Prescriptivism[1]

Metaethics is the branch of philosophy that asks about what morality is, philosophically speaking. It asks questions in philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, metaphysics, and epistemology. For example, can ethical claims be true or false? If so, are these truths objective? Are there moral properties, like being right or wrong, that are part of reality? And if there are ethical truths, how do we discover what these truths are? In this handout, we discuss one theory that seeks to answer these questions: prescriptivism.

In *The Language of Morals*, R. M. Hare argued that moral words are prescriptive. 'The function of moral principles is to guide conduct.'

NON-COGNITIVISM AND MORAL ANTI-REALISM

Non-cognitivist theories of ethics claim that ethical language does not try to describe the world and cannot be true or false. Moral judgements do not express beliefs, but some other, non-cognitive mental state. Different non-cognitivist theories disagree on exactly what moral judgments express, but they agree that moral language does not function to state facts.

Non-cognitivist theories are anti-realist. Since moral judgments do not describe the world and are neither true nor false, then there are no mind-independent moral properties that would make moral judgments true or false. For example, to say 'racism is wrong' is not to claim that racism has any kind of property. It is, instead, according to prescriptivism, to recommend that we do not act in racist ways.

PRESCRIPTIVE MEANING

When I express a moral judgement, Hare says, I am prescribing what you ought to do. I am not trying to influence or persuade you, nor am I expressing my feelings. Whether, as a result, you act as I prescribe is a different matter. Simply saying you should do x isn't an attempt to persuade you – that may require a lot of argument.

So what is it to 'prescribe' something? There are two types of prescriptive meaning, Hare claims. First, there are imperatives that tell someone to do something. Imperatives explicitly state what to do, e.g. 'Shut the door'. Hare argues that some moral judgements work in a similar way. For example, 'Eating meat is wrong' entails the imperative 'Do not eat meat'. How so? To accept the imperative, 'Shut the door' is to shut the door. To accept that eating meat is

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wrong is to not eat meat. So if you ask 'should I eat meat?', and I answer 'eating meat is wrong', then I have answered your question.

Second, there are value judgements. The most general value terms are 'good' and 'bad'. We use the word 'good', says Hare, when we want to commend something to someone. This commendation, although it is not explicit about what to do in the way imperatives are, provides guidance for our choices. How so?

GOOD

We can talk about good chocolate, good teachers and good people. In each case, we are saying the chocolate, teacher or person is praiseworthy in some way. This use of language is quite distinct from describing something. Suppose I say 'That's a good strawberry, because it is sweet and juicy'. If we think 'good' as applied to strawberries just means 'sweet and juicy', then all I have said is 'That's a sweet and juicy strawberry because it is sweet and juicy'. But this isn't what I said. I commended the strawberry, I didn't merely describe it.

Because there is a distinction between describing and commending, nothing about being honest (i.e. telling the truth: descriptive meaning) can make me commend honesty (telling the truth is how to behave: prescriptive). More generally, nothing about the facts can entail a moral judgement.

However, 'good' is not purely a term of praise. Whenever we call something good, in each case there is a set of standards that we are implicitly relying on. Good chocolate is rich in the taste of cocoa. Good teachers can explain new ideas clearly and create enthusiasm in their students. A good person – well, a good person is someone who is the way we should try to be as people. When we use 'good' to mean 'morally good', we are appealing to a set of standards that apply to someone as a person. However, because nothing about the facts entails a moral judgement, there are no facts that establish one set of moral standards as objectively correct. We have to adopt the standards; they are not part of the world, waiting for us to discover them.

The descriptive meaning of 'good' in any context comes from the set of standards that is being assumed. Its descriptive meaning picks up on the qualities that the something must have to be (a) good … (chocolate, teacher, person, whatever). Because 'good' is always used relative to a set of standards, it always has a descriptive meaning. If you know what the standard for a good teacher is, then you learn something factual about a teacher when I say 'she's a good teacher'.

This has an important implication: if we have two identical things, we cannot call one of them good and the other not good. Whenever we apply a standard in making a prescription, we are committed to making the same judgement of two things that match the standard in the same way. If I say this chocolate is good but that chocolate is not, I must think that there is some relevant difference between the two.

'Good' is used primarily to commend. For each type of thing that we describe as good, the standard is different, but in each case, we are commending it. However,

we don't always use 'good' to commend. In fact, any word that both commends and describes can be used just to describe and not commend. For example, we often use the word 'honest' to commend someone. But I can say 'If you weren't so honest, we could have got away with that!' This is an expression of annoyance, not praise. Likewise, I can agree that a 'good person' is one who is honest, kind, just, etc. But I can still think that good people are not to be commended, because, as Woody Allen said, 'Good people sleep better than bad people, but bad people enjoy the waking hours more'.

So, according to Hare, the main features of 'good' are these:

1.	It is used to commend, to provide guidance for choosing what to do.
2.	It assumes a set of standards, features in virtue of which something counts as 'good' or not.
3.	Two identical things must both be good or not. To think otherwise is logically contradictory.

MORAL LANGUAGE

In moral language, 'good' refers, directly or indirectly, to being a good person. A good action, then, will be one that a good person does. Calling something or someone 'morally good' is intended to guide people's choices. The standards for who counts as a 'good person' are moral standards. However, moral standards are adopted, rather than being true or false.

The same three features that apply to 'good', Hare argues, also apply to 'ought' and 'right'.

1.	We say 'you ought to pay back the money' (in a particular situation) or again 'stealing is wrong' (in general) to guide people's choices and actions.
2.	The standards that we are assuming in making these judgements relate to being a good person.
3.	Two actions, in similar situations, must either both be right or not. If I think that it is wrong for you to steal from me, because it infringes my rights of ownership, then I must think that it is wrong for me to steal from you, because it infringes your rights of ownership – unless I can say that there is some relevant difference between the two cases. We must be willing to 'universalise' our moral judgements. Not to do so is logically contradictory.

PRESCRIPTIVISM AND MORAL LANGUAGE

Is prescriptivism's analysis of the meaning of moral language correct? We can argue that it is not. Moral language does not only prescribe, but has many other functions. Hare has in mind the situation in which someone asks what to do. But there are lots of other situations in which we use moral language – we can exhort or implore someone, we can confess, we can complain, and so on.

However, Hare can reply that prescriptivism says that it is essential to morality that it guides choices and actions. This isn't to say that, on every occasion, a

moral judgement is being made to offer such guidance to the listener. The important point is that in holding a particular moral judgement, e.g. 'stealing is wrong', I am committed to acting on it.

We should accept this point. But it doesn't necessarily support prescriptivism. It is not only commending and commanding that make a link between language and action. Language that expresses desires and attitudes also makes such links. Suppose I say 'I like apples', but I never eat apples, refuse anything made from apples, etc. There is something inconsistent here. Likewise, I can say 'I disapprove of stealing', but steal myself and never comment on others' thefts. Just by connecting ethical language to action, Hare hasn't shown that ethical language must be prescriptive. It could just as well express what we want or our attitudes.

It is worth noting that cognitivist theories don't face this objection in the same way. According to cognitivist theories, moral judgments are statements of fact. The meaning of moral judgments is given by what would make them true. So we can understand what 'murder is wrong' means by understanding what it is for murder to be wrong. Now, we can use the claim 'murder is wrong' to do other things, such as influence people's behaviour or complain or express anger or…. But these effects don't give us the meaning of moral judgments. The many uses of moral language don't threaten cognitivist theories the way that they threaten prescriptivism.

PRESCRIPTIVISM ON MORAL REASONING

One use of moral language is in moral reasoning – using premises to draw conclusions about what to do. If I say 'abortion is wrong' and you say 'abortion is right', according to prescriptivism, it seems that I am just prescribing that you and I should not abort while you are refusing the prescription. But are we doing so rationally, or by appealing to facts about what is good or bad?

Hare argues that prescriptivism can explain moral reasoning. First, we can ask about someone's reasons for prescribing what they do. Second, morality involves consistency – moral judgements must be universalised. For example, Singer claims there is no relevant difference between the suffering of people and the suffering of animals. If we are going to say that causing the suffering of people is wrong, we are committed to saying the suffering of animals is wrong – unless we can find a relevant difference. Moral disagreements can be about the consistency in applying certain standards, and reason can help resolve this.

Third, we can infer prescriptions from other prescriptions. A famous argument against abortion says 'Taking an innocent human life is wrong. Abortion is the taking of an innocent human life. Therefore abortion is wrong.' This has the same logical force, Hare claims, if we rephrase it as imperatives: 'Do not take innocent human life. Abortion is the taking of an innocent human life. Therefore, do not commit abortion.' To reject or refuse the conclusion, we must reject or refuse at least one premise. And so our prescriptions are logically related to one another. So we can use reason to discuss these relations. Moral arguments are not only about the facts, but about moral judgments as well.

We can object that the only kind of rationality prescriptivism can recognise in moral arguments is consistency. In requiring us to universalise moral judgements, Hare's theory is similar to Kantian ethics. However, Kant argues that the standards for a good person (the good will) are themselves set by reason, and are therefore objective. Hare rejects this. Neither the empirical facts nor reason entails that we must have certain standards rather than others. If I argue that racism is morally right, and equality is morally wrong, as long as I am prepared to universalise this claim, there is no objective ground on which to disagree with me. Suppose you say 'But what if you were of a different race. Would you say you should be treated as inferior?' I can reply 'Yes.' Now what?

Hare responds that to prescribe that one's own interests be frustrated like this is irrational. And so his moral system will give us the Golden Rule of 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you' – anything else would be inconsistent.

But we can press the objection in a different form. Suppose you say that we shouldn't steal because stealing would make life very difficult. This is your reason for prescribing that we shouldn't steal, implicitly appealing to the standard that the good person does not make life difficult. But Hare says that moral standards are not objectively correct. Suppose I do not adopt your standard – I have a different standard for 'good'. Then not only do I reject your moral judgement that stealing is wrong, I also don't accept your reason for this judgement as a moral reason. So, on Hare's view, there are no reasons to do a particular action independent of what standards we adopt. And so moral rationality is no more than consistency. But this does not rule out very objectionable values.