



A Note on Hare's The Language of Morals

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A NOTE ON HARE'S *THE LANGUAGE OF MORALS*

In *The Language of Morals* Hare argues that since the function of moral judgments is to guide choices they cannot be "merely statements of fact" but must contain an "irreducibly prescriptive element":

. . . moral philosophers cannot have it both ways; either they must recognize the irreducibly prescriptive element in moral judgments, or else they must allow that moral judgments, as interpreted by them, do not guide actions in the way that, as ordinarily understood, they obviously do.¹

Granting that moral judgments do in some sense guide actions, why must they, therefore, contain a "prescriptive element"? Hare's answer is as follows:

. . . to guide choices or actions, a moral judgment has to be such that if a person assents to it, he must assent to some imperative sentence derivable from it; in other words, if a person does not assent to some such imperative sentence, that is knock-down evidence that he does not assent to the moral judgment in an evaluative sense—though of course he may assent to it in some other sense. . . . This is true by my definition of the word evaluative. . . . We are therefore clearly entitled to say that the moral judgment entails the imperative; for to say that one judgment entails another is simply to say that you cannot assent to the first and dissent from the second unless you have misunderstood one or the other; and this 'cannot' is a logical 'cannot'—if someone assents to the first and not to the second, this is in itself a sufficient criterion for saying that he has misunderstood the meaning of one or the other (171-2).

If moral judgments are to guide choices, then, they must entail imperatives. And according to Hare no merely factual statement can entail an imperative; if a judgment entails an imperative the imperative must already be contained in the judgment itself:

. . . nothing can appear in the conclusion of a valid deductive inference which is not, from their very meaning, implicit in the conjunction of the premisses. It follows that, if there is an imperative in the conclusion, not only must *some* imperative appear in the premisses, but that very imperative must be itself implicit in them (32).

At the risk of some oversimplification and distortion these passages can be pieced together to obtain the following line of argument: (1) the function of moral judgments when used evaluatively is to guide choices, (2) when

¹R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 195. All page references in brackets are to this book.

judgments guide choices they entail imperatives, (3) judgments which entail imperatives must contain imperatives as part of their very meaning, and therefore (4) when *moral* judgments are used evaluatively they must contain imperatives as part of their meaning. And (5) since moral judgments (used evaluatively) do have an imperative element in their meaning, they cannot be merely statements of fact. A bit more formally, the argument might be outlined as follows :

1. To say that a judgment is used evaluatively is to say that it is used to guide choices.
2. If a judgment guides choices, it must entail an imperative.
3. If a judgment entails an imperative, then it must itself contain an imperative.
4. Therefore, when moral judgments are used evaluatively, they must contain an imperative (i.e. a prescriptive element), and cannot be merely statements of fact.

In the following discussion I will use this argument as a kind of model, without claiming it is necessarily a true-to-life representation of Hare's position. But in criticizing the argument I hope to bring out more clearly some difficulties in Hare's position.² I will discuss these three questions : (1) Is it true that to say a judgment is used evaluatively is to say that it is used to guide choices ? (2) Is it true that if a judgment guides actions or choices it must entail an imperative ? (3) Is it true that if a judgment entails an imperative, it must itself contain an imperative as part of its meaning ? In the case of (1) I will argue that there are a number of uses of moral judgments which are not in any obvious way choice-guiding but which are usually called evaluative : further, there is no clear way of showing these uses are logically dependent on the choice-guiding use. In the case of (2) I will argue that judgments need not entail imperatives in order to guide choices, and in one sense of 'guiding choices' cannot entail an imperative. In the case of (3) I will argue that on Hare's criterion of entailment it is not true that if a judgment entails an imperative it must contain an imperative as part of its meaning. For judgments do sometimes have a purely descriptive meaning but also entail an imperative in this sense : if someone assents to the judgment but dissents from some imperative which is not stated but is, as we say, "implied", then in Hare's words "this is in itself a sufficient criterion for saying that he has misunderstood the meaning of one or the other". The purpose of this criticism is not to argue that moral judgments *never* have an irreducibly prescriptive element. Nor is it to argue that moral judgments *are* always, or sometimes, merely statements of fact. The purpose is to show that the logical characteristics of moral judgments are more complex than Hare's argument suggests. There are other uses of moral judgments besides the choice-guiding use, and there is no reason to think there

²I am especially indebted to two reviewers of *The Language of Morals* : Mary Mothersill (review in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. LI, No. 1, January, 1954, pp. 24-28) and R. B. Braithwaite (review in *Mind*, Vol. LXIII, April 1954, pp. 249-262).

is a clear order of logical priority among these uses : the choice-guiding role of moral judgments is not explained by saying that they entail imperatives, and in any event entailing imperatives is not peculiar to any kind of language use except, tautologically, prescribing or commanding uses.

I

In a passage quoted above, Hare makes it " true by my definition of the word evaluative " that when a moral judgment is used evaluatively, it entails an imperative. But this cannot be an arbitrary definition, introduced without regard to any previous meanings of ' evaluative '. If that were so Hare could have no objection to the naturalist, who makes it true by *his* definition of the word ' evaluative ' that a moral judgment is used evaluatively only if it is used to describe a certain kind of fact. Further, Hare believes that this definition will " prove illuminating " (169). Behind the proposed definition, according to Hare, there are important facts, namely these : there is a class of sentences containing value words, some of these sentences entail imperatives, and it is this sub-class which " is of primary interest to the logician who studies moral language ". But to say this is to assume that we can already pick out sentences containing value-words, and that what is to count as a value-word is already to some degree fixed. And this is to assume that some meaning has been given to the expression ' value-word ' ; that there is some standard by which to include or exclude an expression from the list of value-words. What is this standard ? Hare has, I think, already at least suggested an answer. And the answer is this : value-words are expressions used in order to " guide choices, our own or other people's, now or in the future " (127). In general, according to this reading of Hare, to say of an expression that it is a value-expression is to say that it is used to guide choices. In particular, to say that a moral judgment is a value-judgment is to say that it is used in order to guide choices. And it is this thesis I want to question.

If a moral judgment is used in order to guide choice, then it must be directly or indirectly aimed at some agent—the speaker himself, or someone else, or some group of agents. And the person making the judgment must at least believe the following things to be true : the agent is in a position to hear and understand the judgment, and is capable of making choices. If a moral judgment is *not* addressed to some agent, or the person making the judgment does *not* believe that the agent is in a position to hear and understand it, or that he is in a position to make a choice, then we can be certain that the judgment is not being used to guide choices. But moral judgments are used (1) to appraise actions and choices, without being addressed to the agent, and (2) when the agent addressed is not in a position to make a choice. And there seems nothing unnatural in calling these uses evaluative. Thus, (1) moral judgments are used to appraise actions of people who are complete strangers and where we have no intention of guiding the agent's actions (" He oughtn't to smoke in that railway compartment "),

and also to appraise actions by people no longer living (" Jones ought to have included his first wife in his will "). Further, moral judgments are used in the context of hypothetical or counterfactual judgments, to appraise actions of an unknown or non-existent agent (" Whoever is looking after those children shouldn't let them play in the street like that "; " If someone *had* been looking after the children, then *he* ought to have kept them from playing in the street "). And moral judgments are also used to appraise actions and choices in works of fiction. In these uses we make judgments *about* actions, but the judgments are not addressed to the agent, and are not intended to guide an agent's choices : one cannot be said to guide the choices of an agent who is no longer living, or not known to exist, or known not to exist, or known to exist only in a work of fiction. Yet, it is natural to call these judgments value-judgments. (2) Moral judgments are used to appraise actions or choices where the agent addressed (ourselves or other people) is not in a position to make a choice : because the situation referred to in the judgment no longer exists (" I ought to have kept the children from playing in the street ") or because circumstances make it impossible to act otherwise (" I ought to be paying him more, but can't afford to "). The point of such uses cannot be to guide choices : one cannot guide someone's past actions, or guide someone's actions in a situation where circumstances prevent him from acting differently. In sum, there are many uses of moral judgments other than guiding choices. And when moral judgments are used in these ways they are surely used as value-judgments—as appraisals of actions and choices. It cannot therefore be true that to say a moral judgment is used as a value-judgment is to say that it is used in order to guide choices.

In reply to this objection, Hare might argue as follows : although moral judgments do have uses besides guiding choices, these uses are all logically dependent on the choice-guiding use, in the sense that if we did not first understand the choice-guiding use, we could not understand the other uses (172). Therefore (so the argument might run) these other uses are all secondary, derivative. And to identify the evaluative use of moral judgments with their choice-guiding use is simply a way of stressing this fact : the fact that the choice-guiding use is basic, and all the others are logically dependent on it. But *are* all the uses that aren't choice-guiding uses logically dependent ? Is it true, for example, that one could not understand the use of ' ought ' in judgments such as " He ought not to have smoked there " unless one first understood the use of ' ought ' in such judgments as " You ought not to be smoking in here " ? The truth of this claim is not obvious, nor is it very clear how one would go about establishing it. It *is* plausible to say that in order to understand what a moral judgment is, one must understand the choice-guiding use of moral judgments. But it is equally plausible to say that it is necessary to understand the uses that are not choice-guiding. It is equally plausible to say, for example, that in order to understand what a moral judgment is, one must understand the uses of moral judgments to

appraise the actions and choices of persons no longer living, or of remote strangers, or of merely hypothetical persons. But there is no obvious sense in which all the other uses are logically dependent on the choice-guiding use. Hare does point out certain "inverted comma" uses of moral judgments that are logically dependent on some other use: e.g., "I ought to do X" used to mean roughly "Most people would say 'X is what ought to be done'" or "The people I respect would say 'X is what ought to be done'" (124-6; 165-70). But he does not argue that whenever a moral judgment is used for some purpose other than guiding choices, it is used in one of these logically dependent *senses*. Nor would such an argument be convincing: it is not convincing to say, for example, that whenever we make a judgment about the actions of someone no longer living, we are merely acknowledging what most people would say, or saying something "just because everyone else does", or using moral language in an ironic sense, or in some other logically secondary sense. The choice-guiding use, then, has not been shown to be logically prior to all the other uses: therefore, there seems to be no good reason for holding that moral judgments are used evaluatively only when they are used to guide choices.

II

In the preceding section I have tried to show that there are many uses of moral judgments besides guiding choices, and that these uses have not been shown to be logically dependent on the choice-guiding use. In the present section I want to criticize briefly the second step in Hare's argument, as I have outlined it: the assertion that if a judgment guides actions or choices, it must entail an imperative. And in criticizing this assertion I hope to forestall an objection to what I have said above. I have assumed (so the objection runs) that when we use moral judgments simply to *appraise* actions and choices, without attempting to *guide* someone's actions or choices, we still use words such as 'ought', 'oughtn't', 'good', etc., with the same meanings they have when used to guide choices. But the meanings cannot be the same, and the evidence is this: when these words are used in order to guide choices ("You oughtn't to be smoking in here") the judgments in which they occur have a special logical characteristic, namely, entailing imperatives ("Don't smoke in here"). But when these words are not used to guide choices, this logical characteristic is absent. Hence (the objection concludes) moral words used for purposes other than guiding choices *cannot* have the sense they have when used to guide choices: therefore it is at least misleading to say that moral judgments have many uses besides guiding choices, since in these other uses moral words have different meanings. This objection depends on the assertion that when moral judgments are used to guide choices, they are marked off by a special logical characteristic—entailing imperatives. And this is the assertion I want to question.

To guide someone's choices is not necessarily to point to a particular course of action and say, or imply, "Do this". We can guide someone's choices by telling him what the alternatives are and what their consequences are likely to be, without telling him what choice to make. Or, we can give reasons for making one choice rather than another, again without telling the agent what choice to make. Further, there is a variety of forms of speech used in guiding choices which are much weaker than an imperative, and do not in any obvious way entail an imperative: e.g., "I advise you to do X" or "I would do X if I were you". Formulae of this sort are deliberately used in order to avoid the imperative "Do X". In general, then, a judgment need not entail an imperative in order to guide choices. There is even a sense in which to guide someone's choices is to refrain from saying, or implying, "Do X". To guide someone's choices is to give him some kind of support in making his own choices, while to tell someone what choice to make is, in effect, making the choice for him. Tautologically, if a judgment is used to guide choices in the sense of telling someone what choice to make, then it must assert or imply "Do X". But that is not the only, or even the most familiar sense of the expression 'guiding choices'.

Hare does have an apparently convincing argument for the claim that moral judgments addressed to persons faced with making a choice *do* entail imperatives. The argument, quoted previously, is this:

. . . if he professes to assent to the moral judgment, but does not assent to the imperative, he must have misunderstood the moral judgment (by taking it to be non-evaluative, though the speaker intended it to be evaluative). We are therefore clearly entitled to say that the moral judgment entails the imperative; for to say that one judgment entails another is simply to say that you cannot assent to the first and dissent from the second unless you have misunderstood one or the other . . . (172).

The argument might be outlined as follows:

1. To say that one judgment entails a second is to say that if both are understood, one cannot (logically) assent to the first and dissent from the second.
2. If moral judgments of the form "I (you, we) ought to do X" are understood as value-judgments, one cannot (logically) assent to them and not assent to the imperative "Do X".
3. Therefore if moral judgments of the form "I (you, we) ought to do X" are understood as value-judgments, they entail the imperative "Do X".

If this argument were conclusive Hare's main point would be established. One would have to agree that although the fact that a judgment is used to guide choices does not prove that it entails an imperative, moral judgments (used evaluatively) *do* entail imperatives, when addressed to agents faced with making choices. But the argument is not, I think, conclusive. It is not immediately obvious that when we assent to judgments such as

“ I (you, we) oughtn't to be smoking in this compartment ” understanding them as value-judgments, we must assent to the imperative “ Don't smoke in this compartment ”. It is not obvious that someone who says “ I know I oughtn't to smoke in this compartment, but I'm going to have a cigarette ” *cannot* be using the expression ‘ I oughtn't to smoke ’ in an evaluative sense, but only in some descriptive sense such as “ The railway forbids smoking ” or “ Most people would disapprove of smoking ”. Further, there is no way to test this claim. In order to test it we would need some independent way of knowing whether the person who says “ I know I oughtn't to smoke in this compartment ” *has* understood ‘ I oughtn't to smoke ’ in an evaluative sense. Hare provides no such independent way of knowing this. And if one were to say that “ understanding a judgment in an evaluative sense ” here simply *means* “ understanding a judgment in such a way that one cannot assent to it and not assent to the imperative ”, then the argument becomes question-begging. Hare does suggest a way of telling whether someone has assented to a moral judgment in an evaluative sense, namely, by studying what he *does*. But Hare himself points out that this test cannot be conclusive : it would only be conclusive if it were “ analytic to say that everyone always does what he thinks he ought to (in the evaluative sense) ” which is “ not how we use the word ‘ think ’ ” (169). Using ‘ assent ’ in the ordinary way, then, we cannot tell whether someone has assented to a moral judgment in an evaluative sense by studying his actions. And in the absence of any independent test of assenting to a moral judgment in an evaluative sense, we have no assurance that it is ever impossible to assent to a moral judgment in an evaluative sense but not assent to the imperative. Consequently, Hare has not established the claim that moral judgments ever entail imperatives. There may *be* imperative-entailing uses, but it is not clear what they are.

III

In the preceding section I have argued that when moral judgments are used to guide choices they need not entail imperatives. Further, I have argued that there is no way to prove that moral judgments ever do entail imperatives when used evaluatively. In this way I have tried to meet the objection raised earlier : the objection that since moral judgments used to guide choices have a logical characteristic (entailing imperatives) absent in other uses, the value-words in these other uses cannot have the same meanings they have in guiding choices. Since it is not clear that moral judgments used to guide choices do entail imperatives, we are not entitled to say that there must be a difference in meaning. We are not entitled to say, for example, that ‘ ought ’ in “ Someone ought to have kept the children from playing in the street ” must have a different meaning than in “ You ought to keep your children from playing in the street ”.

But even if moral judgments do sometimes entail imperatives, according to Hare's criterion of entailment, it still does not follow that they cannot

be merely statements of fact but must contain an "irreducibly prescriptive element". For according to Hare's criterion of entailment, it is not in general true that if a judgment entails an imperative, it must itself contain an imperative. Suppose A (a conductor) tells B (a passenger) "You oughtn't to be smoking in this compartment". It is at least plausible to say that on Hare's criterion A's judgment entails the imperative "Stop smoking": if B understands how A is using the judgment "You oughtn't to be smoking in this compartment" he could hardly be said to assent to it without assenting to the imperative. But it does not follow that A's judgment contains an imperative. The judgment itself might be correctly rephrased as a statement of fact, e.g. as "There is a railway rule against smoking in this compartment". And B might correctly understand A's judgment in this sense. In general it is not true that when a judgment is used in a way that entitles us to infer an imperative from it, the judgment itself must contain an imperative and cannot be a mere statement of fact. What entitles us to infer the imperative may be the circumstances in which the judgment is made, rather than an imperative element implicit in the judgment itself. It might be argued that whenever a judgment is used in circumstances which entitle us to infer an imperative, it is *used as* an imperative and not as a mere statement of fact. Further (the argument might run) to say that a judgment contains an imperative is simply to say that it is used as an imperative. So it is true that whenever a judgment entails an imperative, it must contain an imperative. But how can we know that a judgment is used as an imperative except by knowing that it entails an imperative? And we may not be able to know this from the meaning of the judgment itself: we may have to consider the circumstances. Even granting that moral judgments do entail imperatives, then, I do not think it has been shown that when they do so they must contain a prescriptive element as part of their very meaning and so cannot be "merely statements of fact".

IV

I have tried to show, first, that moral judgments have other uses besides guiding choices and that these other uses are not in any clear way logically secondary; second, that in order to guide choices a judgment need not entail an imperative, and third, that even if there are uses of moral judgments in which they entail imperatives they need not therefore contain an imperative. There may be some sense in which the primary use of moral judgments is to guide choices. And there may be some sense in which judgments cannot guide choices unless they are irreducibly prescriptive. But so far at least these senses have not been made very clear. As a result it has not yet been proved that since moral judgments guide choices they must have logical characteristics similar to those of imperative sentences.

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