

CRITIQUE OF ROGER GIBSON'S "FLANAGAN ON QUINEAN ETHICS AND THE NATURE OF AFRICAN MORAL VALUE"

Babatunde Olatunji ONI

Department of Philosophy,
Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomoso
[E-mail:booni24@lautech.edu.ng](mailto:booni24@lautech.edu.ng)

&

Peter Abiodun OJO

Department of Philosophy,
Ladoke Akintola University of Technology, Ogbomoso
[E-mail:paojo19@lautech.edu.ng](mailto:paojo19@lautech.edu.ng)

Abstract

This paper attempts a critique of Roger Gibson's Flanagan on Quinean Ethics and the Nature of African moral value. It discusses how Gibson's work serves as a bridge between the Western philosophical traditions, particularly W.V.O. Quine's ethical framework. Discussion in this paper navigates the complex interplay between Quinean Ethics and the distinctive characteristics of African moral values, shedding light on the compatibility and challenges posed by their intersection. Gibson explores how Quinean Ethics, grounded in naturalistic and empirical perspectives, intersects with the diverse moral landscape of Africa. Quine's emphasis on a scientific approach to ethics, rooted in empirical observations and linguistic analysis, is contrasted with the nuanced and culturally embedded nature of African moral system. The critical evaluation probes the extent to which Quinean Ethics can accommodate the pluralistic and context-specific dimensions inherent in African moral frameworks. Keeping this in mind, this paper adopts critical and analytic methods of philosophical inquiry to examining how Gibson's discourse reshapes the dialogue between Quinean Ethics and African moral values. The critical-analytical method is adopted to engage Gibson's work for broader philosophical conversations on ethics, cultural diversity, and the universalizability of ethical theories. It explores the challenges and opportunities presented by the integration of diverse cultural perspectives into the ethical discourse, emphasizing the need for a more inclusive and globally informed ethical framework. Through a rigorous examination of the intersections and divergences between these philosophical traditions, the analysis contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved in cross-cultural ethical dialogue.

Keywords: Africa moral value, Ethics, Naturalism, Relativism

Introduction

In the labyrinthine realm of ethical philosophy, the interplay between cultural relativism and universal moral values has been a perennial point of contention. The discourse takes an intriguing turn with Roger Gibson's seminal work, "Flanagan on Quinean Ethics and the Nature of African Moral Value," which thrusts the spotlight the intersection of Quinean ethics and the rich tapestry of African moral values. This discourse, encapsulated within Gibson's meticulous examination, traverses the intellectual landscape with an aim to reconcile the seemingly disparate perspectives and unravel the intricate threads that weave together the ethical framework in diverse cultural contexts.

At its core, Gibson's exploration delves into the Quinean approach to ethics, a philosophical terrain deeply marked by the indelible footprints of Willard Van Orman Quine. Quine's influential contributions to epistemology and language philosophy have long been acknowledged, but it is the application of his ideas to the ethical domain that sparks a riveting conversation. Drawing inspiration from Quine's holistic worldview, Gibson embarks on a journey to scrutinize the ethical implications, seeking to understand the extent to which Quinean ethics can accommodate and resonate with the kaleidoscopic spectrum of African moral values. The discourse unfolds against the backdrop of the perennial debate surrounding cultural relativism and universalism in ethics. The age-old question of whether ethical principles are inherently bound to specific cultural contexts or if there exists a universal moral bedrock underpins Gibson's investigation. Through the lens of Quinean ethics, Gibson aims to discern whether Quine's holistic framework, primarily rooted in the linguistic turn, can provide a conceptual space that accommodates the nuanced and diverse moral values embedded in African cultures.

Crucially, the title itself alludes to a prominent figure in this discourse, namely, Flanagan. Gibson employs Flanagan's perspectives as a lens through which to examine the compatibility and resonance between Quinean ethics and African moral values. Flanagan's philosophical insights, particularly as they pertain to the moral domain, serve as a bridge that connects the seemingly disparate realms, making his work an invaluable touchstone for understanding the confluence of these philosophical currents. The nexus between Quinean ethics and African moral values becomes even more intriguing when one considers the socio-cultural and historical contexts that have shaped both paradigms. Africa, with its diverse tapestry of cultures and ethical systems, provides a unique crucible for examining the adaptability and inclusivity of Quinean ethics. As

Gibson embarks on this intellectual expedition, the contours of African moral values emerge as a mosaic, challenging conventional Western-centric ethical paradigms and demanding a nuanced approach that transcends cultural boundaries. In the pages follow, this paper will delve into the Gibson critical analysis in relating to the nature of African moral value. As such, the exploration of this paper through philosophical and argumentative methods of philosophical inquiry will re-affirms the content of African moral methodology as a universal concept of cultural standard. Thus, the link between African ethical universalism and cultural standard will also be established.

A review of Roger Gibson's "Flanagan on Quinean Ethics"

In the paper under review, Roger Gibson (1988) attempts to defend W. V. O. Quine against the charge of inconsistency leveled at Quine by Owen Flanagan (1982). In his paper titled "On the Nature of Moral Values," Quine makes two fundamental claims about the nature of moral values. First, moral values are irreducibly social. Second, compared to science, ethics is methodologically infirm. This alleged comparative disadvantage to ethics arises from the *fact* that scientific theories are testable by, and thus derive their justification from, empirically observable events, while moral codes can only be tested against observable moral acts.¹ Quine's alleged infirmity of ethics has attracted the attention of a good number of critics. One of such critics is Flanagan's rejection of Quine's claim, based on Flanagan's view that this Quinean claim is inconsistent with Quine's overall philosophy.

Flanagan's Critiques of Quinean Ethics

In his bid to show this inconsistency, Flanagan presents a summary of Quine's Naturalist Holism. According to Flanagan, if Quine's holistic naturalism is correct and philosophy is continuous with science, then "all meaningful discourse requires a naturalistic account". If this is correct, then ethics, like other disciplines, requires a naturalistic account.² To the extent that such a naturalistic account is available, ethics is on par with science. Thus, Flanagan's criticism of Quine consists in the identification of a dual standard with which Quine assesses science and ethics. Flanagan rejects this dual standard by arguing that Quine's standard for assessing ethics is *unnecessarily* different from his standard for assessing science. Flanagan goes on to present what he believes to be an appropriate; account of ethical naturalism, one that he believes is consistent with Quine's holistic naturalism.

¹. Quine, W.V.O., "On the Nature of Moral Values". *Critical Inquiry*, 5.3, 477

². Flanagan, O., "Quinean Ethics", *Ethics*, 93.1, 58

Flanagan's objection to Quine may be understood as a scheme of conditional possibilities: if Quine's holism is accepted, then theoretical coherence is the lot of ethics; theoretical coherence is also the lot of science; but if correspondence to *fact* is the lot of science, then correspondence to *practice* is the lot of ethics. As such, Flanagan argues that the view that scientific theories can be tested against independent observable facts of nature is based on an archaic view of science, a view of science that even Quine rejects. The argument is that this view is inconsistent with the general Quinean holistic theme, according to which all checks [of any theory within a system] are ultimately intersystemic.³ If this is true, intersystemic coherence is the means of justifying both scientific and ethical theories. On the other hand, if it is granted that corresponding observable facts may be brought in to justify scientific theories at some point, the same can be done in the case of ethics. Corresponding ethical practices can be used to justify ethical theories.

Gibson's Defense of Quine against Flanagan

Gibson's attempt to defend Quine from this objection is based on the claim that Flanagan fails to distinguish between *radical* and *mitigated* holism. Radical holism is the version of holism that precludes any possibility of bringing in observed facts about the world to justify certain scientific claims or theories. Mitigated holism, on the other hand, holds that observation sentences (on which scientific theories are based) have their own empirical meanings.⁴ As such, observable facts in the world may be used to test the logical status of such observation sentences. If necessary, such sentences and the theories based on them may be reviewed. Thus, given the mitigated version of holism, the relationship of correspondence between scientific theories and the world retains its significance. Arising from the failure to distinguish the two versions of holism, Flanagan incorrectly presupposes that Quine subscribes to a radical form of holism.⁵ Thus, Gibson summarizes Flanagan's argument against Quine as follows:

- P1: Quine's rejection of the two dogmas of empiricism (namely, the analytic-synthetic distinction and radical epistemology reductionism) supports and is implied by holism
- P2: Holism precludes *any* talk of correspondence obtaining between the sentences of a theory and the world.
- P3: holism eliminates first philosophy, thereby opening the way for naturalism.
- P4: Holism-cum-naturalism applies equally to science and ethics.

³. Flanagan, O. "Quinean Ethic". 70

⁴. Gibson, R. F., "Flanagan on Quinean Ethics. *Ethics*, 98.3, 537

⁵. Flanagan, O. "Quinean Ethic". 71

P5: Quine in effect denies P4 on the ground that “science, thanks to its link with observation, retains some title to a correspondence theory of truth; but coherence theory is evidently the lot of ethics”.

//C: Quine's ground for denying P4 is inconsistent with his acceptance of P2⁶

It is evident from the summary of Flanagan's argument presented above that much of the strength of the argument relies on Quine's holism. Gibson believes that Flanagan's argument, though valid, is unsound. The unsoundness of the argument arises from the falsity of P2 (relative to Quine's overall philosophy). Gibson therefore states that “P2 overstates the scope of Quine's holism”.⁷ Quine's holism does not preclude the possibility of testing scientific theory against observable facts in the world. Rather, Quine allows that an empirical test may be brought in to confirm or disprove a whole theory consisting of many observation sentences, not individual observation sentences. The test for the status of individual sentences is their coherence with other sentences within the theory.⁸ Given this understanding, it is false to interpret Quine's holism as precluding all forms of correspondence between science theories and the external world. Empirical facts about the world thus retain a place of pride in the assessment of the methodology of science and the correspondence relation that Quine ascribes to science. It follows from this, therefore, that given Quine's naturalistic holism, science cannot be assessed *absolutely* on the basis of mere coherence relations.

Gibson notes that Flanagan seems to have envisaged the foregoing outcome. However, Flanagan's response to it consists in maintaining that if there is a correspondence relation between scientific theories and observable facts, such a correspondence relation also holds between ethical theories and ethical practice.⁹ As such, to the extent that science relies on a correspondence theory of truth, the same can be said about ethics. This argument is succinctly captured in the following words by Flanagan:

The corresponding role to observation, of course, is played by practice... The best way to find out whether some particular hunk of the theory of good life is correct is to try it, to practice it. The value of truth telling, for example, is ultimately not merely maintained because of intersystemic consistency considerations. It is maintained because of these and because it works; truth

⁶. Gibson, R. F., “Flanagan on Quinean Ethics.”, 536-537

⁷. Gibson, R.F., “Flanagan on Quinean Ethics.”, 536

⁸. Quine, W. V. O., “Two Dogmas of Empiricism.” *Reading in Philosophy of Language*, (ed) Jay F. Rosenberg and Charles Travis. 70

⁹. Flanagan, O., “Quinean Ethics.” 71

telling helps to maximize our aims, our interests. So, Quine is wrong that the empirical foothold of moral code is “in the observable moral act.” It is in the consequences of the observable moral act.¹⁰

Gibson argues that Flanagan's proposed justification of ethics based on practice or the consequences of moral acts is similar to the causal reduction of moral values to other moral values, as suggested by Quine.¹¹ But arguing in line with Quine, Gibson maintains that such a reduction does not elevate the methodology of ethics to the status of science. As such, compared with science, ethics remains methodologically infirm. Gibson's argument against Flanagan (in defense of Quine) is clearly summarized in the last paragraph of the paper, as follows:

In sum, I have argued that Flanagan's critique of Quine's ethical theory (which alleges that Quine's holism-cum-naturalism is inconsistent with his claim that ethics is methodologically infirm) fails because it erroneously construes Quine as advocating a radical form of holism. Thus, Flanagan cannot legitimately conclude that the coherence theory of truth is the lot of both ethics and science. Further, I have argued that Flanagan's “naturalistic reformulation of the problematic part of Quine's ethical theory” fails to demonstrate that ethics as well as science has some title to the correspondence theory of truth since Flanagan has not shown that noninstrumental moral values enjoy the kind of objectivity characteristic of science.¹²

A Critical Assessment of Gibson's Paper

In assessing Gibson's paper under review, two questions are very important. First, is Gibson correct to claim that Flanagan erroneously construes Quine as advocating a radical form of holism? Second, is it true that Flanagan's ethical naturalism fails to prove that ethics and science are methodologically similar? It appears that the first question is better answered in the negative. Gibson is right to argue that Quine advocates a mitigated version of holism. However, *the claim that Flanagan ascribes the radical version of holism to Quine* appears to be based on a misinterpretation of Flanagan's arguments.¹³ Perhaps much of this misinterpretation arises from the manner in which Flanagan himself presents some of the arguments in his paper. Even Flanagan concedes this much. Flanagan also believes that Quine is a mitigated holist who does not ascribe the coherence theory of truth to science. On this modified interpretation of Flanagan's

¹⁰. Flanagan, O., “Quinean Ethics.” 71

¹¹. Gibson, R. F., “Flanagan on Quinean Ethics.” 539

¹². Flanagan, O., “Quinean Ethics.” 71

argument, Gibson's first critique of Flanagan fails. However, the failure of Gibson's first critique does not neutralize the second question.

In addressing the second question, it is important to note that Gibson's rejection of the consequence of Flanagan's ethical naturalism is based on the *fact* that moral practice, which is the corresponding basis for justifying ethical theories (according to Flanagan), suffers from a lack of objectivity that is characteristic of the observation sentences that justify scientific theories. This may be rephrased as ethics lacks corresponding moral facts, which can serve as an objective basis for justifying ethical theories and claims. As far as this situation holds, Gibson's stand is that Flanagan's ethical naturalism fails to show what it was set to show.¹⁴ An appropriate issue to consider at this point, therefore, is whether there are moral facts or not. In addressing this issue, a good deal of caution is required to avoid the error of placing things that are essentially not morally justifiable. Note that Flanagan agrees with Gibson (and Quine) about this deficiency in the methodology of ethics. They only differ on the methodological implications of that attribute of ethics.

Perhaps, the view that there are no moral facts arises from viewing moral facts from within an erroneous framework. When moral claims are assessed from the same perspective as observation sentences, perhaps we are involved in a categorical mistake. This is because the subject matter in science is empirically inclined, while the subject matter of ethics is human actions. It may then be possible to identify a more appropriate framework within which the assessment of the methodology of ethics is more applicable. Such a framework is presented by Gbenga Fasiku.¹⁵ Within this framework, moral facts are countenanced as possible states of affairs, and these states of affairs are abstract entities.¹⁶ The justification for this account of moral facts is the possibility of making statements that seem to presuppose the existence of such moral facts. For instance, questions such as “Can't you *see* that *this* is *wrong*?” “Could you imagine this being *right*?” makes sense because it appeals to the “fact of the wrongness [or rightness] of a particular act.”¹⁷

Given this framework, the justification of ethical theories lies in their correspondence to certain moral possibilities. The possible moral worlds are independent of individual ethical practices and

^{13.} Flanagan, O., “Pragmatism, Ethics, and Correspondence Truth: Response to Gibson and Quine.” *Ethics*, 98.3, 542

^{14.} Gibson, R. F., “Flanagan on Quinean Ethics.” 540

^{15.} The framework under reference here is based on the notion of possible world semantics. See, Fasiku, G., “Moral Facts, Possible Moral Worlds and Naturalized Ethics” in *Ethica & Politica*, X.2, 264- 265

^{16.} Gibson, R. F., “Flanagan on Quinean Ethics.” 540

are, as such, objective. It is perhaps true that such a system cannot provide ultimate justification for ethics, but, as Flanagan has pointed out, something similar is true of the method of science.¹⁸ It may also be objected that the notion of possible moral worlds depends on the prior acquisition of certain moral values. As also noted by Flanagan, the same is applicable to science, where the idea of observation sentences also depends on the a priori acquisition of certain pictures of the world via language. If the foregoing arguments are true (and I believe they are), then Flanagan's rejection of the alleged infirmity of ethics stands. Thus, on this point, Flanagan is right while Quine and Gibson are wrong.

A Discourse on African Moral Value and Moral Naturalism

The rich tapestry of African cultures is interwoven with a complex array of moral values that have evolved over centuries, shaping the ethical landscape of diverse societies across the continent. In exploring the concept of African moral values and their connection to moral naturalism, we delve into a nuanced understanding of the ethical frameworks that guide human behavior within these communities. On the concept of naturalize ethics as argued by Flanagan and other contemporary philosophers, Akin Makinde, strongly agreed with David Hume, who had, to his knowledge, given a definitive answer to the question of *is* and *ought* as a difference between what is and what ought to be.¹⁹ It is noted that only a grasp of *what is* can be knowledge, whereas statements about *what ought to be* cannot be verified. To put this argument in an epistemological sense, moral statements are not cognitive (as argued by Quine and Gibson), so the question of knowing theoretically what is moral does not arise.

In relating the above view to African moral value, it is not to be doubted again that religion is surely a competing foundational theory of morals in African societies. In reaffirming this position, John Mbiti succinctly argued that:

According to African peoples, man lives in a religious universe, so that natural phenomena and objects are intimately associated with God. They are not only originate from Him, but also bear witness to Him. Man's understanding of God is strongly colored by the universe of which man is himself a part. Man sees in the universe not only the imprint but the reflection of God; and whether that image is marred or clearly focused and defined, it is nevertheless an image of

^{17.} Fasiku, G., "Moral Facts, Possible Moral Worlds and Naturalized Ethics." *Ethica & Politica*, X.2, 267

^{18.} Fasiku, G., "Moral Facts, Possible Moral Worlds and Naturalized Ethics." *Ethica & Politica*, X.2, 265 [my emphasis]

^{19.} Makinde, M. A. "African Culture and Moral Systems: A Philosophical Study" in *Second Order: An African Journal Of Philosophy*, 1988, Vol.½., 1

God, the only image known in traditional African societies.²⁰

From the above, Moral naturalism, as a philosophical approach, asserts that moral values and principles are inherent in the natural world, grounded in human nature and observable realities. In the African context, moral naturalism finds resonance in the interconnected relationship between humans, nature, and the spiritual realm. African cosmologies often depict a holistic worldview where humans are considered integral parts of a larger cosmic order. This interconnectedness is reflected in the moral fabric of African societies, where ethical principles are deeply intertwined with the natural environment and spiritual beliefs. For instance, many African cultures revere nature and consider it a source of moral guidance, with certain animals or natural elements symbolizing specific virtues. Furthermore, the spiritual dimensions of African moral values often emphasize the existence of a divine force that influences human conduct. Moral obligations are seen not only as social contracts but also as cosmic duties aligned with the natural order of the universe. This infusion of the spiritual into the ethical provides a unique perspective on moral naturalism within African thought.

It will be well clarified here that African moral value is based on a natural ground that cannot be tested, as Quine maintained, or observable, as Gibson reviewed. Among the Yoruba Nigerians, African moral values are naturalistic, as they argued in one of their adages, “*Ba se waye lari la'ari, Enikan e yan ana e lodi*,” meaning we be what we are on earth; no one keeps malice with his or her in-law. Having said this, the naturalistic nature of African moral values is as diverse as the continent itself, reflecting the multitude of ethnic groups, languages, and historical experiences. Despite this diversity, certain commonalities exist, providing a foundation for shared moral principles. These values are often deeply rooted in communal life, emphasizing interconnectedness, harmony, and the well-being of the community over individual pursuits. For instance, Ubuntu, a philosophy prevalent in many African societies, encapsulates this communal ethos. It posits that “a person is only a person through others”,²¹ highlighting the interconnectedness of individuals within a community. This philosophy underscores the importance of compassion, empathy, and mutual support, forming the bedrock of African moral values. It is apparent to note here that, while African moral values exhibit resilience and continuity, they are not immune to external influences and modern challenges. Globalization, urbanization, and the influence of Western ideologies have brought about shifts in societal norms

^{20.} Mbiti J., *African Religion and Philosophy*, (New York: Double Day & Co. Inc., 1969), 62

and values. Balancing traditional moral values with contemporary realities poses a challenge for many African communities, requiring thoughtful adaptation without compromising the essence of their ethical foundations.

Conclusion

In this discourse on African moral values and moral naturalism, we have explored the intricate tapestry of ethical principles that shape the diverse cultures of the continent. Rooted in communal living, deeply connected to nature, and influenced by spiritual beliefs, African moral values offer a unique lens through which human conduct can be understood. As these societies navigate the complexities of the modern world, the preservation and adaptation of these values become crucial for maintaining a harmonious balance between tradition and progress. From the foregoing, this paper has discussed, in line with Flanagan's critique of Quinean, that morality as per African Moral value cannot be compared with science based on the following: (1) moral questions and values are resolvable with reference to the notion of the human condition, which is generally defended as common human nature. (2) The argument that African moral value is rooted in communalism and universalism is that, based on a common understanding of core moral propositions that prohibit things like murder, deception, betrayal, cruelty, torture, etc., it is possible—so it is argued—to extract a core of universal moral principles from this common understanding and to ground a trans-cultural morality on it. (3) African moral philosophy is radically pluralistic and heterogeneous, which cannot be compared as scientifically and methodologically infirm.

Given the above propositions, African moral values suggest a standard framework that defines what a community would be and which cannot be placed on the scientific evaluation, as argued by Quinean. This is so because a community is discussed under the African moral system “as an ongoing association of men and women who have a special commitment to one another and develop a distinct sense of their common life.”²² This paper agreed with this definition in support of Flanagan's rejection of the alleged infirmity of an ethical stand. That is to say, we are not arguing in this paper that African ethical principles should, either, be based on the principles of induction or science or turn African moral values into mathematical equations or axiomatic systems. However, our argument in this paper therefore suggests that African moral value is naturalistic such that, the concept of moral term in African world view is ultimately definable in

^{21.} Ramose, M. B., “The Ethics of Ubuntu” in Coetzee, P. H. and Roux, A. P. (ed), *The African Philosophy Reader Second Edition*, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 379

terms of facts about the natural world.

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^{22.} Coetzee, P. H. and Roux, A. P. (ed), *The African Philosophy Reader Second Edition*, 322