Prescriptivism

R. M. Hare argued that moral words are not descriptive and emotive in meaning; they are descriptive and prescriptive. This difference, he claimed, allows a greater role for reason in moral discussion. (*The Language of Morals*)

PRESCRIPTIVE MEANING

Prescriptive meaning works like commands, also known as imperatives. If I say 'Leave the room', I am telling you to do something. Hare argued that if I say 'Eating meat is wrong', I am saying 'Don't eat meat'.

We use the idea of 'right' and 'wrong' to command. We use the word 'good', says Hare, when we want to commend something to someone. There is a difference of emphasis between 'good action' and 'right action': 'good action' commends the action without necessarily commanding it – we are saying it should be praised, but not necessarily that you have to do it to be a good person. If we say an action is the 'right action', then we are commanding it – it is a guideline for behaviour that people should follow.

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. 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.

So the prescriptive meaning of good relates to the fact that it commends. What about its descriptive meaning? This 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).

PRESCRIPTION AND UNIVERSALIZATION

Because 'good' is always used relative to a set of standards, it always has a descriptive meaning. And since we usually use 'good' to commend, we generally use it with prescriptive meaning as well. But we don't always. This can happen with any word that both commends and describes – we can use it just to describe and not commend or disapprove. Take moral words like 'steal' or 'honesty'. 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. Again, 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 Hare argues that descriptive meaning and prescriptive meaning are logically distinct. 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 judgment. We are free in the prescriptions that we make.

However, 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. Likewise, we can choose what standards we live by, but the standards apply universally. 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.

MORAL REASONING

While remaining non-cognitive, prescriptivism finds a place for reason in ethical debate.

First, we saw that emotivism is open to the objection that it makes ethical discussion a matter of manipulation. Prescriptivism sees the 'guiding' aspect of ethics as a matter of prescription, rather than a matter of influencing someone through emotion. This makes ethical discussion more straightforward and rational.

Second, we can argue about consistency and relevance. 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 is a valid argument, even if we rephrase it as Hare would understand it: 'Do not take innocent human life. Abortion is the taking of an innocent human life. Therefore, do not commit abortion.' To disagree with the conclusion, we must disagree with at least one premise. And so our prescriptions are logically related to one another. So we can use reason to discuss these relations.

Objections to emotivism are discussed in the handout 'The denial of moral truth: objections'.