as being important. It is important in discussing moral values, and this is why discussion of morality itself is only relevant when done with rational human persons. That is, perhaps, why the hypothetico-deductive is significant. It, therefore, means that in talking about morals, *synthetic-apriori* discussion may be necessary. It must be noted as well that ethics has been described as methodologically infirm is not to see it as damaging. It does not mean that it is not useful. As a matter of fact, it can be described as the pillar upon which moral behaviour acts characters in societies rest.

## Abbreviations

X A Variable That Represents a Group of People

## Author Contributions

Babatunde Olatunji Oni is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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- [7] Moses Akin Makinde, "African Culture and Moral System: A Philosophical Study" in *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 1, No. 2(1988), p. 3. The theory of *summun bonum*, was referred to the class of nobler values, which, will, of course, focus primarily on our relations with other people. It can also be construed as part of the resources of nature, most directly affect whether we individually flourish.
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