Article   **Open Access**

R. M. HARE'S PRESCRIPTIVISM AND ITS RELEVANCE TO HUMAN EVERYDAYNESS

Terungwa Solomon Gbagir [1]
Kenneth Ochuko Sodje [2]

Department of Religion and Philosophy, University of Mkar, Nigeria [1]
Augustinian Institute, Makurdi, Benue State, Nigeria [2]
Corresponding Email: terungwasolomon@gmail.com [1]

Abstract

Scholars have frequently misinterpreted R. M. Hare's remarks on moral universalism as suggesting objectivity, implying the existence of an absolute moral truth and a singular pattern or universal norm of action recognised as good or just by all and applicable universally. Nonetheless, Hare does not adhere to moral absolutism, save via implication. Hare accurately asserts that, instead of conveying propositions, ethical statements operate akin to imperatives that are universalizable; thus, anyone who asserts a moral judgement such as "stealing is wrong" is obligated to uphold the same judgement in any context where the pertinent facts are consistent. This study examined Hare's Prescriptivism. The research employed the expository and analytic methodologies. The expository approach was employed to elucidate Hare's prescriptivism while the analytic method was employed to scrutinise Hare's prescriptivism. The investigation demonstrated that Hare's ethical prescriptivism is flawed since it overlooks the impossibility of applying a moral principle to individuals to whom it does not pertain, and that not all moral principles are even theoretically applicable to the individuals rendering the judgements. In his view, value judgements or moral statements are fundamentally prescriptive, as they inherently provide guidance for one's actions. Consequently, the study concludes that moral agents should act in a way that is consistent with their moral claims, not in a way that goes against them. This manner, we could help create a more peaceful society that values good behaviour.

Keywords: Prescriptivism, Universalism, Moral Judegment, Hare, Everydayness.

Introduction

The motivation to research on this subject stems from our experiences as moral agents, particularly having observed numerous ethical decisions. We have frequently observed individuals proclaiming that "bribery and corruption are detrimental," yet they fail to align

their actions with these assertions. Concerned about addressing these and numerous other moral paradoxes, we considered R.M. Hare's Ethical Prescriptivism to be the most appropriate theory for debate. Undoubtedly, no society or individual exists devoid of a moral compass. Every community possesses values it upholds and behaviours it detests, ensuring that all individuals conform to acceptable norms. Therefore, the significance of ethics in human existence cannot be overstated. Philosophical ethics is thus dedicated to examining the standards of human conduct to ensure adherence to these norms (Anyam 4). In the realm of ethics and morality, we confront issues and engage in diverse theoretical approaches to address them. For instance, we face dilemmas like as: 'Should I genuinely disclose the truth if it will merely cause him distress?' What types of behaviours and behaviours are deemed virtuous and mandatory? What actions am I undertaking when I render a moral judgement? While results reached at one level may influence those at other levels, it is beneficial to differentiate the issues and tiers of theorisation. Richard Hare's Ethical Prescriptivism constitutes a non-cognitivist theory. Hare contends that moral statements possess a prescriptive nature; they dictate behaviour and direct our activities. Moral declarations serve to direct decisions, both our own and those of others. When I assert that abortion is morally objectionable, I intend to advocate for a specific attitude and conduct. I desire you to adopt my perspective and emulate my behaviour. Hare espouses a Universalist perspective on ethics. He contends that reason influences moral assertions, so endowing them with a universal quality. Hare contends that moral utterances include a universal characteristic, and it is advantageous for us to offer guidance to others, as we would like similar counsel for ourselves. To act otherwise would be incongruous (Bowie and Robert 82-83). Despite the prominent role of moral objectivity in prescriptivism, a comprehensive assessment has not been conducted in the existing literature; therefore, this study aims to address this knowledge deficiency and further advance its relevance to human everydayness.

Clarification of the Key Concept

Prescriptivism: R. M. Hare, in his two works, *The Language of Morals* and *Freedom and Reason*, formulated the meta-ethical theory termed prescriptivism. He asserts that "value judgements or moral statements are fundamentally prescriptive, meaning that these statements encompass an element of significance that serves to prescribe or guide action" (112). Moral statements are designed to direct behaviour or human actions. Commending or condemning anything serves as a means of influencing or directing our decisions.

Foundations of R. M. Hare's Moral Philosophy

The main revelation of this century is that the issues of philosophy are intrinsically linguistic in nature. This is undoubtedly applicable to ethical dilemmas as well. The issues of ethics are multifaceted. Nonetheless, they can be distilled into a fundamental inquiry concerning the relationship between fact and value. An examination of the history of Western ethics reveals that diverse responses have been provided to this fundamental question. For some, value is inherently distinct from reality; for others, there is no fundamental division between fact and value, to the extent that value can be diminished to fact. The crux of the matter is that the dilemmas of ethical philosophy are fundamentally linguistic in nature. Ethical philosophers aim to clarify the language nature of ethical judgements. Their responses to ethical dilemmas are exclusively framed from a language perspective. Certain philosophers do an explicit language investigation of ethical terminology and propositions. Stevenson and Hare are significant ethical philosophers who focused on the language of morality. The texts, *Ethics and The Language* by Stevenson and *Language and Morals* by Hare, would corroborate the

aforementioned statement. Ayer's examination of ethical propositions is presented in his work *Language, Truth and Logic*, which specifically focuses on linguistic analysis (Mukhopadhyay 1-2). So, is morality an objective reality or a subjective construct of the human intellect? Do ethical statements convey beliefs on reality or emotional responses to a world lacking objective value? Does the evolution of human nature contradict or reinforce the notion of universal moral principles? Assuming ethical facts exist, can they be uncovered using procedures akin to scientific approaches, or does moral knowledge necessitate a distinct sort of intuition or insight? What is the relationship between perceiving an action as morally correct and the motivation to undertake it? What criteria must an ethical assertion meet to be considered true? (Chrisman 3).

R. M. Hare, in his book *The Language of Morals,* regards ethics as the logical examination of moral language. Ethical principles help to direct human behaviour, and the most effective method to ascertain the moral principle influencing an individual is to monitor their actions. According to him, ethical language constitutes a prescription for responsibility. The issue of meaning is mostly related to the issue of language. The nature of language one perceives delineates the limits of their understanding of meaning. If he disregards that border, his thoughts may be either inconsistent or arbitrary. Contemporary Western philosophers predominantly regard language as either a reference or a representation of meaning, where meaning is understood as the referent or the entities represented. Non-factual descriptive uses lack a reference or representation in the empirical realm, hence accommodating variations in language corresponding to different uses - factual, non-factual, and further non-factual categories such as religious, moral, functional, and fictitious. They ascribe just emotional significance to ethical terminology. Undoubtedly, R. M. Hare is highly important in relation to his prescriptive theory of meaning. Ethical statements have prescriptive significance just to the degree that the actor has the authority to adhere to or disregard the prescription (Tiwari 79). At this point, it is evident that Hare's moral philosophy possesses a metaethical foundation and serves as a metaethical theory aimed at elucidating the semantic function of moral discourse.

R. M. Hare's Concept of Moral Prescriptivism

In their work "R.M. Hare's Prescriptivism and the Question of Good Governance in Nigeria," Anyam and Gbagir reference the British philosopher R. M. Hare, in his two works, *The Language of Morals* and *Freedom and Reason*, formulated the meta-ethical theory termed Prescriptivism (155). Hare asserts that value judgements or moral judgements are predominantly prescriptive, meaning they involve an aspect of significance that directs or prescribes conduct (Anyam 33). Moral statements are designed to direct behaviour or human actions. The fundamental comprehension is that whether we praise or criticise anything, it invariably serves as a means of influencing our decisions. Hare posits that moral judgements affect the actions we undertake and the behaviours we endorse. This implies that if an individual endorses a moral judgement, they must adhere to it; one cannot accept a moral assertion and simultaneously contravene it. R. M. Hare asserts that moral statements are directly connected to human behaviour, as making a moral statement entails a commitment to its content. For instance, if I assert that honesty is virtuous, I thereby indicate my obligation to be honest and pledge to uphold this principle. Conversely, if I declare that embezzling public funds is immoral, I imply that I must abstain from such actions and commit to avoiding them. Moral judgements invariably influence our behavior (143), as we cannot fully embrace them without adhering to their dictates. If we issue a moral declaration without the willingness to uphold it, Hare contends that we lack sincerity. Moral judgements necessitate personal commitment. Condemning an action as morally reprehensible entails a commitment to abstaining from it (Anyam and Gbagir 156).

This theory posits that ethical concepts such as "good" and "bad" are prescriptive in nature. This indicates that they are employed to delineate a cause of action. According to this hypothesis, asserting that something is good indirectly advises an individual to select it. To declare something as terrible implicitly advises an individual to abstain from it, or in other words, to avoid engaging in it. Moral statements entail imperatives, yet they differ from mere imperatives. According to Hare, the primary distinction between moral statements and imperatives is that moral statements are universal, whereas imperatives are not (Omoregbe 3). This indicates that the urge inherent in a moral statement is universal, directed towards all of humanity. For instance, stating that "abortion is evil" constitutes a moral assertion, but declaring "do not perform abortion" represents an imperative command. The moral assertion "abortion is evil" implies that no individual globally should engage in the act of abortion. Therefore, it might be asserted that a moral statement constitutes a universal imperative; nevertheless, the directive "do not perform abortion" is not universal (20). This is a straightforward command directed at an individual or a collective group. According to Hare, moral concepts are both evaluative and descriptive. In their evaluative capacity, they are employed to commend. Therefore, when I assert that something is excellent, I am implicitly endorsing it to you. If I indicate that anything is unfavourable, I am implicitly advising you against selecting it. Evaluative phrases are utilised to inform decision-making. Hare contends that human activities can only be deemed moral if they are preceded by precise moral statements.

A Critique of Hare's Moral Prescriptivism

It is important to acknowledge that no philosophical theory exists without facing critiques. Nevertheless, such critiques prompt additional scrutiny and enhancement of philosophical theories. This aims to eliminate such theories of significant faults and hence from philosophical dogmatism. Numerous detractors challenge Hare's prescriptivism, with Alasdair MacIntyre and Don Locke being the most prominent. Alasdair MacIntyre contends that Hare has unwarrantedly equated the logic of a specific moral position with the logic of morality itself. In *What Morality Is Not*, he contests Hare's assertion that moral assessments must be universalizable and prescriptive. MacIntyre contends that Hare's emphasis on the universalisability of moral assessments delineates "a line around one area of moral utterance and behaviour and restrict(s) the term to that area" (325). Consequently, MacIntyre contends that only a subset of moral assessments is universalizable. He asserts that it is completely feasible for an individual to express the sentiment "I ought to refrain from engaging in war, yet I cannot censure or denounce responsible nonpacifists" as a moral judgement. A person may be declining to legislate for others specifically on ethical reasons. MacIntyre argues that asserting all moral assessments must be universalizable posits a thesis that can only be upheld by an a priori and wholly unjustified limitation on the term "moral" (325).

MacIntyre asserts on the case for a standard of universalisability to maintain coherence between professed moral principles and specific assessments, "We may reproach an individual for moral inconsistency, yet we do not deem his statements devoid of meaning" (332). MacIntyre perceives the concept of universalisability not as a logical necessity, but as a manifestation of the liberal political principle that mandates "everyone shall be judged by the same standard" (332), emphasising impartiality about the individual whose actions are being evaluated. He asserts, "it is not inherent to the definition of 'morality' that moral evaluations are universalizable; however, liberals often employ the term 'morality' in a manner that incorporates this notion into its meaning" (333). MacIntyre concludes that, although it is frequently beneficial to initiate reflection on a specific moral dilemma with the inquiry, "What ought someone like me to do in this kind of situation?" in intricate scenarios, expressions such

as "someone like me" or "his kind of situation" become devoid of meaning (335). MacIntyre implies that in circumstances where an individual is bound by conflicting moral principles, it is unfeasible to determine a course of action based on what a similarly bewildered hypothetical individual would decide in an equally perplexing hypothetical context. MacIntyre's position is that a moral judgement regarding such a scenario may not be universally applicable.

Don Locke, the second critic under examination, contends in *The Triviality of Universalizability* that Hare's articulation of the universalisability of moral judgements "appears to devolve into the profound triviality that cases are similar, morally or otherwise, unless they are dissimilar" (25). Locke acknowledges that Hare's perspective on universalisability logically follows from his assertion that moral judgements have descriptive significance. He considers it insignificant to claim that a particular property of an object determines its goodness, badness, or other attributes: "The implication of this being good is merely that all entities classified as X are good, where the condition of being X logically necessitates being good" (28). Locke concurs with MacIntyre that Hare's emphasis on the universalisability of moral judgements is not intrinsic to the logic of morality but rather a specific perspective on morality, supported by the assertion that "we ought not to make exceptions in our own favour" in moral judgements. Locke presents the example of an individual who subscribes to the divine right of kings, a prerogative that pertains only to a single individual at any given moment. He contends that the endorsement of divine right rule constitutes "a moral principle that exempts a specific individual - this is a principle...that appears non-universal" (37). The proponent of monarchical authority by divine right would assert that the monarch's power is bestowed by God, and that anyone granted such power is entitled to govern. However, Locke notes that this rationale pertains to only a single individual. "To the extent that there exists a singular sovereign... these principles indeed create exceptions for specific individuals" (37). Locke addresses the essence of the issue by asserting that for Hare, although moral judgements necessitate reasons, Hare imposes no constraints on what may be regarded as a reason.

Relevance of R. M. Hare's Prescriptivism to Human Everydayness

Hare's prescriptivism is significant since it has facilitated the comprehension of moral judgements from a universal and rational perspective. He has embraced prescriptivism due to its relevance to broader audiences or the public. Prescriptivism addresses significant ethical dilemmas of whether moral judgements should be based on logic or individual choices and opinions. Hare has also addressed the distinction between 'is' and 'ought to be.' He eschewed conventional ethical ideas and instead critiqued the prevailing beliefs of his era. Consequently, he was critical of emotivism, descriptivism, utilitarianism, and Kant's deontological theory. Hare was a philosopher who examined all prevailing moral systems but did not discover solutions to specific enquiries. Consequently, he extracted several concepts from established theories and formulated prescriptivism. In his publications, he endorsed certain aspects of emotivism while opposing numerous other components. Hare asserts that moral statements or assessments neither represent anything nor convey the attitudes of persons. Moral judgements are inherently important for him (Ratheesh 77). Furthermore, prescriptivism elucidates moral reasoning and discourse: we can enquire about an individual's rationale for their prescriptions (in contrast to emotivism, Hare posits that prescribing an action should be accompanied by appropriate justification). We are subsequently at liberty to contest those justifications. Morality necessitates consistency, meaning we must be able to universalise our perspective, and we can engage in discourse over the efficacy of a specific standpoint in achieving this. Prescriptivism more effectively addresses moral disagreement than emotivism, as it posits that the action-guiding normative aspect of moral utterances is inherently embedded in the content of a moral statement.

Moreover, prescriptivism permits us to validly critique another individual's moral perspectives without necessitating the invocation of assertions on realist moral truth or untruth and further examine the subsequent case (Dimmock and Fisher 115). To reinforce the aforementioned significance, it is important to establish that assertive moral statements precede moral actions. Prescriptivism is thus frequently regarded as advancement over Emotivism within the context of non-cognitivist and anti-realist metaethical ideas (Dimmock and Fisher 116). Another significance of Hare's moral philosophy is his differentiation 'between a 'critical' level of reasoning, performed by 'archangels' utilising 'Golden Rule' arguments, and an 'intuitive' level, executed by 'proles' employing straightforward principles (often expressing emotional responses) whose endorsement can be rationalised at the critical level. These two levels delineate not two social castes, but two roles between which each individual learns to switch as necessary. The complication is inherently unavoidable within consequentialism, which necessitates a distinction between how one ought to act and how one ought to contemplate action - since modes of thought yield consequences as significantly as modes of action (and believing one should act in a particular manner does not guarantee success in such action, nor even an attempt). A utilitarian evaluation of practical principles must account for both their observing utility, representing the benefits derived from their implementation, and their acceptance utility, which pertains to the advantages associated with the intention to implement them. It is important to recognise that the intention to behave in a particular manner constitutes a mental act in itself. There is no basis for transitioning to an alternative form of utilitarianism, such as 'rule' instead of 'act', or 'indirect' rather than 'direct'; instead, we are merely broadening act-utilitarianism to encompass a wider array of actions, both mental and physical. A generalisation that Hare supported is that the highest ordinal utility is likely to be associated with highly specific principles, whereas a higher average utility may correspond to some relatively general principles. This results from human ignorance and self-deception. A principle that allows adultery in the context of a deteriorating marriage may possess a greater ordinal utility than one that merely prohibits adultery; yet, if there are individuals adept at faulty rationalisation, its average utility may be diminished (Price 17).

Conclusion

This paper evaluated R.M. Hare's moral philosophy, known as "universal prescriptivism." Hare's ethical theory focuses on analysing the semantic function of moral discourse to elucidate the logic underlying our moral thinking. Hare's universal prescriptivism can be juxtaposed with Kant's Categorical Imperative and the Golden Rule. This renders prescriptivism a Universalist variant of non-cognitivism. Hare has undoubtedly established a reputation for his innovative and exceptional contributions to the philosophical discourse on ethics. This study has expounded on the prevalent misunderstanding within the philosophical community regarding Hare's moral philosophy. The study contends that Hare's universal prescriptivism is erroneous in its claims of moral objectivity or generalisability. Moral assertions that are inherently prescriptive do not immediately apply to individuals other than the speaker; rather, the speaker only "wills" and "desires" that others adhere to his ethical prescriptive preferences. Universal prescriptivism mandates that an individual's decision in a specific context should be one that may be endorsed or recommended to others. In a scenario involving multiple individuals, each must evaluate the intensity of their preferences, and the most dominant preference, determined by 'role switching,' must be universally prioritised over the others. This concept is known as 'preference utilitarianism'. Hare elucidates that while it is comparatively straightforward to address our routine moral dilemmas intuitively; our intuition is insufficient for navigating intricate moral issues. Consequently, it can be asserted that 'intricate circumstances necessitate sophisticated and critical interventions.'

Works Cited

Anyam, Damian Tersoo. *Issues in Moral Philosophy*. 4th edition. Makurdi: Obeta Continental Press, 2018.

Anyam, Damian Tersoo and Gbagir Solomon Terungwa. "R. M. Hare's Prescriptivism and the Question of Good Governance in Nigeria" in *Najop, Nasara Journal of Philosophy.* Makurdi: Napo Amazing Grace Enterprise, Vol. 4. No. 1. 2019: Pp.150-159.

Chrisman, M. "What is this Thing Called Meta Ethics?" *Taylor and Francis*, 2015. Web. 3rd February, 2025.

Dimmock, Mark and Andrew Fisher. *Ethics for A-Level*. UK: Open Book Publishers, 2017.

Hare, R. M. *Moral Thinking. Its Levels, Method and Point*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981.

Hare, R. M. *The Language of Morals*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press. 1952.

Locke, Don. "The Trivializability of Universalizability," *Philosophical Review*, 72 (1968): 25-45.

Maclntyre, Alasdair. "What Morality Is Not," *Philosophy*, 32 (1957): 325-335.

Mukhopadhjay, Sayanti. "R.M. Hare and Language of morals." International *Journal of humanities and Aesthetics*, 5.2 (2016).

Omoregbe Joseph. *Ethics: A Systematic and Historical Study.* Lagos: Joja Educational Research and Publishers, 1993.

Price, Anthony. "Richard Hare". *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Ed. Zaita, E. N. 2019.

Stevenson, C. *Ethics and Language.* Yale University Press, 1944.

Sri, Ratheesh D. "Modern Moral Philosophy." Kerala: *University of Calicut*, 2019.

Tiwari, Devendra. "The Meaning of Moral Language: Indian Perspective." *Journal of East-West Thought,* 5(2017): 93-107.