

CHAPTER 3

PRESCRIPTIVITY

I have dedicated Chapters 3, 4 and 5 of this book to the evaluation of R. M. Hare's moral theory, and, in particular, to his attempts to repair what he saw as the irrationalist defects of emotivism. The evaluation focuses on the two logical properties which Hare ascribed to moral judgements, namely, prescriptivity (this chapter) and universalisability (Chapter 4), and upon the necessary roles which imagination, sympathy and decisions of principle play in what Hare referred to as 'critical moral thinking'.

1. INTRODUCTION TO HARE'S MORAL THEORY

Hare's moral theory, which he described as a 'rational kind of non-descriptivism', not only occupies a central place in the conventional history of Twentieth Century moral philosophy, but a central place in the *unconventional* version of that history which I outlined in my introduction, for, while Hare was, no doubt, a critic of the ET, he was, in the eyes of his own critics, a kind of emotivist himself. His theory, as a consequence, has sometimes been depicted as a reaction against emotivism and at other times as an extension of it.

Since it is my intention to show that his 'rational kind of non-descriptivism' reduces under analysis to a thickly-interpreted emotivism, a suitable starting point for my evaluation of his theory is what Hare himself has repeatedly said concerning the connection between it and emotivism, and, to this end, I will cite two of his more pertinent statements. Firstly, from *The Language of Morals* (1952):

It is not surprising that the first effect of modern logical [research] was to make some philosophers despair of morals as a rational activity. It is the purpose of this book to show that their despair was premature (*LM* 45).

And secondly, from *Hare and Critics* (1987):

I did, and do, follow the emotivists in their rejection of descriptivism. But I was never an emotivist, though I have often been called one. But unlike most of their opponents I saw that it was their irrationalism, not their non-descriptivism, that was mistaken. So my main task was to find a rationalist kind of non-descriptivism, and this led me to establish that imperatives, the simplest kind of prescriptions, could be subject to logical constraints while not [being] descriptive (*HC* 210).

Thus, while he maintained that moral judgements involve more than the simple venting or arousal of emotion, which is all he took Ayer and Stevenson to be claiming, Hare agreed with them on a number of important points:

1. in their rejection of moral descriptivism, that is, all moral theories, such as naturalism, ordinary subjectivism and intuitionism, which seek to reduce moral judgements to statements of natural or non-natural fact.
2. in their descriptive/evaluative bifurcation of moral meaning.
3. in their according moral judgements an action-guiding function.¹
4. in their belief that moral judgements are reason-giving or able to be supported by reasons.

However, while points (3) and (4) were points of agreement, they were so, according to Hare, only in a superficial sense, for where the emotivists took moral judgements to be action-guiding and reason-giving in a causal or psychological sense, Hare maintained that they were action-guiding and reason-giving in a logical or rational sense.²

Broadly speaking, then, insofar as it rejected descriptivism, endorsed the descriptive/evaluative bifurcation of moral meaning, and accorded an action-guiding function and a reason-giving character to moral judgements, Hare's theory was intended to preserve the insights of the ET; but insofar as it emphasised the logical or rational character of moral thinking and moral language it was intended to repair the ET's 'irrationalist' defects. Hare's concern about the irrationalist defects of emotivism was a response to some of the more cavalier claims of Ayer and Stevenson, such as Ayer's 'Ethical statements have no validity. They are just expressions of emotion' (*LTL* 136), and Stevenson's 'To ask whether a thing is good is to ask for influence' (*FV* 30). But, as I have been at pains to show, it is possible to interpret Ayer and Stevenson in a much more favourable light, and it is in the light of these much more favourable interpretations that we now turn to Hare's theory and to his attempts to distinguish it from the ET.

¹ The action-guiding function of moral judgements was something which the emotivists took largely for granted: since moral judgements express attitudes and attitudes are associated with certain patterns of behaviour, moral judgements will be associated with certain patterns of behaviour. See Ayer (*AMJ* 238-41) and Stevenson (*FV* 13).

² For Hare, the terms 'logical' and 'rational' are effectively interchangeable: by 'rational' he generally means 'with due regard for logic and the facts'. While it may be objected that this assumed semantic equivalence begs the question 'But is being rational simply a matter of being logical?', the equating of 'cognitive' and 'rational' or 'cognitive' and 'logical', which the labels 'cognitivist' and 'noncognitivist' presuppose, begs an even more fundamental question.

2. RULE-GOVERNED AND CAUSAL USES OF LANGUAGE

In *The Language of Morals* Hare wrote:

I propose to say that the test whether someone is using the judgement 'I ought to do X' as a value judgement is 'Does he or does he not recognise that if he assents to the judgement he must also assent to the command "Let me do X"?' (LM 168).

In other words, if a judgement is a *moral* judgement then anyone who assents to it, provided he knows what he is saying and means it sincerely, cannot dissent from the imperative it entails, because his sincere and witting assent to the judgement entails his assent to the imperative. This is what Hare originally meant when he claimed that moral judgements are prescriptive, but in itself this did not serve to distinguish his theory from the ET, for Ayer and Stevenson had assumed that the judgement 'X is good' entails the imperative 'Do X'.³

Like Ayer and Stevenson, then, Hare emphasised the imperative character of moral judgements (their connection with conduct), but, because he took Ayer and Stevenson to be claiming that an imperative is just a kind of 'verbal shove', he felt the need to draw what he considered, at the time, an important distinction:

In ordinary parlance there is no harm in saying that in using a command our intention is to get someone to do something; but for philosophical purposes an important distinction has to be made. The process of telling someone to do something, and getting him to do it, are quite distinct, logically, from each other (LM 13).

Telling someone to do something, according to Hare, is a linguistic and therefore rule-governed use of language, whereas getting someone to do something is a matter of producing an actual effect on that someone's behaviour, and, insofar as getting someone to do something involves the use of language, it involves only the causal or psychological use of language. This was evident, or so Hare believed, from the fact that a person can get another person to do something without telling him to do it, and that he may tell the other person to do it without actually trying to get him to do it.⁴ But, even so, telling someone to do something is one of the most obvious and effective ways of getting him to do it, and if this were not the case then the act of telling someone that 'X is good' or 'You ought to do X' would have no connection with conduct; the very connection which Hare himself

³ As Hare later acknowledged himself, '[Stevenson] said that the attitude of approval is a disposition to act in the way approved of, and to encourage others to act in the same way' (From a draft manuscript, *Tax Emot*, 1993, which Hare kindly made available to me).

⁴ After Kerner, 1964, p.138.



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