

Abstract “Hare’s Universal Prescriptivism as application of late-Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language”

I shall argue, that although later Wittgenstein himself did not develop a moral philosophy in the narrower sense, his contributions to philosophy are so far-reaching that an ethical theory can be extracted from his works. In particular his insight that the meaning of an expression is dependent on its use can be employed to draw conclusions about moral thinking in general. I shall argue that this program was already successfully executed, namely by Richard Hare’s development of his “Universal Prescriptivism” and his moral philosophy.

One of the major insights of later Wittgenstein in the philosophy of language is that not all sentences describe states of affairs but can be used linguistically in a great variety. Evaluative statements often look like statements of fact due to the indicative mood of their main verb. But I shall show with Hare that evaluative statements are really used to give *prescriptions* in situations of choice. Evaluative statements are put to use in our language to guide conduct, to commend one alternative of acting rather than another. Hare identifies the non-descriptivist role of evaluative statements with the prescriptivist role found in imperatives. Because of this logical relation of evaluative statements and imperatives it is not sufficient to say (like other Non-Descriptivists of evaluative language) that they are merely used to *express* attitudes or feelings. Hare argues further, that one cannot only make prescriptive use but also descriptive use of evaluative statements. We always evaluate something on the basis of its descriptive predicates. It simply does not make sense to say that something is *intrinsically* “good” or “right”, e.g. it would make no sense to call a car “good” and to say that this has nothing to do with its other properties. When we evaluate things we apply standards of evaluation which connect our commendations of things to one or more of their properties. But, as Hare also showed, the descriptive predicates of X are not semantically equivalent to, say “good X”. For we have the practice of teaching (and being taught) evaluative standards. And we can do this by saying “Xs, that are A, B, C are good” (by which we commend such Xs) whereas the statement “Xs, that are A, B, C, are A, B, C” would be just a tautology. Prescriptive use constitutes the “primary”, descriptive use the “secondary meaning” of evaluative judgements. When standards are very widespread and consolidated in a speaker’s community, then evaluative judgements can also be used to inform a hearer about a fact. (E.g.: Due to our consolidated standards regarding edible strawberries, we can tell a hearer that the strawberry in this basket are big, sweet and juicy by calling them “good strawberries”.) But it is important to keep both uses apart.

In general, the prescriptive and descriptive meaning of evaluative statements are related to each other in a special way. We evaluate something because of its descriptive properties and because of the fact that descriptive predicates always apply to a *class* of objects and not just to one single thing, evaluative standards are *universal*. So, if we judge one thing to be good or right, because it has a certain set of properties we must be willing to apply good or right to all other things which also possess this set of properties – otherwise we would commit a logical error. In other words, we must not apply double standards when evaluating things, for this is not compatible with the use we make of evaluative statements, i.e. the logic of our evaluative language. This relation between prescriptive and descriptive meaning of evaluative notions is called *supervenience*.

This in turn commits speakers who issue evaluative statements concerning people’s actions or characters that they cannot make particular exceptions – also not when it concerns the speaker himself. Hare thus arrives at an ethical theory which resembles that of Kant: Moral judgements must be universalizable in order to count as moral judgements at all. The rule to universalize our evaluative statements derives straight from the kind of use we make of them. Since in the end we all agree in most of our moral statements an ethics which is binding for everyone seems at hand.