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A. F. Peters

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R. M. HARE ON IMPERATIVE SENTENCES: A CRITICISM

IN a recent article in *MIND* (January, 1949) Mr. Hare attacks the view which "excludes from the subject-matter of logic all sentences except those which purport to give information, *i.e.* to state that something is or is not the case", the "criterion which . . . says . . . that indicative sentences are the only sentences with which logic is called upon to deal". Mr. Hare's method of attack consists in showing that "the logical behaviour" of imperative sentences "is in many respects as exemplary as that of indicative sentences and in particular that is possible to infer an imperative conclusion from imperative premises". In fact Mr. Hare goes further and purports to show "that inference and contradiction, two of the things about sentences which logic especially studies, can be studied in commands as well as in statements". While I agree with Mr. Hare that it would be wrong of logicians to confine their attention to indicative sentences, and of these only to "fact-stating" sentences, I shall try to give some reasons for thinking that Mr. Hare's attack is in important respects confused, that his assertion that "inference and contradiction . . . can be studied in commands as well as in statements" is false, and thus that Mr. Hare's method of bringing to logicians' attention the need to study imperative sentences cannot be recommended.

I begin by considering imperatives and commands. Let me say at once that I am going to use 'imperative' and 'command' in such a way that sentences only can properly be described as imperatives, a command being a certain use of certain kinds of sentence, usually of sentences in the imperative mood. This is admittedly a restriction of the meaning some philosophers have given to 'imperative' but it is, I think, a salutary one. Thus imperative sentences, *e.g.*, 'Do what your father tells you', 'Vote for Churchill', 'Come to supper', 'Take this cake back to the baker', are not, nor can ever be, commands, or exhortations or requests, or indeed anything but sentences, although, of course, they are sentences which may be used to command. But these sentences have other uses, *e.g.* to advise, exhort, request, entreat, instruct, direct, etc. Indeed, imperative sentences are comparatively rarely used in common speech to command; they are much more frequently used in other ways. Equally important, sentences which we should not normally regard as being in the imperative mood, perhaps, *e.g.* 'Mary will show you your room, Mrs. Prendergast', are sometimes used to direct or command; so are sentences which contain words conventionally used to indicate some other use. Thus 'Please give me my change'. In brief,

- (a) An imperative sentence is not a command.
- (b) We do not use imperative sentences solely to command.
- (c) We sometimes use sentences, not—or not obviously—in the imperative mood to command.

These points seem obvious enough and I cannot think that they have not occurred many times to Mr. Hare. So far as I can see, however, Mr. Hare mostly ignores the last two ((b) and (c) above), and seems not to have made up his mind about the first. Thus he says (p. 22), "I shall take a class of sentences, namely imperatives, and shall show that their logical behaviour is in many respects as exemplary as that of indicative sentences . . ."; "Knowledge how to do something is normally communicated . . . by means of imperative sentences . . ." (p. 23); but also says (p. 24) "Now sentences are traditionally divided into three classes, statements, commands, and questions"; "Such an enquiry would most naturally begin with simple singular commands, like "Come in", and proceed later to more complicated sentences" (p. 24), and again, as already quoted, "it would appear then, that inference and contradiction, two of the things about sentences which logic especially studies, can be studied in commands as well as in statements" which perhaps indicates the adoption of a "half-way" position.

The failure of Mr. Hare to bear these three points about imperative sentences always in mind is perhaps directly productive of the conclusion he arrives at which I must regard as erroneous, and leads him to make remarks which seem to me misleading or false. Consider, for example, the following remark which occurs in a discussion of the attempt of certain writers to banish ethics from philosophy on the grounds that ethical sentences are "crypto-imperatives" or "contain an imperative element". He says, "Ethical sentences are not the only kind of sentences to be suspected of being imperatives in disguise. They are in good company. Some have said that definitions and some even that all analytical sentences are rules; and a rule is a universal imperative." I am not clear whether Mr. Hare himself is of the opinion that a rule is a universal imperative (on the whole I think he is), or that definitions and all analytical sentences are rules (on the whole I think he is not). But this remark is important for two reasons which lead me to discuss it first. First, Mr. Hare's suggestion is that so far as many philosophers are concerned, to accuse a sentence of being an imperative "in disguise" is to outlaw it from the class of logically-interesting utterances; second, because his method of bringing imperatives back into the fold is to show that their "behaviour" is as "exemplary" (i.e. of the same sort?) as that of indicative sentences. Now consider the following sentences which I take to be examples of the kinds of sentence Mr Hare has in mind:

- (1) 'All Britons are Europeans'; 'An animal is a vertebrate';
- 'Every strike is communist-inspired'; 'All men are mortal';
- 'All red objects are coloured'.

I think that at least some philosophers would regard these sentences as "stating" (*i.e.* capable of being used to express) rules. But whether or not these sentences are correctly analysed as expressing rules, it seems to me obviously incorrect to say that these sentences are universal imperatives though not perhaps to say that they are universal sentences. Clearly, however, it is plausible, and I think illuminating, to regard these sentences as equivalent respectively to:

(2) 'Any person you may correctly call a Briton you may correctly call a European'; 'All organisms classified as animals are to be classified as vertebrates'; 'Whenever a strike occurs regard it as the work of the communists'; 'Expect any man you may encounter to die one day'; 'In any true sentence in which 'red' occurs, substitution of 'coloured' for 'red' will result in another true sentence'.

Each of the sentences of this group seems to me capable of being used to express a rule, and the phraseology of three of them, at least, seems to me to suggest that it would be natural to use them to give instructions if not to command (and thus plausible to call at least these sentences imperative sentences), though each has a different grammatical structure from the rest. I think also that there are other possible uses of the sentences in (1) which would not be describable as "giving a rule" or "giving a command". Whether it would be correct to describe these uses as "making an assertion" is a point I do not wish to discuss. All I want to point out here is that the sentences in (1) are certainly not imperatives, but might be used—perhaps even ought to be used—to make rules, or to give directions, or to command. The best way to interest philosophers in such sentences, even though it is at the same time asserted, for example, that they "state" rules and do not "state" facts, is not, so it seems to me, wrongly to call them "universal imperatives" or commands (or, of course, rules or directions), and then attempt to show that commands (and I suppose also rules and directions) may "contradict" each other, or when arranged in what we are asked to call a 'syllogism' permit inferences to be drawn, but simply to devise examples showing how such sentences might be used to give rules or directions or to command.

Consider another remark which occurs on p. 24, *viz.* "It would seem, in fact, that questions can be translated without loss of meaning into commands; thus 'Who is at the door?' can be translated 'Name the person who is at the door' . . . and 'are you married?' can be translated 'I am/am not *married, *Strike out whichever is inapplicable'". Now I cannot agree that a question can ever be translated into a command with or without loss of meaning. But I do agree that sometimes an imperative sentence may be used in contexts in which an interrogative sentence would normally be used. Thus I would agree that in circumstances in which I should normally use 'Who is at the door?' I might use instead 'Name the person

who is at the door', though I think it rather improbable that I should. On the other hand I can imagine circumstances where it might be perfectly correct for me to use (and therefore where I might use), 'Who is at the door?' but grossly improper for me to use (and therefore where I should not use), 'Name the person who is at the door' (e.g. when talking to the Dean). But I cannot say as much for the second of Mr. Hare's examples, because whereas I can conceive that I might write, I can conceive of no situation in which I would say, 'I am/am not *married, *Strike out whichever is inapplicable' instead of 'Are you married?' One of the things which makes me think that Mr. Hare has not kept the three points about imperative sentences I mentioned in mind, is his disregard for normal English usage.

I now want to consider Mr. Hare's two main contentions, *viz.*, that inference and contradiction can be studied in commands. Contradiction first as I think it is of lesser importance.

I must begin by admitting that I am not sure whether Mr. Hare means to assert that an imperative sentence may contradict another, or that one command may contradict another. Thus on p. 28 he says, "It is hardly necessary to point out that the contradictory of (2.1) according to the usage which I am suggesting, is. . . . No showing of her room to Mrs. Prendergast by Mary at time *t*, yes". Since (2.1) is also a sentence, *viz.*, 'Showing of her room to Mrs. Prendergast by Mary at time *t*, yes', it would seem that Mr. Hare holds that one imperative sentence may be the contradictory of, rather than, contradict another. Again on p. 34 he says, "closely connected with the fact that it is possible to infer in imperatives, is the fact that it is possible to give or receive contradictory orders". On the same page, however, he says, "That it is descriptives and not dictors which contradict, will appear also from the following consideration", and if I understand Mr. Hare aright, descriptives and dictors are parts of sentences. However, I think I shall interpret Mr. Hare correctly if I take his view to be that two imperative sentences may be contradictories while two commands may contradict. Now I cannot agree either that one command can contradict another, or that one imperative sentence be the contradictory of another. To command both that the floor be scrubbed and that the floor be not scrubbed is not to contradict oneself, although of course it is to make whoever is being commanded bewildered and wonder which command is to be obeyed. Thus I would agree that one command may countermand another, that the use of one imperative sentence may be inconsistent with the use of another, that obedience to one command may be incompatible with obedience to another, that two imperative sentences may be incompatibles. Mr. Hare may choose whichever of these expressions he prefers or some other similar of his own devising. What I must object to is Mr. Hare's use of the verb 'to contradict', in which he says that one command may contradict another, and that to command both that a thing be done and be not

done is to contradict oneself, that two imperative sentences may be contradictories. I think it is well established that we only use this verb in connexion with assertions, and with sentences used to make assertions. Mr. Hare's use is the more remarkable in that he admits on page 36—unless I misunderstand him—that “imperative sentences are not either true or false”, *i.e.* that it is an improper usage of ‘true’ and ‘false’ to characterise an imperative sentence in this way. I cannot think, then, on what grounds Mr. Hare defends his usage of ‘contradict’. To object to Mr. Hare's usage, however, is not to say that logicians should avoid studying imperative sentences because no two such sentences can be contradictories. If Mr. Hare is urging that incompatibility or inconsistency is worth the study of philosophers as well as contradiction then I fully agree with him. But it seems to me that if most philosophers do avoid studying imperative sentences—and I am not sure that this contention is correct—then the way to persuade them to change their attitudes is not to misuse a word with such an important philosophical use as ‘contradict’ in the hope that this will “sanctify” the “untouchables”.

I now turn to Mr. Hare's most important contention, *viz.* that inference can be studied in commands. Several examples are given to illustrate the contention that “it is possible to argue in imperatives”. For the sake of brevity I shall mainly confine my attention to one of these which is also cited as an “imperative interpretation” of a well-known indicative “sentence-formula”, *viz.*

Let all men be mortal.
 Let Socrates be a man.
 —————
 Let Socrates be mortal.

Of this it is claimed that it is an example of “arguing in imperatives”, is a syllogism, and is “valid” because ‘Let Socrates be mortal’ can be inferred from the conjunction of ‘Let all men be mortal’ and ‘Let Socrates be a man’. I regret that I must begin by objecting to Mr. Hare's usage once more. I have always understood that to argue is to maintain by reasoning, or to prove, and if ‘Let all men be mortal’ and ‘Let Socrates be a man’ are imperative sentences as Mr. Hare says they are, *i.e.* may be used to give directions or commands, then I cannot see that if I command—or if the Deity Himself commands—that all men be mortal and that Socrates be a man, that I—or He—can be said to be reasoning; or that if I go on to command that Socrates be mortal, that I am maintaining by reasoning, or proving, a conclusion which in some way is expressed by, or perhaps just is the sentence ‘Let Socrates be mortal’. I am also acquainted with several meanings of ‘argument’ but none which permits me to describe the “sentence-formula” above as an argument. Since I have always understood that a syllogism is a kind of argument I must also disagree that Mr. Hare's sentence-formula is properly described as a syllogism. What disturbs me

most, however, is the contention that 'Let Socrates be mortal' can be inferred from the conjunction of 'Let all men be mortal' and 'Let Socrates be a man'. Now to use examples of Mr. Hare's, I can understand that if I were to command, or better, to advise, a man to use an axe or a saw and then commanded him shortly after not to use an axe (because as Mr. Hare suggests I fear he may cut off his leg), it would be very natural of him to assume that I wanted him to use a saw. But I cannot agree that if I command him to use an axe or a saw and then command him not to use an axe, I have commanded him to use a saw—which if I understand Mr. Hare properly is what he says I am doing. I have not commanded the man to use a saw at all, but only to use an axe or a saw, and not to use an axe. Perhaps this is too nice a point. I will try to make myself clearer by an illustration. My wife says to me, "Polish the floor or wipe the dishes", and being a husband I regard this as a command. Immediately afterwards she says, "Don't wipe the dishes". My first reaction is probably to ask her to make up her mind what it is she wants me to do, but thinking better of it I assume she means me to polish the floor. As I am about to start doing this, my wife then commands, "Don't polish the floor but brush the front door step". This shows me that my natural assumption, *viz.* that she wanted me to polish the floor was incorrect. Instead it is her wish that I should brush the front door step. Thus while it may have been perfectly natural, perfectly reasonable of me to assume that she wanted me to polish the floor and perhaps unnatural and unreasonable of her to command me to brush the front door step, she was not commanding me to polish the floor nor was my "inference" that she wanted me to polish the floor "valid". As for my inference—which Mr. Hare wants me to term the "conclusion" of her "argument"—this found expression not in an imperative sentence but in an indicative sentence, *viz.* 'My wife wants me to polish the floor'; and this wasn't properly an inference if the use of 'inference' implies that 'my wife wants me to polish the floor' is deducible from, follows necessarily from, the conjunction of my wife's commands (and it is, I think, with this familiar implication of deducibility, of necessary consequence, that Mr. Hare uses 'inference'), but only an expression of a perfectly natural assumption which turned out to be incorrect.

One last word. I must emphasize that I agree with Mr. Hare that philosophers do wrong to confine their attention to indicative sentences, more especially if they further confine themselves to "fact-stating" indicative sentences. But I cannot agree that Mr. Hare's method is more to be recommended as a remedy than Professor Ryle's or Professor Stevenson's (which in both cases, though in different ways, I take to be to draw attention to interesting uses of imperative sentences). The Procrustean bed has never proved a satisfactory piece of philosophical furniture.

A. F. PETERS.