

## Can I Do What I Think I Ought Not? Where Has Hare Gone Wrong?

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## CAN I DO WHAT I THINK I OUGHT NOT? WHERE HAS HARE GONE WRONG?

THE common man's answer to the first question is "Yes, I can do what I think I ought not", for we do have expressions to cover the cases of (1) not doing what one believes one ought to do, and of (2) doing what one believes to be wrong. Moreover, there are signs indicating that such expressions are appropriate. The signs are characteristic sorts of behaviour, such as acting furtively, or other manifestations of a guilty conscience.<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Hare (*The Language of Morals*, Oxford, 1952) would convince us that if the normative words in such expressions were used in their primary, that is in their prescriptive or evaluative sense, then the expressions would be self-contradictory. For the conclusion to his reasonings is, that if one sincerely assents to "I ought do X" then he logically must do X, unless he is physically or psychologically prevented from doing it, or unless he changes his mind. (Of course he might have forgotten.) That is, Hare claims to have shown that if a person has not done X, and yet claims to have sincerely assented to "I ought to do X", and if the person denies having changed his mind and denies that he was prevented, etc., then we may conclude that he does not understand what the expression "I ought to do X" means. Hare supports this conclusion, briefly with three arguments. His first point is that the function and purpose of moral rules is to guide conduct. His second is that "value judgements if they are action guiding must be held to entail imperatives" (*ibid.* p. 162). Or to put this second point another way; "the test whether someone is using the judgement 'I ought to do X' as a value judgement or not is, 'Does he or does he not recognize that if he assents to the judgement he must also assent to the command, "Let me do X!"?' " (*ibid.* p. 168). His third point is "that it is a tautology to say that one can not sincerely assent to a second person command addressed to one's self and at the same time not perform it if now is the occasion for performing it, and it is in our physical and psychological power to do so" (*ibid.* p. 20). I wish to question the second of these points. The paradoxical nature of Hare's conclusions is to be explained in part, I believe, by his account of the connection between imperatives and statements of value; a connection which he makes out to be analytic.

### *Hare's Argument*

As a first step I wish to consider Hare's argument that "value judgements if they are action-guiding must be held to entail imperatives" in more detail. Therefore, in this section I shall be concerned almost exclusively with the structure of his argument as presented in Chapter II (especially pp. 163, 170-171).

<sup>1</sup> J. Gardiner, "Assenting to a Moral Principle", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, N.S., lv (1954-55), 23-44, 29.

The argument begins with a distinction made between three senses of "I ought to do X" (p. 167).

1. "Conformity to the accepted standard requires that I do X." (I ought<sub>1</sub>, a statement of sociological fact.)
2. "I have a feeling that I ought to do X." (I ought<sub>2</sub>, a statement of psychological fact.)
3. "I ought to do X." (I ought<sub>3</sub>, a value judgement.)

Hare then proposes entailment of an imperative as *the* criterion for deciding when to place the utterance of "I ought" in the action guiding or evaluative category. That is, he proposes as a definition of I ought<sub>3</sub>, that it entails an imperative.

His argument then follows these lines. He claims to show that this use of I ought<sub>3</sub> as entailing imperatives must exist, and that this use is logically primary, by showing that unless it did exist we could define all uses of "I ought" naturalistically. The question of whether a non-naturalistic analysis of "I ought" in all its uses implies an imperative entailing usage of "I ought" is to be decided by resolving the question of whether the impossibility of giving a naturalistic analysis for I ought<sub>3</sub>, the value judgement, implies that this sense entails imperatives. For when statements of the sort I ought<sub>1</sub>, or I ought<sub>2</sub>, are analysed it will always be found that they contain "I ought" in inverted commas, such that the only part of the analysis which is not a matter of fact is just this value judgement. (It is therefore this sense of "I ought", as a value judgement, which must account for certain puzzles which arise in connection with I ought<sub>1</sub> and I ought<sub>2</sub>, e.g. "I have a feeling I ought to but I don't really know if I ought".) But why, he asks, can we not define "I ought" in the action guiding case, that is I ought<sub>3</sub>, naturalistically? If we could so define I ought<sub>3</sub>, this would mean that it was equivalent to a series of indicative sentences. But if I ought<sub>3</sub> is equivalent to a series of indicative sentences, we can derive no imperative from it. And there are by definition, Hare claims, some cases in which "I ought" is used so as to entail imperatives.

Now what is the force of this argument? It is this. If it is a fact that in some of its uses, "I ought" entails an imperative, then it is these uses which account for the impossibility of a naturalistic analysis. The argument however does not establish it as a fact that any such uses exist. From the premises that (1) if "I ought" entailed at least one imperative we could not analyse "I ought" naturalistically, and (2) we can not analyse "I ought" naturalistically, it does not follow that "I ought" entails at least one imperative. The inference "if p then q, and q, therefore p", is not valid. Hare's argument, therefore, in no way supports the proposition that if a man sincerely assents to "I ought to do X" he logically must assent to "Let me do X", and *a fortiori* can not support the proposition that if a man sincerely assents to "I ought . . ." he logically must do it.

"I ought" and "Let me!"

But is there not an oddness about the notion of "assenting to a command" as remarked by Gardiner (*loc. cit.* p. 23)? What is it? Here lies a clue to where Hare has gone wrong. When someone says to me, "You ought to do X" I can always demand a justification. That is I can ask "Why, what reasons have you?"<sup>1</sup> for in using "ought" one implies without expressly stating them, that one has reasons for prescribing the act in question. That is, the use of "ought" contextually implies that the speaker has reasons, to use Nowell-Smith's terminology (*Ethics*, Penguin Books, London, 1954, pp. 190-191.). But this is not the case when one is ordered to do a thing. One is not entitled to ask for a justification for a command in the way one is so entitled in the case of prescriptions (i.e. statements of the form, "You ought to do . . ."). For the person giving the command is not logically bound to be able to give reasons for it. It is of course possible to ask, "Why ought I do X?" when one is ordered "Do X!" But the reasons given if any, by the person issuing the command either would be in support of "You ought do X" (in which case they would not support "Do X!") or they would be meant to justify the person's position as one authorized to give such commands. In the second case, any reasons given would still not support "Do X!" (logically), but rather a statement to the effect, "I have the right to give such commands". The result stands that imperatives can not (logically) be justified or supported by reasons in the way in which prescriptions can be. In his account of morals, Hare has not provided for this difference between imperatives and prescriptions. This oversight explains what strikes us as odd about the notion of "assenting to a command", for a further distinction between commands and prescriptions follows from the difference just covered. It is, that whereas it is true that one assents to prescriptions, this is not the case with imperatives. The essential feature of assenting to a proposition is that one does so *because* of the reasons or evidence supporting it.<sup>1</sup> This is the common use of the word "assent" in which one assents (mistakenly) for example to the proposition that whenever we see a material object we always see a sense-datum as well, because of the argument from illusion. But in the case of imperatives there can be no such assent because there can be no such reasons for assenting. To say that "Do X!" is not the sort of expression with reasons supporting it logically, in the way in which "You ought" is such an expression, is of course, not to say that one has no reasons for giving a command. One obviously does, in general, have reasons for giving orders. It might be the case that the reasons for which one gives a command were identical with the reasons for which one thought that the thing in question ought to be done. But where these reasons would support the proposition "You ought . . ." logically such that "You

<sup>1</sup> "Assent implies primarily an act of the understanding and applies to opinions or propositions." Cf. *Webster's International Dictionary*.

ought . . . " might logically follow from them, this could not be true of the command. "Do X!" is not the sort of statement which can follow from reasons. If it is logically impossible to support a command with reasons (in the way in which prescriptions can be so supported) then it is also logically impossible to give one's assent to a command. From this I conclude that whatever Hare is attempting to establish when he suggests that in sincerely assenting to "I ought" we necessarily assent to "Let me!" he is using the word "assent" in two contrary if not contradictory ways.

What the argument to this point shows is that one's reasons for giving commands, bear to those commands a relationship quite different from the logical relations between propositions. The distinction to be made is that between reasoning and having a reason.<sup>1</sup> Reaching the conclusion "I ought" is a matter of reasoning; giving a command is not. Only in cases where we are concerned with a matter of reasoning is it appropriate to speak of a man's giving his assent. "I ought do X" and "Do X!" are distinct; no relation of entailment exists between them.

To this point I have followed Hare's terminology in allowing that "Let me . . ." is a command. The whole idea of giving a command to one's self may strike some as very odd. But that need not detain us here, for the preceding argument has shown that even if sense can be made of "giving a command to one's self", still "Let me . . ." if a command, can not be entailed by (one's giving one's assent to) "I ought". The notion of "assenting to a command" has been rejected. One might protest at this point, that a more likely interpretation of Hare's words would seem to be that by "assenting to a command" he meant to refer to the making of a decision, and that by "Let me . . ." he meant the expression of a decision "I shall". Given this interpretation of Hare, would it then be true to say that assenting to "I ought" entails making a decision, "I shall"? That is, would it be true that, "the test whether someone is using the judgement 'I ought to do X' as a value judgement or not is, 'Does he or does he not recognize that if he assents to the judgement he must also make (assent to) the decision, 'I shall do X'?' " (see quotation p. 1). The answer must be "no", for the above argument, directed at clarifying the distinction between commands and propositions, applies equally well to a decision-proposition dichotomy. It can no more be claimed that in assenting to "I ought" one necessarily decides "I shall" than it could be claimed that in assenting to "I ought" one must give the command "Do X!". This is true in the case of decisions for the same reasons that it was true as regards commands. Again, the distinction to be made is between reasoning and having a reason. (As one *gives* commands and does not assent to them, so one *makes* decisions and does not assent to them). The reasons one has for deciding "I

<sup>1</sup> P. F. Strawson, *Introduction to Logical Theory* (Methuen and Co. Ltd., London, 1952), p. 37.

shall" (giving the command "Do X!") do not support the decision (command) logically in the way in which reasons for assenting to "I ought" support "I ought". Where the second activity is a matter of reasoning the first is not. "I ought" and "I shall" are distinct. No relation of entailment exists between them.

The point here is this; that statements of value on the one hand, and imperatives or expressions of decision on the other, are in their very nature such that no analytic connection could exist between them. This being the case, it is entirely possible for a man to assent to the value judgement "I ought . . ." without making the decision "I shall", or (if this makes sense) commanding himself "Let me . ..". Therefore it must be possible for a man to assent to a value judgement and yet not perform (commit) the act which the value judgement prescribes (proscribes); for once admitted that a decision to do a thing does not follow from one's giving one's assent to the proposition that it ought to be done, it could scarcely be claimed that the *performance* of the act in question does follow therefrom. This is simply to say that a man can do a thing which he thinks he ought not do.

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