

Hare, R.M.: Sorting out ethics

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Over the past half century Richard M. Hare has developed his concept of ethics in a large number of articles and some very remarkable books. He himself calls this concept by a complex, but explicating, name “rational(istic) universal prescriptivism”. It claims to be rationalistic, because moral statements are subject to *reasoning*. This is due to a certain logical feature shared by words like ‘good’ or ‘wrong’, called their *universalizability*. Whoever claims that a certain act is or was good or wrong is bound to claim that any other act of the same type, performed under circumstances of the same type, by actors of the same type, is good or wrong too. It is *prescriptive* because its objects can be understood in the same way as sentences like ‘His shooting him was wrong’ (even if it has the same linguistic surface structure as e.g. ‘His gun was silver’) in a prescriptive mood. As a result, utterances of this sentence must, not in all cases, but may in some, be interpreted as meaning much the same as utterances of ‘He ought not to have shot him’.

This concept is now once again presented in Richard M. Hare’s new book *Sorting out ethics*. It will not only serve the beginner as a systematically arranged introduction to one of the most interesting, as well as most important ethical theories twentieth century’s philosophy has brought about. Even practical philosophers well acquainted with Hare’s theory will profit from finding it articulated in an updated terminology, and closely connected to actual debates of philosophy of language. Both beginners and arrived philosophers will find it instructive to see Hare’s theory contrasted to rival theories, which he sharply characterises and criticises. The text appears in a concise and stringent manner, so that the reader will hardly recognise that what she/he holds is a compilation of lectures and papers (with the Axel Hagerström Lecture, held in Uppsala in 1991 as its core).

The *first part* of the book undertakes a “Defence of the Enterprise” of moral philosophy as such and particularly a moral philosophy that starts with investigations into meaning that the philosophy of language has brought about. The connection between these philosophical areas is easily recognisable, although not always recognised: What ethicists, as well as other people, do when criticising an action, recommending the omission of certain acts, justifying their recommendation or critique, or when justifying what they have done – is talk. Therefore, what exactly they are criticising, recommending or justifying, and whether they are right in criticising, recommending or justifying it depends – at least partly –

on the meaning of the words they use. According to this, a closer look at some features of the meaning of the words especially used in “moral talk” serves as a starting point if an ethical theory applicable in a moral practice, essentially consisting of criticising, recommending and justifying actions, is at issue.

In the *second part* of his book Hare develops “A Taxonomy of Ethical Theories”. It is only consistent that he chooses as his *ratio divisionis* different views about what is supposed to be the meaning of moral statements containing words like ‘good’ or ‘wrong’. Discussing this taxonomy leads to a catalogue of requirements any *adequate* ethical theory should meet, and which sorts out any non-rationalistic and non-prescriptivistic theory.

In a *third section* “Could Kant have been a Utilitarian?” the author argues once again for his much disputed thesis that Kantian and utilitarian ethics are not, as is regularly supposed, necessarily opposed to each other. Both, so he tries to show, share a pure formal aspect that is due to the logical properties of moral concepts, and in both cases one has to look at the consequences of an action in order to apply the pertained principles, to make the ethical theories work in practice.

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Any application of any ethical principle in order to criticise, recommend or justify an action necessarily is a case of normative argumentation. Insofar as logic is understood as an enterprise that is concerned with the explication of the meaning of terms relevant for argumentation (e.g. ‘hence’, ‘since’, ‘because’, ‘consequently’, ‘therefore’, ‘thus’, etc.; as well as terms like ‘and’, ‘or’, ‘if ... then’) and insofar as there is a broader use of these terms in every (scientific as well as everyday) normative argumentation, logicians will do their job adequately only if they explicate these terms in a way that also takes account of common usage.

Unfortunately, and for purely historical reasons, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, modern logic was developed only, or at least foremost, with respect to the requirements of the natural sciences and mathematics. One indicator that might be mentioned is how widespread the manner of explaining the meaning of logical operators, like ‘and’, ‘or’, ‘if ... then’, in terms of truth conditions became until now: in nearly every book entitled ‘Introduction to Logic’ one will read sentences like: ‘A complex statement such as ‘p and q’ is true if both statements p and q which are part of it, are true’ – that is, the being true of both the elementary statements is the truth condition of the complex built by the ‘and’-connector. If these books contain a chapter dedicated to the general questions of a theory of meaning it will supplement this view: ‘the truth conditions of the sentences p and q will be the conditions under which p and q describe what is the case’.

According to the regular understanding of the word ‘true’, sentences that say that a certain action A ought to be done and another one A* ought not to be done, are not capable of being true or false. The logical operators, therefore, wouldn’t be applicable to them. So it would be impossible to argue, that A (A*) ought (not) to be done with respect to principles like ‘Act so that you thereby promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number’ or ‘Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law’.

Systematically this is of the greatest impact for practical philosophy and for the very possibility of practical reasoning. If the standards of correctness and acceptability of arguments are established in terms of truth conditions, and if reasoning is founded on argumentation, then practical reason lacks any basis at all. Criticising and justifying actions with respect to normative premises, as e.g. the mentioned principles are, would be impossible. The systematical verdict had a great impact historically too, inasmuch as modern logic induced huge advancements and new philosophical paradigms, making use of it gained remarkable

achievements. Above all, the so-called “analytical philosophy” developed very fast, while the developers denied the possibility of practical reasoning at all. The sentences in question they interpreted either as pure emotive expressions (emotivism), or as statements that give a true or false description of some (types of) act, the actor, the society in which he lives, or some metaphysical state of affairs (descriptivism). The emotivistic interpretation declares what one erroneously expected to be practical reasoning as irrational (whereas it might be practical), the descriptivistic interpretation declares it as non-practical (whereas it might be rational).

That Hare is right to argue that moral thinking (even if provided by professional philosophers) often lacks logical structure and the indispensable strength in argumentation (p. 1, p. 39, p. 124) is very much a consequence of this development. Starting with his very first writing on ‘Imperative Reasoning’ (1949) he was himself one of the first philosophers to mark that practical deficit of analytical philosophy and the analytical deficit of practical philosophy, and tried to re-establish a methodological guided practical reasoning just by making advantageous use of the new logical instruments. He recognised, and again demonstrates in *Sorting out ethics*, that the requirement to find argumentatively justified answers to ethical questions is a contra-indication to the restriction of what is called reasonable and meaningful to the area of those sentences capable of being true or false (p. 48f) – and there are questions to be solved that need careful reasoning and differentiated arguments (to name just a few: in how far should eugenics be interdicted, should animal-consuming research be financially promoted by societal institutions, how are international contracts on reducing emissions of greenhouse gas to be shaped). This leads directly to an understanding of the role of the moral philosopher more adequate to a non-authoritarian society. She/he is not the one to decide what is to be done and what is to be omitted, not the one who has something like a privileged access to moral principles or values. But, if well-trained in using the linguistic instruments of argumentation, she/he can “do something to help us discuss moral questions rationally; and this requires obedience to the logical rules governing the concepts” (p. 44).

To Hare, the language of morals is an instrument to cope with conflicts of interest that are inevitable when people live together in communities, and develop desires and needs that sometimes cannot be realised without acting against the desires and needs of others (p. 123). Whatever else it may be, and the question whether it is “one of the most remarkable inventions of human race” (p. 122), or something like a divine gift put aside, – if that “instrumentalistic” view of what a moral theory should provide is correct, there are some conditions it has to fulfil in order to be an adequate instrument for conflict solving. This includes that at least some moral statements, uttered in a prescriptivistic manner, may be incompatible with at least some others, that, furthermore, this incompatibility is expressible by logical means and that, as already mentioned, these sentences are open for argumentational use. The theory should be acceptable (or justifiable) to both parties of the conflict, since the acceptance of an argumentatively provided solution depends on the acceptance of the theory itself. Finally, the theory should, at least in principle, be able to be embedded in a social practice, so that giving sound arguments may have practical consequences – this practice should sort out reactions like ‘you are right, but so what?’ as incorrect. Only an ethical theory that meets these requirements would be able to conciliate the conflicts. With respect to these requirements, Hare sorts out those candidates that are purely descriptivistic or emotivistic. He thereby demonstrates, quite convincingly, that just those descriptivistic approaches identifying the truth-conditions of moral statements by

naturalistic means, in order to avoid any relativity and gain objectivity in their moral judgements, happen to be dependent on social or cultural relativity. The argument he uses is based on an assumption about language acquisition: growing up thinking that abortion is wrong is acquiring a linguistic skill, as well as acquiring a moral principle, an attitude to abortion (p. 68).

The author's own proposal, rational(istic) universal prescriptivism, is neither non-rationalistic as emotivism, nor purely descriptivistic. Consistent with its instrumentalistic approach, instead of asking for truth conditions for moral statements, it tries to supply procedures that lead to prescriptions capable of conflict solving. That there is a semantic shift in his use of 'universalizability' when he offers his approach as such a procedure, does not make the result inefficacious. If one claims that a certain act is, or was, good or wrong, one might, by implicit linguistic rules or whatever, be bound to claim that any other act of the same type, performed under circumstances of the same type by actors of the same type, is good or wrong too. Unveiling such linguistic rules may be capable of demonstrating that moral language is open for arguments. But evidently *this* type of universalization does not contribute to conflict solving. So, in the more application-oriented parts of his writings, when Hare does not want to justify the concept of universalizability by hinting at its linguistic origin, but by demonstrating how effectively it will work in conflict situations, he shifts to quite a different idea of universalizability. Due to this idea one is bound to examine how far an act (of a certain type, performed under circumstances of a certain type by actors of a certain type) would be called good or wrong by any other party whose interest is in question.

In cases of societal relevance, this means that, among alternative policies, one has to find those "guidelines which will on the whole, if generally adopted, lead to the best courses of action. And the best courses of action are those which do the best, all in all, for people in society" (p. 145). It is in this respect that this approach can claim to combine the most important the lessons from the Kantian, as well as the utilitarian tradition. With this concept of ethics that depends on a reasonable assessment of the acceptability of consequences various alternative norms might have for the members of a society (and therefore providing some kind of norm assessment in analogy to technology assessment), Hare provides a promising starting point for practical reasoning that possesses the argumentative strength required by the tasks to be solved.