



HARE ON MORAL LANGUAGE

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The moral theory that R.M. Hare propounds is known as Prescriptivism. In his two prominent books- *The Language of Morals* (1952) and *Freedom and Reason* (1963), we find a clear account of the prescriptive theory. According to Hare, a moral judgment must have the following three important components. In his words, "It does require, however, three main premises which are to be found there, and which constitute the three most important truths about moral judgments."¹ These three important components are-(1) "Moral judgments are a kind of *prescriptive* judgments"². (2) "they are distinguished from other judgments of this class by being *univeralizable*."³ (3) "...logical relations between prescriptive judgments..."⁴

Like all meta-ethical philosophers, Hare distinguishes between the descriptive and the evaluative use of language. Moral languages are primarily used for giving advice or instruction, or giving choices. In other words, they prescribe a particular course of action. According to Hare, "They are used primarily for giving advice or instruction, or in general for guiding choices."⁵ Hare says that prescribing is a many-sided activity. It includes those uses of language such as, for example, commending a book, instructing pupils, or deciding questions of duty.

Hare says that value words such as, 'good', 'right', 'ought' possess supervenient or the consequential properties. According to Hare, "...one of the most characteristic features of value-words...is a feature sometimes described by saying that 'good' and other such words are the names of 'supervenient' or 'consequential' properties."⁶ The supervenient characteristics refer to the justification or the reason that we give to a value judgment. Value words always have descriptive characteristics. Hare holds that there may be good reasons for justifying ethical conclusions. It is always possible to ask for a reason 'why', when a moral judgment has been passed. For instance, if I say something 'good', then one can always raise the question-why I have regarded the things as 'good'? if I say that 'this is a good car' or 'this is the right way to go', then in these cases, one may always raise these questions-why I have regarded this car as good? or why I have chosen this path a the right path? The answer to these questions will be some factual descriptions about the things concerned. For example, this is a good motor car because it gives me a good mileage. Or this is a good path, because it is shorter than the other routes. Hare writes, "...'good' is a 'supervenient' or 'consequential' epithet, one may always legitimately be asked when one has called something a good something, 'what is good about it?' Now to answer this question is to give the properties in virtue of which we call it good. Thus, if I have



said, 'That is a good motor-car' and someone asks 'Why? What is good about it?' and I reply 'Its high speed combined with its stability on the road', I indicate that I call it good in virtue of its having these properties or virtues.'⁷ Hare says that when we are giving a factual reason for a value judgment, we are actually invoking or applying a general criterion, a standard, rule or principle. W.D. Hudson says that, "According to Hare, value judgments alone are supervenient... The point which he notes about, e.g., "X is good," is not simply that one may ask a reason why and universalize the answer. It is rather that one can always ask "what is good about it?" and that the answer can *never* be "just its goodness." This is where "X is good" differs from e.g., "X is yellow." To "what is yellow about it?" the answer may, though it need not, be "just its yellowness." Goodness (and, equally, rightness or oughtness) is always necessarily supervenient upon other characteristics, as yellowness (or any other non-evaluative characteristic) is not."⁸

Hare says that prescriptive language is in the form of imperative. An Imperative statement is in the form of command. According to Hare, value judgment entails imperative means that when we say we ought to do x, we are committed to do 'x'. Hare states, "We are therefore clearly entitled to say that the moral judgment entails the imperative; for to say that one judgment entails another is simply to say that you cannot assent to the first and dissent from the second unless you have misunderstood one or the other; and this 'cannot' is a logical 'cannot'-if someone assents to the first and not to the second, this is in itself a sufficient criterion for saying that he has misunderstood the meaning of one or the other. Thus to say that moral judgments guide actions, and to say that they entail imperatives, comes to much the same thing."⁹ The man who says that he ought to do x, but does not perform it, he either does not understand the meaning of the words which he is using or he may be insincere. Hare remarks that, "It is a tautology to say that we cannot sincerely assent to a command addressed to ourselves, and *at the same time* not perform it, if now is the occasion for performing it and it in our (physical and psychological) power to do so. Similarly, it is a tautology to say that we cannot sincerely assent to a statement, and *at the same time* not believe it."¹⁰ If moral judgments imply sincere assent to a command, then it will be logically impossible to assent sincerely to any such judgment and yet act contrary to it. "For I said there that I proposed to use the word 'value-judgment' in such a way that 'the test, whether someone is using the judgment "I ought to do X" as a value-judgment or not, is "Does he or does he not recognize that if he assents to the judgment, he must also assent to the command "Let me do X"?"'"¹¹

But Hare believes that in certain circumstances, this may not be the case. He says that sometimes, sincere people can be morally weak. It may be possible that someone thinks that he ought to do x but is failing to do it. Hare tries to describe this difficulty in the following words, "Nobody in his senses would maintain that a person who assents to an imperative must (analytically) act on it even when he is unable to do so."¹²



Hare says that an imperative statement differs from an indicative statement. Let us take two examples-‘shut the door’ and ‘you are going to shut the door’. The first one is an imperative statement and the second one is an indicative statement. According to him, “It is difficult to deny that there is a difference between statements and commands...The distinction lies between the meanings which the different grammatical forms convey. Both are used for talking about a subject-matter, but they are used for talking about it in different ways. The two sentences ‘You are going to shut the door’ and ‘Shut the door’ are both about your shutting the door in the immediate future; but what they say about it is quite different. An indicative sentence is used for telling someone that something is the case; an imperative is not-it is used for telling to make something the case.”¹³

Hare differentiates between three kinds of meanings. They are descriptive, prescriptive and the evaluative meaning. He defines descriptive, prescriptive and evaluative meanings as, “An expression which, in a certain context, has descriptive meaning and no other, I call a descriptive term, word, or expression, as used in that context; one which has prescriptive meaning (whether or not it also has descriptive meaning) I call a prescriptive term; and one which has both kinds of meaning I call an evaluative term.”¹⁴ According to Hare, value words have descriptive meaning. When we are passing a value judgment, we are actually invoking or applying a general criterion, a standard, rule or principle. This he refers to the supervenient character of the value judgments. According to Hare, “Value-words *are* indeed like descriptive words, both in that they have descriptive meanings, and in that the descriptive meanings of both are alterable, flexible and so on.”¹⁵ The value judgments are primarily used to prescribe a particular course of actions. Hare however, says that the prescriptive meaning is constant for every class of object of which a value word may be used.

Evaluative words entail imperatives because they possess a commendatory force. Hare distinguishes between two kinds of meaning that an ethical statement can have. They are cognitive and the non-cognitive meaning. The cognitive meaning of a word or a statement is the factual or descriptive content it refers to. The non-cognitive meaning refers to the commendation or the favourable attitude that the speaker has towards the object. When we hear a person say, ‘X is good’, we know that he has a favourable attitude towards ‘X’, whatever ‘X’ may stand for. Therefore, irrespective of our knowledge of ‘X’, we know that the person favours it or has a pro-attitude towards it. This is the non-cognitive, commendatory meaning of a proposition. This meaning, according to Hare, is of primary importance in ethical discourse. Yet, a person commends an object or an event on the basis of certain factual characteristics that the object possesses. For example, when we recommend a book as good, we recommend it on the basis of certain factual properties that the book possesses like saying that it has an informative content. Thus, we see that the value judgment has both a cognitive and a non-cognitive meaning. Hare says that the cognitive meaning of a value word may vary, but the non-cognitive meaning remains constant. The cognitive



meaning, which changes are primarily descriptive, while the non-cognitive or the commendatory meaning is primarily evaluative. Hare says that the evaluative or the prescriptive meaning of 'good' is always constant. According to Hare, "When we call a motor car or a chronometer or a cricket-bat or a picture good, we are commending all of them. But because we are commending all of them for different reasons, the descriptive meaning is different in all cases. We have knowledge of the evaluative meaning of 'good' from our earliest years: but we are constantly learning to use it in new descriptive meanings, as the classes of objects whose virtues we learn to distinguish grow more numerous."¹⁶

The prescriptive meaning is logically prior to the descriptive meaning, because any standard must be accepted before it is invoked. If we say that the books are good if they have funny characters, it must be because we have accepted that books with informative content are good.

Again, Hare says that we can use the evaluative word in order to change the descriptive meaning. The standard of goodness may vary down the ages. But the evaluative meaning will remain constant. Hare argues, "What is happening is that the evaluative meaning of the word is being used in order to shift the descriptive meaning; we are doing what would be called, if 'good' were a purely descriptive word, redefining it. But we cannot call it that, for the evaluative meaning remains constant; we are rather altering the standard."¹⁷

Another important feature of moral judgments is that it is universalizable. This means that when a person says that he ought to do something, he is committed to say that anyone else in the same situation, given the same condition will have to do it. Hare says, "that moral judgments are a kind of prescriptive judgments and that they are distinguished from other judgments of this class by being universalizable."¹⁸ Hare says that both the descriptive and the evaluative terms are universalizable. But there is a significant difference between the universalizability of factual terms and evaluative terms. While a factual term is universalizable on the basis of a meaning rule, evaluative term necessarily call for a reference to a universalizable moral principle. According to Hare, "For, as we have seen, it follows from the definition of the expression 'descriptive term' that descriptive judgments are universalizable in just the same way as, according to my view, moral judgments are. It is impossible consistently to maintain that moral judgments are descriptive, and that they are not universalizable."¹⁹

According to Hare, universalizability is a necessary characteristic of a moral judgment. The concept of universalizability is based on the very notion of meaning itself. He believes that language is meaningful if it is used in accordance with rules. A descriptive statement such as 'My car is red' is universalizable with regard to a meaning-rule. If I call an object red, I am committed to calling anything else like it red. In saying that 'my car is red', I am committed to holding that there is a feature 'r' of my car such that any car having a feature which resembles 'r' will also be call red. According to Hare, "If I call a thing red, I am committed to calling anything else like it red. And



if I call a thing a good X, I am committed to calling any X like it good. But whereas the reason in the former case is that I must be using the word 'red' in accordance with some *meaning-rule*, the reason in the latter case is much more complicated."²⁰ A descriptive term is universalizable with reference to a meaning-rule. An evaluative term is universalizable with reference to a standard or principle. When I call a thing 'good', I call it on the basis of some principle or standard that the thing possesses.

Hare maintains that there is room for rational discourse in ethics and that logical relations hold in moral argument. This he explains by maintaining a difference between what he calls '*Phrastic*' and the '*Neustic*' of a proposition. According to Hare, "'Phrastic' is derived from a Greek word meaning 'to point out or indicate,' and 'neustic' from a word meaning 'to nod assent'. Both words are used indifferently of imperative and indicative speech."²¹ *Phrastic* refers to indicative mood or a statement, whereas *Neustic* refers to the imperative mood. Hare says that two propositions may differ in the *Neustic* or an imperative mood though both may have the same *phrastic* or the propositional content. According to Hare, the logical relations can hold between an imperative as well as an indicative sentence because both of these sentences have the *phrastic* in common. Let us consider the sentences-

Shut the door.

You are going to shut the door.²²

Hare says that first sentence is in the imperative mood, whereas the second sentence is in the indicative mood. But there is something Common to both the sentences is a description or a state of affair, namely, 'you are shutting the door in the immediate future'. This common ground between both the imperative and the indicative is called the '*phrastic*'. Hare says, "We have noticed that the two sentences 'You are going to shut the door' and 'Shut the door' are both about the same thing, namely, your shutting the door in the immediate future; but they are used to say different things about it."²³

Obviously, there is a difference between the first and the second sentence. The first sentence is used in the form of a command whereas the second is used to indicate something. Hare illustrates the difference in the following words-

Your shutting the door in the immediate future, please.

Your shutting the door in the immediate future, yes.²⁴

The fourth sentence has an element called 'please' and shows that the sentence is an imperative. The fifth sentence has an element called 'yes' and shows that the sentence is an assertion. These two additional elements, that is, 'please' in the fourth sentence and 'yes' in the fifth sentence are called by Hare '*Neustic*'. As he says, "I shall call the part of the sentence that is common to both moods ('Your shutting the door in the immediate future') the *phrastic*; and the part that is different in the case of commands and statements ('yes' or 'please'), the *Neustic*."²⁵



Thus, the phrastic is that part of the sentence, which is common to both moods, the Neustic is the part which is different in the case of commands and statements. Hare says, "The utterance of a sentence containing phrastic and neustic might be dramatized as follows: (1) The speaker points out or indicates what he is going to state to be the case, or command to be made the case; (2) He nods, as if to say 'It is the case', or 'Do it'."²⁶

Hare argues that the logical relations hold between imperative sentences (i.e., sentences which tell us to make, or not to make, something the case) as hold between indicative ones, because the logical words are best treated as part of the phrastics of sentences. Hare says that all moral reasoning is deductive. All deductive inference is analytic in character, that is, It depends solely upon the meaning of the words used, and particularly that of logical words such as the sign of negation 'not', the logical connectives 'if', 'and', 'or', and the quantifiers 'all' and 'some'. All these elements should be treated as parts of phrastic. In his words, "...in their ordinary uses the common logical connectives 'if', 'and', and 'or', like the sign of negation, are best treated as part of the phrastics of sentences. This means that they are common ground between indicatives and imperatives. The same is true, with a certain qualification...of the quantifiers 'all' and 'some'."²⁷

According to Hare, in a moral argument, we always infer a normative value judgment and this demands that there must be at least one value judgment in the premises. We cannot derive a value judgment from premises, which are purely factual. He therefore maintains that no imperative sentence can be derived from merely a set of indicative sentences: "...from a series of indicative sentences about the character of any of its objects' no imperative sentence about what is to be done can be derived, and therefore no moral judgment can be derived from it either."²⁸ Hare therefore holds that one of the premises of the moral argument must be an imperative-a universal imperative or general principle of conduct. We cannot draw a prescriptive conclusion from purely descriptive premises. He gives two rules that govern the principle that no imperative sentence can be derived from merely a set of indicative sentences. According to Hare, "Let me first state two of the rules that seem to govern this matter...The rules are:

- (1) *No indicative conclusion can be validly drawn from a set of premisses which cannot be validly drawn from the indicatives among them alone.*
- (2) *No imperative conclusion can be validly drawn from a set of premisses which does not contain at least one imperative.*"²⁹

Hare declares his adherence to Hume's law: no 'ought' from an 'is'. As he says, "In this logical rule, again, is to be found the basis of Hume's celebrated observation on the impossibility of deducing an 'ought'-proposition from a series of 'is'-propositions..."³⁰



In a deductive argument, the premisses justify the conclusion. The conclusion is already implicit in the premisses. Hare gives an example to illustrate the rules of the syllogism.

Take all the boxes to the station.

This is one of the boxes.

\You are going to take this to the station.

In this argument, the conclusion is already contained in the premisses. The major premise is a universal imperative. The minor is a particular indicative or informative. The conclusion is again a singular imperative, which is drawn from the above premisses. In Hare's moral syllogism, the facts, which are to justify a moral judgment, are stated in a descriptive minor premise and their relevance is guaranteed by an evaluative major premise. This argument satisfies Hare's two rules of a syllogism.

By summarizing Hare's Prescriptivism as a theory of moral language, we have found that moral language is primarily used for giving advice or instruction. In other words, it prescribes a particular course of action. Moral judgment must have both the descriptive and evaluative components. Hare argues that a value judgment is inherent in a factual judgment, but a value judgment is not derived solely from the factual judgment alone. In order to draw an ethical conclusion, one of the premisses must be evaluative. In this way, Hare tries to defend the autonomy of ethics by giving importance to the role of prescription.

- ¹ Hare, R.M. (1963), *Freedom and Reason*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p.4.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Hare, R.M. (1975), *The Language of Morals*, London: Oxford University Press, p.155.
- ⁶ Ibid., p.80.
- ⁷ Ibid. p.131.
- ⁸ Hudson, W.D., (1983), *Modern Moral Philosophy*, Hong Kong: The Macmillan Press, p.183.
- ⁹ Hare, R.M., (1975), *The Language of Morals*, etc., p.172.
- ¹⁰ Ibid. p.20.
- ¹¹ Hare, R.M. (1963), *Freedom and Reason*, London: Oxford University Press, p.79.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Hare, R.M. (1975), *The Language of Morals*, etc. p.5.
- ¹⁴ Hare, R.M. (1963), *Freedom and Reason*, etc., p.26.



- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Hare, R.M. (1975), *The Language of Morals*, etc., p.118.
- 17 Ibid. p.119.
- 18 Hare, R.M. (1963), *Freedom and Reason*, etc., p.4.
- 19 Ibid. p.16.
- 20 Ibid. pp. 15-16.
- 21 Hare, R.M. (1975), *The Language of Morals*, etc., p.18.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid. p.17.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid. p.18.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Ibid., p.21.
- 28 Ibid., p.30.
- 29 Ibid. p.28.
- 30 Ibid. p. 29.