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A COHERENCE THEORY OF TRUTH IN ETHICS

ABSTRACT. Quine argues, in “On the Nature of Moral Values” that a coherence theory of truth is the “lot of ethics”. In this paper, I do a bit of work from within Quinean theory. Specifically, I explore precisely what a coherence theory of truth in ethics might look like and what it might imply for the study of normative value theory generally. The first section of the paper is dedicated to the exposition of a formally correct coherence truth predicate, the possibility of which has been the subject of some skepticism. In the final two sections of the paper, I claim that a coherence theory in ethics does not reduce the practice of moral inquiry to absurdity, in practice as well as in principle.

A Coherence Theory of Truth in Ethics

In 1978, Quine published the following cryptic remarks:

Disagreements on moral matters can arise at home, and even within oneself. When they do, 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. Science, thanks to its links with observation, retains some title to a correspondence theory of truth; but a coherence theory is evidently the lot of ethics.¹

A great deal of effort has gone into proving Quine wrong on this point. Attempts have been launched by Morton White,² Owen Flanagan,³ and others.⁴ The motivation for resisting Quine is quite strong: a coherence theory of truth seems to render illegitimate, in certain respects, reasonable, rational moral inquiry. We seem to think, when speaking about moral matters, that our sentences are judged against an independent criterion; independent, that is, from what we merely *happen* to believe. A coherence theory of truth in ethics, it is claimed, is

unable to accommodate this basic intuition about the nature of moral reasoning.

In this paper, I want to do a bit of work from within Quinean theory. Specifically, I want to explore precisely what a coherence theory of truth in ethics might look like and what it might imply for the study of normative value theory generally. The first section of the paper is dedicated to the exposition of a formally correct coherence truth predicate, the possibility of which has been the subject of some skepticism. In the final sections of the paper, I claim that a coherence theory in ethics, first, does not reduce the practice of moral inquiry to absurdity – if a coherence theory is the “lot of ethics,” this need not be inherently shameful. A coherence theory can, in the words of David Wiggins, “persevere...in the familiar processes of reasoning, conversation, and criticism.”⁵ Second, though this is somewhat more speculative, there is reason to think that beyond its practical implications, the coherence theory is acceptable in principle – the coherence theory is congruent with a plausible strain of metaethical intuition. Though Quine’s science/ethics dichotomy is likely to repel many realists, a coherence theory of truth in ethics can accommodate much that is the concern of those with realist intuitions (more, certainly than Quine assumed). Though controversial, I will not attempt to defend Quine’s science/ethics dichotomy here (Quine’s *theory* certainly seems to lead us in this direction, contra Flanagan, et al.⁶) except indirectly, by showing how a coherence theory of truth in ethics can provide a reasonable accommodation of moral argument and metaethical intuition.

A COHERENCE THEORY ARTICULATED

Throughout the paper, I shall use the term “moral system” (or, in wider contexts, “normative system”) to refer to a type of Quinean web of belief built from moral sentences – a moral system contains beliefs about the evaluation of actions and states of affairs.⁷ Moral systems are characterized socially, in a way similar to scientific systems.⁸ Scientific terms are learned via

interaction with fellow language users – similarly, moral words are taught socially, often parentally, and moral beliefs and observations, are a result of social inculcation – moral schemes can thus often apply to one’s whole community, assuming a sort of consistency in the transmission of moral learning.

One might object to a strict delineation between scientific and normative systems. Norms certainly apply to the construction of scientific systems of the world (such as the norm that truth ought to be sought after, that systems of belief that do not accurately describe the world ought to be rejected, etc.). But there is no difficulty in claiming that two systems, one built from observation sentences and containing the results of mature scientific inquiry, the other built from the adjustment of norms toward the goal of coherence, can’t inform each other. Normative inquiry might inform science as to the proper goals of scientific pursuit. Similarly, science might inform ethics with regard to predictable consequences of actions, perhaps, or it might supply crucial information for the evaluation of observable states. Interplay between systems does not show that we cannot talk of two distinct systems, or that, somehow, a single truth predicate must apply to both.

TRUTH

A preliminary formulation of a coherence theory of truth in ethics might look like this:

T1: A normative sentence x is true if and only if it is part of a normative system and that system is coherent.

T1, as it stands, is unacceptable. T1 seems to posit of a certain sentence, x , say “Calley acted wrongly”, that it can be true without reference to any particular system. Just so long as there is *some* coherent system out there that accommodates x , x is true. A speaker, S , could say “Calley acted wrongly” and “Calley acted rightly”, and would not be committed to a contradiction, given that there exist coherent systems (perhaps believed by no one) wherein each sentence is a part. If this is the

case, however, little can be done in terms of systematizing normative sentences. If x and *not* x can both be true when spoken by *the same speaker at the same time*, coherence is impossible, for there could be no possible way to amend systems even on the basis of consistency – all normative sentences are true, excepting only self-contradictions. Thus, if T1 is held as the proper formulation of truth in ethics, coherence is meaningless. Any system of moral sentences, no matter how inconsistent on its face, is coherent.

A possible remedy is to relativize truth to a system. A moral sentence, on this proposal, is true relative to the given system of which it is a part:

T2: A normative sentence x is true in a normative system L if and only if x is part of L and L is coherent.

Certainly any normative sentence (so long as it is not self-contradictory) is going to be true *in some normative system*, but T2 eliminates the difficulty of two mutually contradictory sentences being true as spoken by the same S . A sentence x is true as spoken by S if x is part of a coherent system that S believes.

T2's relativization of truth to a system is necessary, but not sufficient. Certainly, we should like to say, when S says with confidence: "Hitler acted wrongly," this sentence is true. However, normative systems to which speakers actually subscribe are rarely, if ever, coherent. But this means that *any* moral sentence uttered by a speaker whose normative system is even slightly incoherent will be false.⁹ But if we are judging moral sentences solely on the basis of the moral systems of which they are a part, we ought to be able to avoid an error theory. A theory of truth that dooms virtually all normative utterances to falsity is of little use over and above the correspondence theory.

This problem is avoided by construing coherence as a sort of cognitive ideal – even though a particular system *isn't* coherent, if it is reasonable to think that a sentence x would be part of a system duly adjusted, expanded, and rid of incoherence, then it is true. This could be accomplished by the Quinean doctrine of minimal mutilation: a number of moral sentences are held with confidence, these are treated as the "center" of the web of belief,

revision taking place at the periphery. Incoherent moral systems are thus revised keeping, in so far as is possible, the sentences in which the most confidence is asserted fixed.¹⁰ Consider T3:

T3: A normative sentence x is true in a system L if and only if either x is a member of L and L is coherent, or x is a member of L^* where L made coherent according to the doctrine of minimal mutilation yields L^* .

T3, I claim, accurately reflects the procedure of moral reasoning and deliberation. Certain important ethical truths are treated as fixed, such as “unnecessary or undeserved killing is wrong,” “Hitler was wrong,” etc. When regions of a normative system are fuzzy or incoherent, one attempts to revise that system in light of moral sentences that are held with confidence. If I want to make a somewhat controversial claim, such as “infanticide, in certain cases, is justified”, I will start with a set of sentences that all interlocutors hold with confidence and attempt to show how “infanticide, in certain cases, is justified” can fit into a coherent system (L^*) that keeps such sentences intact (whether or not L^* is, in fact, believed). Thus, on the coherence theory, one has reason to accept a moral sentence if it coheres with a belief one holds strongly, that complements those beliefs that form the center of one’s L -system, or those sentences that are consistent with moving one’s L system closer to the idealized L^* system. In addition, one has reason to accept a *system*, i.e., to adopt a moral system as one’s moral web of belief, if it makes coherent antecedent moral beliefs one holds strongly, consistent with the doctrine of minimal mutilation (more on this below).¹¹ This view of the acceptance or rejection of certain moral sentences or systems, it seems to me, best coheres with the established practice of moral inquiry, and reasonable standards by which moral argument is assessed.

COHERENCE

T3, I think, is a good starting point. But problems remain. Common to any coherence theory of truth is the problem of characterizing what exactly coherence is supposed to be. As Richard Kirkham puts the matter:

The term ‘coherence’ as used by coherence theories has never been very precisely defined. The most we can say by way of a general definition is that a set of two or more beliefs are said to cohere if and only if (1) each member of the set is consistent with any subset of the others and (2) each is implied (inductively if not deductively) by all of the others taken as premises or, according to some coherence theories, each is implied by *each* of the others individually.¹²

For starters, consistency alone is not sufficient, since “Calley acted wrongly” and “I ought to eat an egg salad sandwich for lunch” surely don’t form a coherent normative system. Some kind of relationship or connection between sentences is required. I propose that these connections need only consist in the capacity to be derived by other sentences in the system, thereby displaying a relationship of mutual implication. A proper characterization of coherence, therefore, will satisfy two constraints: consistency and derivability. But, of course, normative sentences alone are not going to be sufficient to derive all other normative sentences; other tools, such as requisite non-normative sentences are required for the derivability condition to be satisfied. (I will treat the derivability constraint as satisfied if a sentence is derivable from *all* other sentences taken together, rather than each sentence individually – the latter seems unreasonably strong.)

C1: A normative system L is coherent if and only if, for all normative sentences x , if x is a member of L , x is consistent with all other sentences of L and is derivable by a system of deductive logic with all other sentences of L and any requisite non-normative sentences available as premises.

C1, at first glance, looks like it might work. If all sentences of L are derivable by the others, this would certainly seem to suffice as an explanation of the relationship between constitutive sentences. Example:

Contents of L : (...“Unnecessary or undeserved killing is wrong”, “Killing unarmed non-combatants is an act of unnecessary or undeserved killing”...)

Requisite Non-normative sentences: (...“Calley, on March 16, 1968, ordered soldiers under his command to kill unarmed non-combatants in the Vietnamese village of My Lai”...)

Normative sentence (x) (also a member of L): “Calley acted wrongly”

The relationship between x and the further sentences of L is thus displayed here – x is derivable in terms available via C1; given certain non-moral sentences, x is an implication of the additional sentences of L .

Two additions to C1 are needed. Not all members of a coherent theory are going to be derivable via a system of deductive logic. Take, for instance, a general normative principle like “Lying is immoral”. Principles of this sort, presumably, are often supported by extrapolation from particular instances. But, of course, “lying is immoral” is not deductively derivable from these instances, just as “all emeralds are green” is not deductively derivable from the sum total of green emeralds. An account of inductive generalization must be included to augment a system of deductive logic (such an account might also be expanded to include abductive inferences – I will hold judgment pending the results of inquiries concerning the legitimacy of abductive reasoning). In addition, the relevant set of implications is required, given that general normative principles (such as “torture is wrong”) are often held with confidence with little exposure to particular cases (though, regrettably, the reverse is often true, at least in the case of torture), thus not allowing a sufficient number of cases for inductive generalization. In addition, consistency can often only be ascertained by looking at particular instances and implications of generalizations:

C2: A normative system L is coherent if and only if, for all normative sentences x , if x is a member of L , x is consistent with all other members of L and their normative implications and is derivable by a system of deductive logic or inductive generalization with all other sentences of L and any requisite non-normative sentences available as premises.

For coherence, I shall settle on C2. The relevant truth predicate for moral sentences, therefore, is T3, wherein coherence is defined as above. There are three problems associated with the formal correctness of this notion of truth, however. I shall consider these now.

OBJECTION: DERIVABILITY

The derivability constraint I have heretofore been insisting upon requires a word of defense.¹³ First, it might be objected that there is no way to ascertain coherence without circularity – each sentence has to be derived from other sentences that in turn must be derived (often in terms of the former sentence). But this is no particular problem. In attempting to ascertain the coherence of a system, we are merely looking to see if there is a sufficient relationship between the constitutive sentences. The derivability constraint is thus intended to express a relationship of mutual implication. We start with a given sentence x and ascertain whether it is derivable. If so, we move on to the next sentence, y , and check to see if *it* is derivable from all other sentences in the system, including x .

The second objection to the derivability constraint is more powerful. Certainly, we like to say, a moral sentence held with a high degree of confidence is true. If, however, the derivability constraint is taken seriously, sometimes we must jettison these sentences, *even if there is nothing inconsistent in the system*. Consider the following situation. Imagine that I have a large number of coherent beliefs about a specific moral topic, but none of these beliefs implies or is implied by the following sentence, x : “Hitler acted wrongly”. Now suppose, also, that I hold x very strongly. It seems that, in an L^* system, x ought to be discarded on the grounds of coherence – minimal mutilation requires that we reject x . But surely this is an unintuitive conclusion. Can it be that, merely because we have no *other* beliefs that imply x , x ought to be rejected?

One possible way of avoiding this conclusion is by claiming that, given our confidence in x , minimal mutilation would not require giving x up, but would require supplementing the system with a principle, y , “Unnecessary or undeserved killing is wrong”, say, which would allow the derivation of x . There are two associated difficulties with this suggestion. The insertion of a principle without further cases seems arbitrary; one could, with an equal claim to coherence, insert z : “Germans with moustaches act wrongly”, which would, of course, imply x . Put

another way, even if we settled on some principle from which we could derive x , our system would remain incoherent, one case surely does not form a proper inductive base for a general moral principle.

As far as I can tell, I am forced to conclude that a system with one rogue, but strongly held, belief is incoherent; the rogue sentence must be rejected. I will give two reasons why I think this is not as wrongheaded as might be thought. First, for a system to be coherent there must be some sort of relationship between constitutive sentences beyond mere consistency; recall the unattractiveness of describing a set of completely unrelated, though consistent, sentences as coherent. The reasoning for this is reflected in my second consideration. The original intuition that gave rise to this problem, i.e., that strongly held moral beliefs ought to be held as true, is not borne out in practice. If, in moral discussion, we happen upon an interlocutor with one strongly held moral belief, we are likely to think him or her misguided in holding that belief if he or she cannot give us *reasons* for thinking that belief true. Merely saying “I believe x very strongly” is not good enough. In moral discussion, we expect that beliefs held fixed should have some established connection with individual cases or with general moral principles; without such support they should be jettisoned. The intuition that a strongly held rogue sentence must be true, therefore, is not supported by the practice of moral deliberation. Holding a sentence strongly without further support suggests irrationality.

One further comment on the derivability condition: problems such as the one above have a tendency to display the sharpest contrast between the current theory and generally realist moral theories. One central claim of moral realism (and, I think, a helpful one in determining the oft-slippery line between realism and anti-realism) is that moral sentences are true or false regardless of our beliefs.¹⁴ In most cases I am able to accommodate this intuition, perhaps in a weak form, given that coherence is defined with reference to a cognitively ideal L^* system and not merely our system of beliefs *as is*. Nevertheless, in an important sense, moral truth does depend upon our

beliefs – in a cognitively ideal system there must be some support for each sentence; there must be *other beliefs* from which you could derive any, no matter how strongly held, belief. In this sense, the current theory violates realism’s demand that moral truth be divorced from belief. In the case of a system with one rogue belief, additional beliefs make all the difference. I hereby capitulate: Quine’s dichotomy seems to lead us down this path. Nevertheless, there are things to say in favor of this feature of the coherence theory, a case I intend to make near the end.

OBJECTION: CIRCULARITY

C2 can, I contend, capture all necessary relationships between moral sentences within a moral web of belief. But both C1 and C2 have a major difficulty. Definitions of coherence such as C1 and C2, whether for normative sentences or not, are going to make explications of coherence truth like T3 blatantly circular. Consistency and deductive derivability (and to a less rigid extent, inductive derivability), are defined in terms of truth – that two sentences can both be true, that a system of logic is truth preserving, that a generalization, following a certain number of instances, is likely to be true, though revisable. If a definition of truth relies on coherence as defined by C2, truth appears on both sides of the equivalence. To define consistency merely by “a system of deductive logic or inductive generalization” simply isn’t enough. One has to be able to make the case that that system of derivation is truth preserving. If we’re using a system of derivation to define what truth *is*, i.e., what it means to be truth preserving, we’re in trouble.¹⁵

But the circularity problem, at least as far as a coherence theory of truth *in ethics* is concerned, has a solution. The solution is informed by the intuitive principle that the coherence of any cognitive system is not a normative question; rather, it is a question about the world, about whether a system of beliefs coheres.¹⁶ Therefore, the question of the coherence of a normative system is a straightforwardly scientific one (taking, again, Quine’s theory as given). And given that there is a *different truth*

predicate for science, there need be no circularity – entailment can be defined in terms of correspondence truth, thereby defining the notion of coherence truth.

This need not be as paradoxical as it sounds. The coherence of a belief system is a question to which the correspondence theory of truth straightforwardly applies. In addition, recall that both scientific systems and normative systems are mutually informative. Norms characterize the general maxim that science ought to search for truth, that false beliefs should be rejected, etc. Science informs ethics with the factual content of certain states of affairs that are then normatively appraised (including possible consequences of actions, say). Science can reasonably form the basis of a truth predicate that is applicable to normative systems – it can investigate and determine whether a normative system is coherent with an eye to consistency, deductive and inductive derivability, etc.

Whether, for example, normative systems are consistent is a matter of the logical relationships between moral terms (right, wrong, moral, immoral, good, bad, ought, ought not, etc.) and whether the sentences of the system and their implications can all be true (true, here, is defined by the scientific truth predicate). Of course, a la Quine, because normative sentences do not have a proper link with observation, in point of fact none of these sentences are true on a correspondence theory. But false sentences, of course, can still be judged according to their consistency and ability to support generalizations.¹⁷

An investigation of the coherence of a moral system will thus take as primary the logical relationships between moral words. To take an example, let's say a system consists in the following four sentences:

- w. Unnecessary or undeserved killing is wrong.
- x. Calley acted wrongly.
- y. Hitler acted wrongly.
- z. One ought not kill unnecessarily or undeservedly.

This system is coherent only if, first, w–z are consistent. This, of course, is going to depend on the surface logic¹⁸ of “wrong”

(this need not be a moral question – the logic of moral words could be as a descriptive, empirical question; *how* people treat the relationships between moral terms in moral discourse). For our purposes, the relevant logical characteristic is the relationship between “wrong” and the normative prescription, “ought”. It seems clear that, as a matter of the surface meaning of “wrong”, if an act is wrong, one ought not perform it. These four sentences, therefore, are consistent, i.e., they all can be true even if the truth predicate we’re using is the scientific, correspondence truth predicate.

Along with requisite non-normative sentences, sentences x and y can be deductively inferred from sentence w ; sentence w can be inductively generalized from sentences x and y (in point of fact, two cases seem a poor inductive base, but I shall ignore this for the present example). Sentence z can be deductively inferred from sentence w , given the relationship between “wrong” and “ought not”. This system of sentences survives the derivability constraint. Using the scientific truth predicate (along with the surface grammar of normative terms), it is possible to show the above normative system coherent (though appraised in terms of the correspondence truth predicate, each sentence is, strictly speaking, false¹⁹).

OBJECTION: MIXED INFERENCES

A further problem can be characterized as follows: “In your system, you allow derivations involving both normative and non-normative sentences, for example, ‘Lying is wrong, Nixon lied, therefore, Nixon was wrong’. But derivations like these are not legitimate, given that the first two premises of the argument are to be judged according to different truth predicates. Valid inference is characterized by the ability to preserve truth, but in your system, there are two different kinds of truth. Straightforwardly valid inferences like the one above must be judged on some other basis than truth preservation, because truth preservation requires some single truth predicate for its explication. In addition, there is a related difficulty of mixed conjunctions:

'Hitler had a moustache and was immoral,' though clearly *true*, is not straightforwardly true on either a coherence or a correspondence model. Elements of both must be combined, but how this is to take place is most likely an unsolvable difficulty.'²⁰

First, it must be stated that inferences involving normative and non-normative sentences are justified when attempting to determine whether a normative system is coherent. In such cases, all that is required is that the inference be valid, not sound. Treating all sentences in such derivations as applying the scientific, or correspondence, truth predicate is perfectly legitimate. Normative sentences come out false, but validity of inference is preserved. The problem, however, is when mixed inferences are used to gain knowledge, when we expect that at least some of the moral sentences are going to be *true* (or, at least, when the question of their truth is worthwhile).

Avoiding problems associated with mixed inferences is going to require some additional theoretical apparatus. Because inferences that contain normative and non-normative sentences are clearly not characterized from within either of these individual systems, I propose a third cognitive system, a metasystem, from which inferences involving both normative and non-normative sentences can be evaluated. The metasystem has all relevant tools available, including the truth predicates of both normative and non-normative systems. In addition, the metasystem has access to all sentences that appear in both scientific and normative systems.

Mixed inferences take place in the metasystem. But note that the metasystem is not forced to adopt either a coherence or correspondence truth predicate, but can adopt a different standard of validity. Call this standard "*true_a*". A sentence appearing in the metasystem is *true_a* if and only if it is true as assessed by the truth predicate of the relevant, original cognitive system. *True_a* is thus defined in terms of the original correspondence or coherence truth predicates. For example, normative sentences are *true_a* if and only if the system of which they are a part coheres (roughly speaking, of course). Non-normative sentences are *true_a* if and only if they correspond to

the world (in whatever sense required by descriptive science). Thus validity in the metasystem is characterized by the preservation of *truth_a*, not *truth*.

Conjunctions of normative and non-normative sentences function in a similar way. Because they are found only in the metasystem (given the inability to fit in either the scientific or ethical systems), if both sides of the conjunct are true_a, the conjunction is true_a. This means, of course, that conjunctions are true according to the truth predicate of the system of which they are a part – they are evaluated according to the truth_a (normative: coherence, scientific: correspondence) of each of the conjuncts.²¹

In like fashion, one could expand the above account to deal directly with sentences and derivations that involve the predicate calculus, sentences that are evaluated by their satisfaction by a domain of objects. For example, let *Mx* mean “x has a moustache” and *Ix* mean “x acted immorally”. The open sentence *Mx&Ix* is *satisfied_a* by {Hitler} if Hitler satisfies_a “x has a moustache” and “x acted immorally”. Satisfaction_a, like truth_a, is defined as satisfaction as judged by the relevant cognitive system. Following Tarski, scientific systems require a recursive definition of satisfaction. However, satisfaction in a normative system does not: satisfaction is not used in the definition of truth. One could, therefore, as Tarski says, “define [satisfaction] by saying that given objects satisfy a given function if the latter becomes a true sentence when we replace in it free variables by names of given objects.”²² Defining satisfaction in this way for a moral system involves no circularity. Thus *Ix* is satisfied by {Hitler} if “I{Hitler}” (“Hitler acted immorally”) is true, i.e., is part of a coherent *L* or *L** system.

Briefly, I should like to flag what is perhaps the most important objection to a coherence theory of truth in ethics, though I will save in-depth discussion to the end. A traditional problem with coherence theories one is the problem of coherent, but false, systems (precisely: systems that contain false sentences). Put in this way, this objection would be blatantly question-begging, insofar as my theory of truth entails that such systems do not exist. But the problem can be put another way: pick any heinous

moral proclamation you like, x : “the slaughter of puppies is morally good,” say. There will certainly be some coherent collection of sentences out there that contains x . Thus the problem is not that coherent but *false* systems exist, but rather that coherent but very-unintuitive-and-don’t-we-really-deep-down-think-they’re-false systems exist.

My answer to the above worry foreshadows the discussion in the final sections. It is certainly true from “the point of view of the universe” that such theories are true (or, at least, have as great a claim to truth as any other coherent system). Nevertheless, any person holding that x is false can perfectly legitimately say that x is false. Any intuition that a particular moral sentence is false is hereby accommodated. For those who think it’s false, it *is* false. Thus the problem must be, not that these things are true when we really think they’re false, but that *had we believed them, they would be true*. At first glance, this seems a particularly stifling problem for the theory at hand. And, indeed, I am committed to this, seemingly problematic, implication. But hope is not lost. I shall claim that this implication is, in fact, congruent with a plausible description of metaethical intuition. Though it certainly sounds (perhaps wildly) wrong, under circumstances where x is believed, we should not simply dismiss the implication that such circumstances might change the truth-value of familiar moral doctrines.

I thus conclude my exposition of a coherence theory of truth in ethics. I now turn my attention, not to issues regarding formal characterization, but to the theory’s implications for normative moral inquiry in practice as well as in principle. As I have been promising throughout, I intend to claim the coherence theory does not commit us to a radically different picture of the practice of everyday moral discourse. I thus begin with an examination of the coherence theory’s implications for the cognitivism of moral “reasoning, conversation, and criticism”.

COHERENCE, MORAL DELIBERATION, AND COGNITIVISM

Importantly, the process of looking for coherence in one’s normative system closely represents the way moral agents

actually deliberate and discuss moral matters. Normative inquiry “argues from widely accepted but weak premises to more specific (and controversial) conclusions.”²³ A coherence theory of truth thus nicely complements the process of normative inquiry as it is actually practiced not only in moral philosophy, but also in everyday life. Situations present themselves, moral judgments are issued. The resulting system is then assessed: does this judgment conflict with anything I believe strongly? If so, the judgment, perhaps with a sense of reluctance, is given up in favor of the more strongly held moral principle. In other cases, the particular judgment is rendered more powerful, general principles must be revised. Achieving coherence *is* the process of normative inquiry.

For example, if two interlocutors argue about the assessment of William Calley as regards the My Lai massacre, one who favors dispensing blame will begin with a premise upon which both are expected to agree, that the killing of non-combatants is wrong, say, especially in cases where no good is possible as a result of the action. The disputants therefore attempt to decide if that belief is more strongly held than conflicting ones (for example, one does not act wrongly if one acts under orders) and attempt to see, in a sort of L^* system, if moral blame placed on Calley is appropriate – if “Calley acted wrongly” can be held in a coherent system keeping the most strongly held moral beliefs fixed.

This point has profound implications for the cognitivism of moral disputes under a coherence theory of truth in ethics. At heart, the current theory is able to do many things that traditional non-cognitivist theories (such as emotivism) are not. The acceptance of the truth of moral sentences is a matter of cognitive judgment, whether it would make sense for the coherence of our system to adopt a given sentence, knowing what we hold to be the most certain of our moral beliefs. This, of course, can be a source of disagreement. But disagreements are not hopelessly unsolvable. For two persons subscribing to similar normative system, a resolution is motivated by looking at firmly held sentences and determining their proper entailments, performing acceptable

instances of inductive generalization, treating like cases alike, etc. On a coherence theory of truth in ethics, moral dispute is not reduced to mere emoting.

One might think a special problem arises when considering cases of *system*-acceptance vs. *sentence*-acceptance (as in the case above). Though whether or not to accept a given sentence when one subscribes to a (more or less) coherent system is relatively straightforward, the choice between two equally coherent systems is much less so. Situated as I am, with a roughly coherent *L* system, what licenses me in continuing to hold my system in the face of alternative *L* systems that I could choose at any time? If coherence is the mark of truth, isn't my decision to hold my coherent system vs. some other coherent system merely arbitrary? While there is something of a failure of cognitivism for inter-system *discussion* (see below), from the point of view of individuals (or relevant groups, communities, etc.), systems are selected relative to their coherence with antecedently strongly held belief. The choice of moral system is thus not arbitrary – it is conditioned by those claims we find most difficult to revise. This claim is not mysterious: certain normative sentences we believe quite strongly and reasonably expect that under all but the most extraordinary circumstances, these sentences will come out *true*.²⁴ Accepting an alternative, though coherent, normative system comes at a high cost in terms of system mutilation. Thus theory change obeys the rules of Quine's holism; it is conservative, altering entrenched postulates only in light of significant pressure to do so – again, I claim, congruent with the practice of moral inquiry.

Of course, given that the truth of moral sentences is defined only relative to systems, the current theory is open to the rejoinder that cognitive discussion of moral matters is only possible *within* a normative system. But this, perhaps, is not good enough. Moral systems abound, it is claimed, and outside one's moral system we can only "hope with Stevenson that these epithets may work their emotive weal. In an extremity we can fight, if the threat to the ultimate value in question outweighs the disvalue of fighting."²⁵

Outside one's own normative system, all cognitive bets are off. Strictly speaking, contradictory sentences spoken by different speakers, participants in different L^* systems can *both* be true, understood from within their particular system. In such cases, cognitive argument fails. Speaking to someone of a different L^* , one cannot convey a moral truth to which agreement is applicable – truth is defined as internal to one's own system. Beyond a system, moral discussion cannot aim at a commonly applicable moral truth; speaking to outsiders involves rejecting the cognitive pursuit of coherence with strongly held moral beliefs. Emoting seems the only possible route.

Nevertheless, and by way of mitigating the counter-intuitive nature of this suggestion, consider the *practical* question of failure of moral cognitivism. The greater the agreement between agents one is expected to encounter on a particular L^* system, the smaller the worry becomes concerning the necessity of violence. It would certainly seem absurd to characterize moral inquiry and argument as non-cognitive if a certain L^* applied to an expansive majority of the world's moral agents. If so, the practical difficulty of ethical discussion beyond one's own system is rare. In a situation where one can expect, generally speaking, to interact with persons of his or her own systematic persuasion, moral inquiry is cognitive; the pursuit of moral truth is a matter of cognitive moral judgment, taking as central the coherence of one's moral system with moral beliefs held very strongly. So the question of cognitivism becomes tightly bound to relativism. If moral systems are many, the greater the problem with cognitivism becomes. If moral systems are few, perhaps *very* few (and situations of cognitive failure rarely, if ever, present themselves), the greater the practical claim to cognitivism for a coherence theory of truth in ethics – the smaller the worry for everyday moral practice and inquiry. Whether relativism is true, then, is a question usefully tied to the objectivity (in one sense, which I illuminate below) of moral systems and inquiry.

COHERENCE AND OBJECTIVITY

I have argued that the cognitivism of everyday moral inquiry, and hence the coherence theory's ability to maintain our ordinary understanding of moral inquiry and argument, essentially depends on the question of objectivity. My discussion here will center on a somewhat unlikely place: anthropology. I will argue there is good evidence to suggest that the relativity thesis, i.e., that L^* systems are hopelessly divergent, is false. If so, this is crucial for actual, everyday, moral argument on the coherence theory – failures of objectivity (and cognitivism) will never come up as a real, practical worry for those living in our world. (Importantly, the implications of the evidence I present here go deeper than a merely practical claim – these details I will present in response to a final objection.) First, however, a word on “objectivity”.

There are at least two senses of “objectivity”. Often “objectivity” seems to refer to something like an ontological thesis, i.e., that there are objects or real properties out there to which ethical truths correspond. J. L. Mackie equates the claim that ethical sentences are objective with the claim that ethics is part of “the fabric of the world.”²⁶ Thus Mackie claims that “objective values” “would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe. Correspondingly, if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else.”²⁷

If objectivity requires “entities” to which ethical values “correspond” that are thereby a part of the “fabric of the world” about which we learn through “some special faculty of moral perception or intuition”, I confess the current theory is not objective. Following Quine, moral sentences have no established contact with the world; they are judged solely on the basis of the coherence of the system of which they are a part. However, there is another sense of objectivity that I think the current theory might lay claim to that, it seems to me, does justice to the objectivity intuition. One need not posit some sort of moral ontological category,

but merely insist that every moral sentence has a determinate status, true or false, and this status is applicable for all interlocutors. Moral disputes, in principle, can be settled.

This is the kind of objectivity I'm after – ethics is not part of the fabric of the world, but is part of the fabric of human experience and interaction – and it is the sort of objectivity upon which the ordinary practice of moral inquiry rests.²⁸ This form of objectivity is, of course, controversial. According to Mackie there is a “well-known variation in moral codes from one society to another and from one period to another, [including] differences in moral beliefs between different groups and classes within a complex community.”²⁹ Communities, societies, classes, groups, etc. *differ* in their moral views. What is more, each of the contradictory systems has a chance at being *coherent*. Starting with different central premises, it is possible for one community, one group, to subscribe to an L^* the sentences of which are incompatible with the L^* of another group. Given the fact of moral relativity, some moral disputes, perhaps many or even most, are intractable – a single true answer that coheres with the disputant's moral systems will not be available. Rational resolution of ethical matters is only possible if two interlocutors subscribe to the same system, or reasonably similar systems such that a single L^* can apply to both.

This way of reading the question of objectivity, as does the previous discussion of cognitivism, treats the problem of objectivity as essentially a practical question: whether the practice of moral argument is fundamentally altered by the adoption of a coherence truth predicate; whether moral systems are too diverse to allow rational resolution of moral questions. Thus, this question of objectivity is to be settled by an investigation into contingent anthropological fact. *If* it is the case that many, even most, moral disagreements are intractable given the wide variety of *believed* coherent moral systems, the current theory of truth in ethics has no claim to objectivity. If, however, most persons can be said to subscribe to reasonably similar moral systems (such that they could be made coherent by the same L^*) moral inquiry is objective. All disputes can, in principle, be settled.

Many philosophers believe that the balance of support is for the former thesis, i.e., that a significant number of ethical disagreements are going to be intractable. Gilbert Harman, for example, seems to think that the range of moral disagreement makes it impossible for us to say with any legitimacy: “Hitler shouldn’t have acted as he did.”³⁰ We can say that Hitler’s actions were wrong: given our moral standards, any act of that kind is wrong (this is presumably a moral principle held with a fair degree of confidence in, at least, our system). But because Hitler subscribed to a radically different normative system than we do, he had no moral reason to act differently than he did. Thus an anthropological claim regarding Hitler’s own moral code becomes a claim about the objectivity of ethical judgment. We have nothing to say to Hitler, we can only condemn acts like Hitler’s for those who subscribe to our moral system.

I will not pretend to have the tools to settle this matter conclusively here. Nevertheless, evidence has recently appeared that moral systems are *not* as divergent as once thought. If this is the case, it may be reasonable to think that a single L^* can make all L systems coherent. This is, of course, a hypothesis. Nevertheless, Martha Nussbaum writes:

As a descriptive thesis about how people really do make moral judgments, relativism is clearly false. People are resourceful borrowers of ideas. The ideas of Marxism, which originated in the British Library, have influenced conduct in Cuba, China, and Cambodia. The ideas of democracy, which are not original to China, are by now extremely important Chinese ideas. The ideas of Christianity, which originated in a dissident sect of Judaism in a small part of Asia Minor, have by now influenced conduct in every region of the globe, as have the ideas of Islam. As Aristotle said, “In general, people seek not the way of their ancestors, but the good.”³¹

A reasonable way to interpret the sharing of ideas that has taken place from culture to culture is by supposing some core of strongly held values that allows the transmission of normative ideas from one culture to the next. Though some cultures do not act in accordance with the ideas of reciprocity, for example, or equality, this need not be a result of a radically different normative viewpoint. Rather, it may be an instance of what Michelle Moody-Adams calls “affected ignorance”: “Affected

ignorance – choosing not to know what one can and should know – is a complex phenomenon. But sometimes it simply involves refusing to consider whether some practice in which one participates might be wrong. Sometimes – perhaps much of the time – cultures are perpetuated by human beings who are uncritically committed to the continuance of a way of life.”³² Affected ignorance seems a reasonable explanation of the actions of communities that differ radically from a set of widely shared moral ideals. If this is true, moral discussion with Hitler, for example, is possible. People often act contrary to their own moral ideals, though for widely divergent reasons (self-interest, weakness of will, strong desire to maintain a way of life, etc.) Divergent actions need not signal divergent moral schemas.

Even if the possibility of divergent moral schemas cannot be ruled out here, the possibility of the transmission of ethical values lends credence to the idea that divergent moral systems need not be a *permanent* feature of the moral landscape, that the reach of moral inquiry is wide, indeed. Moral agents are not blind to the introduction to new ideas and ideals – intercultural moral dialog is no mere fiction: “the ideas of every culture turn up inside every other, through the Internet and the media. The ideas of feminism, of democracy, of egalitarian welfarism, are now ‘inside’ every known society.”³³ Although it is certainly true that normative systems differ around the edges, a coherence theory can claim objectivity (given that coherence is defined as a cognitive ideal – L^*). In addition, the transmission of moral ideals from system to system provides reason for thinking Quine wrong: even *if* we are traversing unfamiliar moral waters, we need not resort to mere emoting or, in extremity, fighting (of course, we fight “in extremity” even within our own moral systems). The transmission of moral knowledge is possible within systems that have merely “points of contact” – these can be exploited for the purposes of rational, cognitive moral discussion even in uncharted seas (my confidence in this conclusion is, I think, borne out by the anthropology). And the evidence suggests that cross-system discussion is efficacious in leading to (what might be called) a shared L^* moral system. Thus those who subscribe to varied normative systems can have

cognitive moral discussion. That moral revision leads to the same L^* is, I claim, a tenable working hypothesis.

Perhaps not all the anthropological facts are in. I leave this possibility open. There is good reason, however, to believe that the coherence theory of truth in ethics can fulfill the demands of objectivity and a robustly cognitive picture of everyday moral “reasoning, conversation, and criticism”. Moral dispute is not reduced to hoping, with Quine, that moral “epithets...work their emotive weal”.

OBJECTION: (MERELY) SKIN DEEP

There is, I think, a legitimate worry that my previous discussion of the coherence theory and the implications for the cognitivism and objectivity of moral sentences and moral systems has simply missed the point. What I have suggested so far is that, first, any individual person, here and now, can make moral claims perfectly consistent with her deeply held moral views, i.e., each of her most important commitments will, in fact, be true (assuming, of course, their coherence). In addition, the coherence predicate is able to accommodate our everyday practice and understanding of the efficacy and import of moral inquiry. The anthropological evidence, insofar as it bears the weight of my suggestion, shows us that the moral views held in the world we inhabit are amenable to assimilation into the same L^* system. But, one might claim, this is not enough. These suggestions are merely practical, which suggests, wrongly, that the problem of moral cognitivism and moral objectivity is a merely practical problem, i.e., about what we can and can't say, about the sorts of debates we might actually have in real life, how those debates are constructed. Though the practical issue is important, it is not the extent of the problem of, e.g., objectivity.³⁴

Rather, the notion of objectivity also involves modal claims: what *would have been true* if things had been different, if standards had shifted.³⁵ Indeed, it is clearly an implication of the current view that, had our L^* -system turned out in radically different ways, moral truth would have an entirely different character. Not to put too fine a point on it, but the My Lai

massacre, even, might turn out to have been perfectly justified if only we truly, and coherently, *believed* it was. Most, I assume, would reject this suggestion.³⁶

Though this implication is surely problematic, at least at first glance, I shan't give in to the suggestion that it yields a *reductio* of the current view. My response, again, involves the anthropological data – assuming that humanity is able to engage in productive moral argument (moral systems made coherent within the same L^* system), this is no mere accident. I submit that the practical possibility and fruitfulness of moral argument, stretching to the assimilation of moral views to a single L^* system, represents a deep fact about the nature of humanity and the evolution of humankind, generally. It is not merely luck that we deeply condemn the My Lai massacre, that we believe strongly the holocaust was fundamentally unjust (or that our L^* system contains them, arrived at via open and honest dialog). That we so strongly accept such things expresses a deep feature of our lives and our interaction with the world around us. Put bluntly, the possible world wherein “standards have shifted” is a possible world *very* far from our own.

If so, it is time to reconsider the seemingly devastating suggestion that the coherence theory implies, e.g., that if we were simply to *believe* that the My Lai massacre is justified, it thereby is. What this suggestion forgets to mention is what must be true *if* we were to believe the My Lai massacre is justified – what the circumstances that surround such a deeply (and honestly, with all the facts, etc.) held belief must be. The world around us would be enormously different. It would certainly be difficult to recognize – the development of sentient beings might have occurred in an entirely different way. The interactions of persons with one another would be wholly unlike they are in the world in which we live. Given this, I believe it is perfectly cogent to believe that in worlds so divergent from ours, moral truth might, in fact, alter. Our fundamental beliefs about moral truths, insofar as they developed within *this* world, may simply be inapplicable in such divergent cases.

Many realists deny this claim in favor of the view that moral truths are necessary, applicable to every possible world.

Nevertheless, I believe there is a strain of metaethical intuition that is amenable to the suggestion that, in circumstances radically divergent from our own, alternative sets of moral standards are, in fact, perfectly legitimate. Just as we are perfectly justified in thinking that the My Lai massacre was an event of moral horror, we are also justified in believing that, should persons disagree in possible worlds quite different from actuality, whether they are justified will depend upon what they believe, which in turn depends upon their concrete history, circumstances, existence, and evolution. In this sense I diverge from realist intuition, and proudly – though our world can come under the jurisdiction of one L^* system, other worlds need not, depending on the major differences in the circumstances of life, sentience, and agency.

So, I claim, the objectivity and cognitivism implied by the current view is robust, but incomplete. It is, however, objectivity enough to satisfy most, if not all, of our considered metaethical judgments. It diverges from realism only in cases where, in point of fact, we ought to diverge. The question “What if we believed the My Lai massacre was justified” is answered with “in such a case, the My Lai massacre *would* be justified”. But this is not the end of the story. We would accept the My Lai massacre only in radically altered circumstances. Confronted with such divergence, strong realist intuition might, in fact, waver. It is not unreasonable to expect *some* failures of, say, cognitivism and objectivity. It is a virtue of the current view that it accepts such failures, but only in possible worlds far removed from our own.

WHY COHERENCE?

So far, this paper has established two claims: first, that a coherence theory of truth in ethics is not technically absurd – it can be established consistently, deflecting suggestions that it succumbs to insurmountable technical worries, e.g., of the kind suggested by Tappolet; second, that it is not metaethically absurd – it is consistent with ordinary argument and a plausible strain of metaethical commitment. But a further question remains. Lack of absurdity does not entail believability. By way

of conclusion, I shall offer a few considerations that motivate acceptance of the current theory.

Quine states, in *The Roots of Reference*: “I think that what sets morals apart from scientific theory is a substantive point of modern scientific theory itself: a scientific doctrine as to the origins and basis of morality. Science sees the moral law no longer as coeval with the cosmos, but as the work of society.”³⁷ Quine, here, latches on to an important and compelling thought: that ethics is, at heart, the work of humankind, of sentient creatures as they evolve, develop, and come to understand the world around them. This thought fits nicely with a coherence theory of moral truth: ethics is tied intimately to beliefs – duly pruned and adjusted taking as central the most closely held postulates – about ethics, by beings as they are, as they believe they ought to be. In this respect, ethics is fundamentally different than science, and this is reflected in a bifurcation of truth predicates, accommodated here. For those who believe Quine’s point, in addition to Quine’s previous, though more controversial, point concerning moral sentences and their relationship to observation, the motivation for accepting a coherence theory of ethics should be clear.

Of course, Quine’s doctrines are controversial. For those who remain skeptical, I offer a third consideration, foreshadowed by my discussion of objectivity and cognitivism. There I suggested the realist’s strong proposal that moral truths are necessary violates a more or less plausible line of thought that radically different worlds with radically different conditions of life and history may, in fact, justify different moral views, views beyond rational resolution of moral argument. This intuition is clearly subject to denial. Nevertheless, for those who find such a line of thought plausible, the coherence theory does a better job than traditional (realist-compatible) theories of truth of capturing the most plausible metaethical stance. The current view has the power to condemn divergent moral views in this world (and does so in a way that is familiar), while remaining open to the possibility that other worlds (and, perhaps, wildly different circumstances within this world) produce substantially different, justified, moral outlooks. While the coherence theory can accommodate much that is close to the heart of realism, it offers

an important alternative for those who are tempted by the thought that moral sentences, while entrenched by human society and evolution, do not reach the status of necessity.³⁸

NOTES

¹ Quine, W. V. (1981): 'On The Nature of Moral Values' in *Theories and Things*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 63.

² Morton White (1998): 'Normative Ethics, Normative Epistemology, and Quine's Holism' in *The Philosophy of W. V. Quine*, ed. Hahn and Schlipp, Chicago: Open Court, 2nd Ed., 649–662. See also White's *What Is and What Ought to be Done*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981.

³ Owen J. Flanagan (1982): 'Quinean Ethics' in *Ethics* 93, 56–74.

⁴ Crispin Wright, for example, claims that moral sentences can fulfill a kind of correspondence intuition. See note 28.

⁵ David Wiggins, (1987): 'A Sensible Subjectivism?' in *Needs, Value, and Truth*, Oxford: Blackwell, 210.

⁶ See Roger F. Gibson, (1988): 'Flanagan on Quinean Ethics' in *Ethics* 98, 534–40. See also Quine's "Reply to Morton White" in Hahn and Schlipp, 663–5.

⁷ Whether a coherence normative system could include additional norms beyond ethics, including prudential norms, norms of etiquette, etc., is a problem I do not intend to solve here – it is certainly possible, though such a suggestion creates problems that I shan't go into here.

⁸ Quine, (1960): *Word and Object*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 80–85.

⁹ Or, at least, *not true*. But I will assume, for the time being, that normative utterances satisfy the principle of bivalence.

¹⁰ Though I will not offer a full account, "confidence" in moral sentences might be characterized as the general reluctance to admit as false when confronted with additional moral argument or experience. There seems to be no possible argument that could allow us to revise certain moral judgments, i.e., of the general prohibition on killing, for example, or the *prima facie* equality of persons. Others, such as a belief that euthanasia is permissible, or that violence is never justifiable, might be given up in light of further arguments or experience. The former set, then, are held with confidence (although, of course, confidence comes in degrees).

¹¹ Thus I'm assuming here that individuals or groups *have* antecedent moral beliefs, some very strongly held – though I won't go into great detail concerning the status of such beliefs, it seems reasonable to think they are constituted, say, by evolutionary pressures or are given rise to by strong emotional responses or pro-attitudes, etc. (For example, the strong aversion to infant killing might come about as a result of evolutionarily endowed emotional responses toward baby killing.) Though, of course, these beliefs

are subject to revision, given the Quinean doctrine of minimal mutilation, one could think of them as those beliefs that are held “with greatest confidence” in performing the process of revision toward an L^* system.

¹² Richard L. Kirkham, (1992): *Theories of Truth: A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 104.

¹³ The following objections were suggested to me by Jonathan Cohen and Nellie Wieland, respectively.

¹⁴ See David O. Brink (1989): *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 7.

¹⁵ See Kirkham, p. 107.

¹⁶ Though the answer to this question may imply normative conclusions (insofar as one’s normative system contains some dictum or other concerning the coherence of one’s belief systems), it need not; *whether* a system is coherent can be separated from this question’s normative implications.

¹⁷ Notice that applying the correspondence theory to normative sentences need not (and does not) have any particular metaethical heft – it is a technical device that allows us to ascertain the answer to the question we’re really after, i.e., whether our L or L^* systems are coherent.

¹⁸ I say “surface logic” to distinguish my position from R. M. Hare’s. Hare seems to think that a full characterization of the logic of ethical terms yields a robust normative theory (for Hare, a version of utilitarianism). However, keeping the logic of moral terms, as I use the word, fixed, it is possible to have two mutually contradictory, but individually coherent, systems (say utilitarianism and Kantianism). The issue here is not the logic of moral terms. Hare’s position, however, seems to rely on a more robust notion of what the logic of moral terms consists in. By “surface logic”, I simply mean the relations of implication and contradiction. The relationship between “right” and “maximization of the good”, as I see it, is not a matter of the logic of normative terms. The relevant characteristics of “ x is right”, as far as I’m concerned, are “one ought to perform x ”, “ x is not wrong”, etc.

¹⁹ I will follow what I think is Quine’s position, i.e., that normative sentences evaluated on a correspondence truth predicate yield an error theory, i.e., that all normative sentences are false. This is contrasted with the position that normative sentences have *no* truth-value on a correspondence theory of truth. Certainly such a position would be damaging to my explication of normative coherence in terms of scientific principles. Nevertheless, the error theory, as I said, is commensurate with Quine’s writings, and is supported, I believe, by intuitive philosophic considerations. Horwich, for example, seems to support such an error theory (Paul Horwich, *Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 1998), 78), as does, of course, J. L. Mackie (J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), ch. 1).

²⁰ The thrust of this objection is stated in Christine Tappolet’s “Mixed Inferences: A Problem for Pluralism about Truth Predicates” in *Analysis* 57,

209–210, and “Truth Pluralism and Many-Valued Logics: A Reply to Beall” in *Philosophical Quarterly* 50, 382–5.

²¹ In the end, I find talk of a metasystem only appropriate for theoretical matters. In the rest of the text I will speak loosely, assuming that problematic mixed inferences and conjunctions are evaluated in the metasystem, even though this is not made explicit in each case.

²² Alfred Tarski (1999): “The Semantic Conception of Truth” in *Truth*, eds. Blackburn and Simmons, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 129.

²³ John Rawls (1999): *A Theory of Justice*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Rev. Ed., 16.

²⁴ As I stated above (note 11), these beliefs arise in a number of ways, perhaps through evolutionary pressures, entrenched pro-attitudes, etc. These deeply held beliefs might be thought of as “guides” for minimal mutilation – the desiderata by which we accept or reject moral theories – though they, of course, are open to revision in light of recalcitrant moral belief and the pruning and adjustment of our *L* systems. But just as the truths of logic, say, or mathematics are treated in Quine’s holism, for example, we try to accommodate these strongly held beliefs as much as possible *in practice*.

²⁵ Quine, “On the Nature of Moral Values”, 65. Quine here refers to C. L. Stevenson, whose work on emotivism is detailed in *Ethics and Language* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1944).

²⁶ Mackie, p. 15.

²⁷ Mackie, p. 38.

²⁸ See Railton (1996): “Subject-ive and Objective” in *Truth in Ethics*, ed. Hooker Oxford: Blackwell. The question of correspondence reappears: Crispin Wright, for example, claims that the existence of mind-dependent facts can result in satisfaction of a “Correspondence Platitude” by moral sentences. Wright claims that a statement fulfills a certain correspondence intuition if “matters stand as it affirms” (“Truth in Ethics” in *Truth in Ethics*, 12); since “Calley acted wrongly” accurately reflects the way moral matters stand, i.e., that Calley acted wrongly, moral sentences can fulfill a kind of correspondence. Wright is, perhaps, correct. But this is not sufficient to justify the application of a correspondence theory of truth for moral sentences. First, mind-dependent moral facts must be described with reference to the *L** system – therefore relying upon the notion of coherence. Corresponding to a moral fact, therefore, simply reduces to a sentence being present in a coherent *L** system. Correspondence does no work beyond the coherence theory articulated here.

It is important to notice, however, that Wright does not think a correspondence theory of truth, strictly so called, is applicable for ethics. He settles for “superassertibility” (which is cast as a kind of undefeated warranted assertion). Although I do not have the space to go into detail here, I focus on *coherence*, rather than superassertibility, first, because it is congruent with the way that ethical matters are judged by moral agents –

finding out what moral matters are the most crucial, performing revision, and searching for a coherent L^* system. Second, superassertibility seems rely on the notion of coherence, anyway. “Moral truth, for the anti-realist, will be durable justifiability in light of the standards that discipline ordinary moral thinking,” (“Truth in Ethics”, 11). But the standard that disciplines ordinary moral thinking, as we have seen, is *coherence*. And, as I will be claim below, the coherence theory as I have presented it has a reasonable (though contingent) claim to establish the durable justification of sentences within a coherent L^* system (as a result of the anthropological thesis of limited moral disagreement). Claiming that for a moral sentence to be true, here and now, it must be durable in light of any conceivable additional evidence seems too strong; just as, in Quine, no statement is wholly immune to revision, it is conceivable that certain facts about us, or our world, or the nature of our society, might alter some strongly held moral commitments. This, however, does not mean that we are not perfectly legitimate in thinking those moral theses (and the sentences present in a coherent L^* system) *true*. Requiring durable justification in light of any further evidence does not seem to allow us what we want out of a theory of truth in ethics, namely, the ability, here and now, to describe our most strongly held moral commitments (and their implications) as true. The durability of truth in ethics, however, is not given up completely by this theory, as I hope to show.

²⁹ Mackie, p. 36.

³⁰ Gilbert Harman, (1977): *The Nature of Morality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 109. Harman’s thesis is also stated in *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* with Judith Jarvis Thomson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

³¹ Martha Nussbaum, (2000): *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 48–49.

³² Michelle M. Moody–Adams, (1997): *Fieldwork in Familiar Places*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 101 pp. Moody–Adams’ book is a sustained defense of the objectivity thesis I present here, made much more compelling by a masterful command of the significance of certain anthropological facts. My analysis says little that is not contained, already, in Moody–Adams’ illuminating work.

³³ Nussbaum, p. 49.

³⁴ I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for calling this crucial point to my attention.

³⁵ There are two ways of reading the phrase “had been true if standards had shifted”. The first is a *de re* reading: how would we judge an act or institution z in a possible world where *those persons* believed something about z contrary to our evaluation of z ? Certainly, says the coherence theory, we need not alter our evaluation of z depending upon how different people evaluate z . Evaluations are judged from *our standards*. (What people believe in some possible world is not relevant to *our* evaluation of an act in

that possible world, just as whether a person is *called* Nixon in a possible world does not determine whether he actually *is* Nixon (see Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).) The second, more problematic reading, is *de dicto*: in a possible world where *our standards* have changed would “*x* is moral” be true in that world? This is a question of the necessity of our moral beliefs, distinct from the question of whether an act would have been moral *given* our beliefs.

³⁶ Briefly, I should like to diffuse a worry that the current view is actually *self-defeating*. The coherence theory articulated here implies a meta-claim, i.e., that were we to shift our standards to accept, say, infant torture, infant torture wouldn’t be wrong. But, as the objection runs, this straightforwardly contradicts a first-order view central to (ordinary, common-sense) moral systems, that it is *not* the case that were we to shift our standards to accept infant torture, infant torture would be acceptable. Notice that this objection only works if the second claim (the denial of the meta-claim) is itself a first-order moral sentence; if it were a second-order claim, it would merely be false, implying no formal worry for the coherence view. However, if it is a first-order claim, it seems as though the coherence theory is straightforwardly self-defeating: the theoretical structure of the coherence theory conflicts with sentences the coherence theory itself claims are *true*. Nevertheless, I think it is implausible to view the second claim as straightforwardly normative, to be evaluated in a normative system. Rather, it is a statement *about* a normative system, about how normative systems are to be constructed – a claim the coherence theory says is *false*. It is no less a theoretical/scientific claim than the claim that were our standards to shift, alternative moral sentences would be justified. (In fact, it is merely the denial of this straightforward second-order claim.) These claims, given the theory as articulated, most naturally appear in the scientific system (or, perhaps, the metasystem, if normative and theoretical claims are conjoined in certain cases). Thus there is no worry about the coherence theory being self-defeating. Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for calling this point to my attention.

³⁷ Quine, (1974): *The Roots of Reference*, LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 51–2.

³⁸ Thanks are due to Jonathan Cohen, Gila Sher, and an anonymous reviewer for *Philosophical Studies*. I should also like to thank Jennifer McCrickerd for judicious care of these ideas in their infancy.

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