

## Objective Prescriptions\*

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I offer no apology for presenting a simple paper about what is essentially a simple subject: the objectivity of moral judgments. Most of the complications are introduced by those who do not grasp the distinctions I shall be making. I am afraid that they include the majority of moral philosophers at the present time. These complications can be unravelled; but not in a short paper. I have tried to do it in my other writings (see esp. Hare 1981: chs 1, 12 and refs).

The term ‘objective prescriptivity’ was introduced by John Mackie (1977: ch. 1). Mackie thought that not only some misguided philosophers but even ordinary people think that when they use moral language they are uttering objective prescriptions. Hence his well-known ‘error theory’ of ethics. According to this, when we utter a sentence containing a word like ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ we all think, both that we are saying something prescriptive, i.e. action-guiding, and that we are stating some fact about the world; and we are always mistaken, because there are no such prescriptive moral facts existing in the world. I agree with Mackie that, in

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the sense in which he used that expression, there can be no objective prescriptions. That is to say, if by 'objective' we mean 'factual', in the sense of '*merely* factual', a prescription could never be that. An imperative like 'Shut the door' does not state any fact about the door. And a statement of fact like 'The door is locked' cannot be used to tell somebody to do something. It only becomes a guide to action when conjoined with some general prescription like 'If a door is locked, do not try to open it'.

The idea that there are no moral facts has a respectable history in philosophy, going back supposedly to Hume and even to Protagoras. Its re-emergence in recent times has been a cause of *Angst* and anguish. If one had thought that there were moral facts, especially if one had thought that they were established by God's command, and then came to see that there were not, it might seem that the bottom had dropped out of one's moral world: 'God does not exist, therefore everything is permitted'. Even if one had not believed in God, but only in some ruined but romantic moral temple left over from his demise, one might be, as many would-be good boys have been, led into bewilderment, despair, even suicide.

All this makes me think that the belief in objective prescriptions is not just an error. For many centuries since the beginning of recorded history people have been using moral language, or more primitive precursors of it, and thinking that they meant something by it that was sometimes true. It is hard to believe that they were simply mistaken all that time. Of course there are examples of such mistaken use of language. For much of the world's history

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until recently people have talked about witches. Now we know (though in some other parts of the world they do not) that there are no such people as witches, in the sense of people who *really* have magical powers as opposed to *pretending* to have them. So the people who talked in past times about witches, and even burnt women to whom they attached the name, were mistaken in thinking that the word picked out a property which some women really had. And according to unbelievers the words ‘God’ and ‘the Devil’ were like this too. But do we have to believe that words like ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are the same?

I shall be arguing that we do not, and that all the time, when people used words like ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, they were saying something that they did want to say, and which it was useful to say, and which was even in some sense (which I shall explain later) sometimes *true*. There was a mistake, especially on the part of some philosophers; but it was not the mistake that Mackie thought he had detected. Mackie thought that people all along were using the words which they thought picked out properties that actions done in the world really had, and that they were mistaken in this: there are no such properties. I shall be arguing, in contrast, that they were mistaken in thinking that *that* was what they meant. I shall call this mistake *descriptivism*. Whether most ordinary people committed this mistake, I doubt; but many philosophers certainly did. I think that the ordinary people who thought it, thought it only because they had taken a wrong *philosophical* path in trying to explain what they meant, no doubt led astray by philosophers, clergymen, and others. Left to themselves, they could have used the

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words quite happily without ever asking what they meant, like the centipede who can go on walking quite happily until someone asks him how he does it.

The words ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ did, and do, serve a purpose in language; they have a use, as Wittgenstein might have put it. It is a task for the philosopher to explain, if he can, what this use is. Before I give you my own answer to this question, I am going to discuss some other, as I think mistaken, answers. Nearly all of these are motivated by a desire to do something for the bewildered and potentially suicidal good boys I mentioned earlier. They actually made the good boys’ situation worse, as we shall see. What these well-meaning philosophers were after is often called the ‘objectivity’ of moral statements; but for lack of an understanding of what this means one can go sadly astray, and indeed land up in the very position (sometimes called ‘relativism’) that these people were trying to avoid.

At this point I must say that I do not intend in this paper to take issue with the people who call themselves ‘moral realists’, because I think that might be a waste of your time. What is called ‘moral realism’ purports to be an ‘ontological’ view, as it is called—a view about what exists or does not exist *in rerum natura*. But I have found it impossible to discover what the view is. In another paper (Hare 1985 = 1989: 82) I have explained why ‘ontological’ ways of putting the dispute between so-called realists and anti-realists lead nowhere, except into a conceptual enquiry about the meanings of the moral words and how they get those meanings—which is where we ought to have started. The only clear way of formulating this dispute is as a dispute

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between descriptivists and non-descriptivists, who have opposing views about the meanings of the moral words. We should also have to take into account another conceptual dispute, about the meaning of the word 'exists'. All ontology comes down to this conceptual question in the end. But that I shall leave aside, since I have already discussed it in the paper referred to. I will confine myself to some rather polemical and perhaps provocative remarks.

The only way, it seems to me, in which a realist can pretend really to be doing ontology and not just conceptual analysis is for him to hold a crude correspondence theory of truth. According to such a theory, for a moral statement to be true would be for there to be, out in the world, some solid entity called a 'moral fact'. Because I do not think that there are any solid entities called 'facts' out in the world (moral or any other sort), and do not even know what it would be like for there to be, I cannot discuss such a theory. The world (contra Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*) consists of things, not of facts, as Sir Peter Strawson pointed out long ago (1950).

There is of course a very big question about what it means to say that *any* statement, moral or other, is true; and to this question I shall be recurring later. But I do not think that you will wish me to discuss the crude correspondence theory I have just mentioned, because I should be surprised to find anybody holding it who understood the issues. Probably what realists are most wanting to maintain is that moral statements can be true or false. This is sometimes, in introductory ethics lectures and even elsewhere, said to be the view of people called 'ethical cognitivists'. That too is misleading. An 'ethical cognitivist' ought to be someone who

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thinks that one can *know* that moral statements are true. So he must at least think that some moral statements are true, and also therefore, presumably, that some are false. Since I myself think, both that moral statements can be true or false, and that we can know them to be true or false, I get extremely cross when people classify me as a non-cognitivist. Such people show only that they have not understood the issues, as will shortly, I hope, become clear. We need to say *what it means* to call moral statements true or false, and *what it means* to say that we can know them to be true. I shall in what follows give some hints on what I think about this. But that is all I have time to say about cognitivism and realism; I come back now to the question of objectivity, confusions about which it is my main purpose to clear up.

The most common mistake of would-be objectivists is to treat the word 'objective' as if it meant the same as 'factual'. This mistake I have mentioned already. It is tempting to make it, because it looks as if the problem would be solved if we could show that moral statements state something objective in the sense in which ordinary matters of fact are objective. This amounts to the claim that moral statements are like many other kinds of statements (statements about the colour or shape of objects for example) in being *purely* descriptive of the world. Establish the moral facts, the idea is, and then all moral doubts will be at an end. But since that kind of purely factual objectivity or pure descriptivity is incompatible with prescriptivity, as we have seen, this claim amounts to the abandonment of the idea that moral statements are prescriptive. That is, they stop

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being guides to our actions. One can think that something is wrong, but then go on to say ‘Yes, it is wrong; so what?’. This is one reason why this way of solving the problem will not do. Since the whole point of calling actions right or wrong is to provide a way of deciding whether to do them or not, if you abandon the prescriptivity of these moral statements you might as well stop making the statements. A non-prescriptive moral language has lost its function, except in so far as non-prescriptive uses are parasitical upon the prescriptive uses of other people, as where we call an act wrong, meaning no more than that it is the sort of act that people *call* wrong.

I hope that nobody will raise the tedious objection to what I have said (which I have answered often before) that purely factual statements *can* guide conduct, as in the following example (which I expect you have heard before): the tyrannical mistress says to her cleaning lady, ‘The stairs are dirty’, and this guides the cleaning lady to clean the stairs. The point is that it would not do so unless there were an assumed ‘standing order’ in that house that when the stairs are dirty they are to be cleaned. This ‘standing order’ is a prescription, and of course it, together with the factual statement that the stairs are dirty, provides a guide to action; but the factual statement by itself does not do this. Many examples of this type are put forward by descriptivists, but the answer to them all is similar—and similar, too, to the point I made about the statement that the door is locked, which can guide actions, as I said, only when combined with a prescription.

That, then, is the first trouble with this proposed solution: if moral statements were purely factual they would

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not guide our actions. A second one is that there is going to be a difficulty about how to determine whether the factual claims allegedly made in calling acts right or wrong are true or not. There are two standard alternative ways of determining this. The first is to say that we are all, if we have been properly brought up, able to recognize these facts. Let us call this way *intuitionism*. So, it is claimed, there are some acts which everybody will agree to be wrong. These deliverances of our moral consciousness can be treated as data just as experimental observations are treated as the data of empirical science. The trouble with this is that, although it may work for some moral questions on which nearly everyone in a given society agrees, it breaks down when we are discussing any at all disputed question. Try, for example, using this approach when two people are disagreeing about whether it is right to seek equality of wealth in society even at the expense of diminishing the total amount of wealth to be distributed. Let us call this problem the 'cake' problem: is it right to increase the size of the cake or to divide it equally, if you cannot do both? A right-winger will think it obvious that it is right to increase the size of the cake; a left-winger will think it obvious that it is right to distribute it equally even if it is not then so large. It is no use their appealing to their respective moral convictions, because these disagree.

When two whole societies, or the politically aware parts of them, disagree with each other in this way (the Chinese and the Americans for example), the moral facts are not going to be determined by their consulting their moral convictions, because these differ in the two societies. People have just been brought up with different attitudes to



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the distribution of wealth. The effect of this approach to the problem is, as I said earlier, relativism. When we examine one society, the approach tells us that it is right to divide the cake equally; when we examine the other, it tells us that it is right to increase its size. So the ‘moral facts’ differ from one society to another, and what make them differ are the different moral traditions, and thus the different education that is practised, in the two societies. So whatever the merits of this approach might be, it is not a way of securing objectivity.

The other alternative, within the descriptivist approach, which I will call *naturalism*, is to say that we tell which factual claims about the rightness or wrongness of actions are true by applying what we know about the *meaning of the words* ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. In one sense this is quite right, as we shall see. But the descriptivists go about it in too simple a way. They think that if we know the meanings of these words we shall be able to *recognise* acts which are wrong, just as, if we know the meanings of ‘red’ and ‘triangular’, we can recognize objects which are red or triangular. We might even be able to give a verbal equivalent of ‘wrong’, as we can give the verbal equivalent of ‘triangular’ by saying that it means the same as ‘having just three straight sides’. But the effect of this approach is not very different from the other one. The reason is that if we try to determine the meanings of moral words by seeing what people apply them to, or what they recognize as proper applications of them (as we do with ‘red’ and ‘triangular’), we shall again get different answers, depending on the mores of the society in which we do the investigation. To revert to

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our example, the people in one society will instantly recognize as right, actions which increase the wealth of the society; the people in the other society will instantly recognize as right those which lead to its more equal distribution. On this approach, these reactions tell us about the meanings the people in the two societies attach to the word 'right'. But since they are different meanings in the two societies, they do not even have a common word for discussing with each other the rightness of different economic policies. They have merely a homonym with two alternative meanings. The result again is relativism.

Descriptivists are likely to object to this that I have chosen an unfair example. Increase in wealth and the more equal division of wealth, they may say, are only means to an end, the end of satisfying human needs. We can all of us, in all societies, recognize as right the policies that do most to satisfy these needs. It does not matter whether we can recognize this because we can tell a right act when we see one, or because we know that 'right' means 'maximally satisfying human needs'. In either case, if we want to know which policy is right, we have to ask which does most to satisfy human needs. But the word 'needs' is as bad as the word 'right'. This difficulty has notoriously arisen with the Marxian precept 'to each according to his needs'. To say that someone needs something is to say something incomplete, unless we say what he needs it for. He may need it in order to survive, or he may need it in order to have some fun in life. Many people are so unhappily placed that if they are to survive they have to work at their crops from dawn till dusk, and get no time for fun. Others, more happily placed, can get