

6 Prescriptivism

Prescriptivism:

“You ought to do this” is a universalizable prescription (not a truth claim); it means “Do this and let everyone do the same in similar cases.”

Pick your moral principles by first trying to be informed and imaginative, and then seeing what you can consistently hold.

Prescriptivism sees ought judgments as a type of **prescription** (or imperative). “You *ought* to do A,” like “Do A,” doesn’t state a fact and isn’t true or false. Instead, it expresses our will, or our desires. But unlike simple imperatives, ought judgments are **universalizable**. This means that they logically commit us to making similar evaluations about similar cases. This leads to a useful form of golden rule reasoning.

We’ll begin by listening to the fictional Ima Prescriptivist explain his belief in prescriptivism. Then we’ll consider objections.

6.1 Ima Prescriptivist

My name is Ima Prescriptivist. I’ve embraced prescriptivism as I’ve come to see that moral judgments express our impartial desires about how people are to live.

I’m taking a moral philosophy course right now. Until last month, I hadn’t found any of the views to be very attractive. Then we started R.M. Hare’s prescriptivism. Hare’s view makes more sense to me than all the others put together. I’ll try to explain his view; but you’ll have to bear with me, because it’s complicated. You won’t see its attractiveness until we get far into it.

Let me start at the beginning. An ought judgment is a type of prescription, or imperative. Compare these two examples:

Indicative:

The door is open.

Imperative:

Close the door.

The indicative tries to state a fact about the world and is true or false. To accept the indicative is to have a belief. But the imperative doesn’t state a fact and isn’t true or false. Instead, it tells what to do—it expresses our will or desire that the person close the door. Moral judgments are like the imperative. They don’t state facts and aren’t true or false. Instead, they express our will or desire about how people are to live. To accept a moral judgment isn’t to have a belief about an external fact. Instead, it’s to commit yourself to a way of life.

You’re probably thinking, “Oh no, Ima rejects moral truths; so his view is going to be just like emotivism.” But don’t judge so quickly. My view makes ethics rational, and so is very *unlike* emotivism. It doesn’t matter that moral judgments aren’t literally true or false. What matters is that we can refute Nazi racists and teach our children how to think rationally about moral issues.

Imperatives can be highly rational and needn’t be very emotional. Many impressive achievements of human reason are systems of imperatives. Consider a cookbook with complicated recipes, our country’s laws, the rules for chess, and the directions for using a complex computer program. A computer program itself consists of instructions that tell the computer what to do under various conditions. Imperatives can have a sophisticated logical structure and needn’t be very emotional. By contrast, exclamations are primitive grunts.

Moral judgments in our ordinary speech are closer to imperatives than to exclamations. In discussing ethics, we often shift between imperatives (“Don’t kill”) and ought judgments (“You ought not to kill”); the two seem similar. It would be strange to use exclamations (“Boo on killing!”).

6.2 Freedom and reason

This is still Ima. Let me explain why I like prescriptivism.

To satisfy me, an ethical theory has to do two things. First, it has to allow me the *freedom* to form my own moral beliefs. Sure, I need factual information and advice from others. But these alone won’t give me the answer. To think otherwise would compromise my freedom as a moral agent. In the end, I have to answer my own moral questions.

The worst approach to ethics is cultural relativism. This view gives you no freedom to think for yourself on moral issues. You have to go along with the crowd—with whatever the majority approves of. I can’t accept this. I’m a free person, and I can think for myself about ethics.

In addition, a satisfying view has to show us how to be *rational* in forming our moral beliefs. Morality is important. It shouldn’t be an arbitrary thing, like picking a postage stamp. Answering moral questions should engage our rational powers to their limits.

Subjectivism is an example of an irrational approach. Here you can say, “I like it—so it must be good.” How idiotic! Don’t we have minds? Can’t we *reason* about morality?

But *how* can we reason about morality? None of the earlier views has been very helpful on this. Do we just go with our basic moral intuitions? What if our society has taught us racist intuitions? The ideal-observer view gives the

So a satisfying view should show us how to form our moral beliefs in a *free* and *rational* way. This reminds me of my younger brother, Brian. His girlfriend got him involved in a Nazi group that preaches racial hatred. So he talked with me about how we ought to treat other races. Brian asked, “Ima, don’t just force your principles on me, but instead teach me how to think out my own moral views.” He was confused on how to think our moral questions. He said that the alternative to *thinking* was to just go along with the side that most sways your emotions. Later I’ll say how I answered his question.

So how can we be both free and rational in forming our moral beliefs? Hare struggled with this question and came up with a remarkably innovative answer. He sees moral language as the key. What do we mean by “ought”? Once we understand this term, we can discover the logical rules for its use. Then we can understand how to reason for ourselves about moral issues.

Hare sees ought judgments as universalizable prescriptions. “You ought to do this” is equivalent to “Do this and let everyone do the same in similar cases.” Our moral beliefs express our desire that a kind of act be done in the present case and in all similar cases. Moral beliefs can be *free* because they express our own desires and aren’t provable from facts. They can be *rational* because the logic of “ought” leads to a method of moral reasoning that engages our rational powers to their limits.

6.3 Moral reasoning

This is still Ima. I need to give the logical rules for “ought” and then show how moral thinking can be rational.

There are two basic logical rules for “ought”:

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| U. | To be logically consistent, we must make similar evaluations about similar cases. |
| P. | To be logically consistent, we must keep our moral beliefs in harmony with how we live and want others to live. |

These rules are based on the meaning of “ought,” which is a word for expressing universalizable prescriptions. Rule U holds because ought judgments are universalizable: it’s part of their meaning that they apply to similar cases. Rule P holds because ought judgments are prescriptions (imperatives), and thus express our will, or our desires, about how we and others are to live.

Rules U and P are consistency rules. They aren’t imperatives or moral judgments. They don’t say “We *ought* to do such and such ...” Instead, they tell us what we must do if we’re to be logically consistent in our moral beliefs. These rules, despite their abstractness, are very useful. They lead to a golden rule (GR) consistency condition, which is the most important element in rational moral thinking.

Suppose that Detra has a nice bicycle. I say to myself:

By rule U, this logically commits me to making the same evaluation about an imagined reversed situation:

- (b) I believe that, if the situation were exactly reversed, then Detra *ought* to steal my bicycle.

By rule P, this in turn logically commits me to willing something about the imagined reversed situation:

- (c) I desire that, if the situation were exactly reversed, then Detra would steal my bicycle.

So believing that I ought to steal Detra’s bicycle logically commits me to desiring that my bicycle be stolen if I were in her place. If I don’t desire this, then I’m inconsistent in holding my original ought judgment.

Here’s a general formulation of this idea—which is somewhat like the traditional golden rule (“Treat others as you want to be treated”):

The GR consistency condition claims that this combination is logically inconsistent:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I believe that I ought to do something to another. • I don’t desire that this be done to me in the same situation. |
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This consistency condition holds because ought judgments are universalizable prescriptions. To accept an ought judgment in a consistent way is to desire that a kind of act be done in all similar cases, including ones where we imagine ourselves in the place of the other person.

To apply the GR consistency condition, we’d imagine ourselves in the exact place of the other person on the receiving end of the action. If we think we ought to do something to another, but don’t desire that this be done to us in the same situation, then we violate GR consistency. Suppose that we think we ought to enslave others because of their skin color, but we don’t desire that we be enslaved if we were in the same situation (including the same skin color). Then we’re inconsistent—and we’re breaking the logical rules built into the term “ought.”

To apply our GR consistency condition most adequately, we need knowledge and imagination. We need to *know* what effect our actions have on the lives of others. And we need to *imagine* ourselves, vividly and accurately, in the other person’s place on the receiving end of the action. GR consistency, when combined with knowledge and imagination, is an important tool for refuting Nazi racists and for teaching our children to think rationally about moral issues.

To think rationally about ethics, we need to be informed, imaginative, and consistent. Moral reasoning doesn’t deduce moral conclusions from facts. Instead, it tests our consistency. The most important kind of moral consistency is GR consistency. If we think we ought to do something to another, but don’t

desire that this be done to us in an imagined identical situation, then we're inconsistent.

6.4 Against Nazis

This is still Ima. I need another section to tell you how I answered my younger brother's question.

Recall that my brother Brian got involved with a Nazi group that preached racial hatred. He was perplexed about how we ought to treat other races. He asked, "Ima, don't just force your principles on me, but instead teach me how to think out my own moral views." He was confused on how to reason about moral questions.

How did I answer? First I praised Brian for wanting to reason instead of just following his emotions. Emotions are great—but not Nazi emotions divorced from reason. Many Nazis don't want to be rational, and prefer violence or emotional rhetoric.

Then I told Brian that he had to make up his own mind on moral issues. Moral principles can't be proved or disproved by appealing to facts. The principles he accepted would be his own free choice, and would express how he wanted people to live.

Brian broke in, "Are you saying that we can't reason about basic moral principles?" I replied that I was *not* saying this. I told him that many philosophers had claimed that we can't reason about basic moral principles, but that Hare had shown them wrong. We can reason by appealing to consistency. Even though we're free to form our own moral beliefs, our beliefs can be more or less rational. To think rationally about ethics is to think in a way that is informed, imaginative, and consistent.

To be informed is to understand the facts correctly. So we talked about the facts. We talked about differences between races and whether these are genetic or cultural. We talked about how Nazism develops and spreads. We talked about alternatives to Nazi views, and how other societies deal with racial diversity. And we talked about the probable consequences of the Nazi strategy, and alternative strategies, on people's lives—including the lives of the Jews who would suffer under Nazi policies.

I told Brian that it wasn't enough just to know the facts; we also need to appreciate the human significance of the facts on people's lives. We need what Hare calls "imagination." So I told Brian to imagine himself and his family in the place of the victims, those who would suffer from Nazi policies.

I told Brian that we also need to be consistent, and I explained GR consistency. Brian saw right away that this would exclude Nazi policies. He said, "Surely I don't desire that I and my family be treated so badly if we were in the place of the Jews. So I can't consistently hold that I ought to treat them this way." He concluded that Nazi moral beliefs were irrational—since Nazis wouldn't hold these beliefs consistently if they knew the facts of the case and exercised their imagination.

Brian then asked if there were any ways for a Nazi to evade the GR reasoning. I told him that Hare had sketched several escape strategies, but that none were very satisfactory. Let me give four of these:

1. The Nazi could use "ought" in a way that doesn't express a universalizable prescription. Then he could reject the GR consistency condition.

In this case, the Nazi's use of "ought" would be peculiar and misleading. He'd do better to avoid moral language and just say that he *wants* to mistreat Jews.

2. The Nazi could refuse to make moral judgments on the issue.

Then we couldn't refute his moral views, because he doesn't have any. We can't beat him at the game of morality if he doesn't play the game. Note that our consistency condition applies only if you make an ought judgment about how you ought to treat the other person.

3. The Nazi could say that he doesn't care about being inconsistent and irrational.

Then he's admitted that we've refuted him.

4. The Nazi could desire that he and his family be put in concentration camps and killed if they were Jewish.

Such a Nazi could be consistent. But only a crazy person has such desires.

So the GR argument is strong but not inescapable. The argument becomes decisive for a person who wants to make genuine moral judgments on the case (1 and 2) in a consistent way (3) and doesn't have crazy desires (4). Thus prescriptivism gives a strong way to reason. With most other views, we can't argue further when we run into a difference on a basic moral principle. Prescriptivism goes further because it appeals to consistency.

Let me sum up my approach to moral rationality. To think rationally about ethics is to think in a way that is informed, imaginative, and consistent. And the most important part of consistency is to follow the golden rule.

Reflect on how you react to this view. Do you have objections?

6.5 Objections

Ima's approach to ethics has many virtues. It does a fine job in showing how moral thinking can be both free and rational. It gives a brilliant analysis of the golden rule. And it gives useful tools for reasoning about moral issues. While its approach to moral rationality resembles that of the ideal-observer view (see

cy component. The most questionable part of the view, however, seems to be its analysis of “ought.”

Ima’s view divides into two parts:

- (1) *Rules of moral reasoning*: To be logically consistent, we must make similar evaluations about similar cases, live in harmony with our moral beliefs, and follow the golden rule.
- (2) *Analysis of “ought”*: Ought judgments are universalizable prescriptions—not truth claims.

Some critics object to formulating (1) in terms of *logical consistency*. They say we commit no logical inconsistency if we make conflicting judgments about similar cases, violate our moral beliefs, or violate the golden rule. Some such critics think the so-called *logical rules* in (1) are better seen as very general *moral rules*:

- (1a) We *ought* to make similar evaluations about similar cases, live in harmony with our moral beliefs, and follow the golden rule.

The logical rules in (1) are based on the analysis of “ought” in (2). But this analysis has further problems, since it implies that ought judgments aren’t truth claims, and so aren’t literally true or false. This seems to conflict with how we approach ethics in our daily lives.

When we deliberate about a moral issue, we generally assume that there’s a truth of the matter that we’re trying to discover. We’re not just trying to develop rational desires; we’re also trying to discover the truth about how we ought to live. And we speak as if there are moral truths. We use words like “true,” “false,” “correct,” “mistaken,” “discover,” and “know” of moral judgments—but not of imperatives. When we use such objective language, we can’t plausibly substitute a universalizable prescription for an ought judgment. Suppose that I say this:

- (a) I know that *you ought to do this*.

Prescriptivism claims that the italicized part is a universalizable prescription, and means “Do this and let everyone do the same in similar cases.” But we can’t substitute the latter for the former:

- (b) I know that *do this and let everyone do the same in similar cases*.

Here (a) makes sense but (b) doesn’t. So prescriptivism seems to clash with how we use moral language.

Ima could reply that our moral practice is wrong when it speaks of moral knowledge and moral truths. Or he could accept these notions but water them down; maybe calling an ought judgment “true” just endorses the judgment (and doesn’t make an objective claim). While these responses are possible, the presumption lies with our moral practice. If so, then we should accept moral

Ima says it doesn’t matter that moral judgments aren’t true or false. What matters is that we can refute Nazi racists and teach our children to think rationally about moral issues. Prescriptivism does a good job on these. For example, it gives powerful ways to show that Hitler’s moral beliefs were irrational—even though these beliefs wouldn’t be literally false. Prescriptivism gives strong moral arguments but not moral truths. But I’d like to have both. I’d like to use GR reasoning to discover moral truths—for example, that Hitler’s moral beliefs were false.

Ima’s rejection of moral truths makes it easier for Nazis to escape the GR argument. Ima’s consistency conditions tell us what we have to do, *if* we choose to use “ought” consistently. But we might avoid using “ought.” If we do so, we don’t violate any moral truths and don’t violate GR consistency. On Ima’s view, none of these is a moral truth:

- We ought to make moral judgments about our actions.
- We ought to be consistent.
- We ought to follow the golden rule.

Moral truths would make it more difficult to escape the GR argument.

Where do we go from here? We might try to combine ideas from intuitionism and prescriptivism—so we’d have both moral truths and strong ways of reasoning about morality. Or we might try to develop prescriptivism’s tools of moral reasoning in a neutral way that could be defended from various views on the foundations of ethics. We’ll work on both ideas in the next three chapters.

6.6 Chapter summary

Prescriptivism sees moral judgments as a type of prescription, or imperative. Moral judgments, like the simple imperative “Close the door,” don’t state facts and aren’t true or false. Instead, they express our will, or our desires.

Ought judgments are universalizable prescriptions. “You ought to do this” is equivalent to “Do this and let everyone do the same in similar cases.” So moral beliefs express our desire that a kind of act be done in the present case and in all similar cases—including ones where we imagine ourselves in someone else’s place.

Prescriptivism shows how can we be both free and rational in forming our moral beliefs. Moral beliefs can be *free* because they express our desires and aren’t provable from facts. They can be *rational* because the logic of “ought” leads to a method of moral reasoning that engages our rational powers to their limits.

Moral beliefs are subject to two basic logical rules:

- U. To be logically consistent, we must make similar evaluations about similar cases.
- P. To be logically consistent, we must keep our moral beliefs in harmony with how we live and want others to live.

Rule U holds because moral judgments are universalizable: it's part of their meaning that they apply to similar cases. Rule P holds because moral judgments are prescriptions (imperatives), and thus express our will, or our desires, about how we and others are to live.

Prescriptivism's GR consistency condition, which follows from these two logical rules, claims that this combination is inconsistent:

- I believe that I ought to do something to another.
- I don't desire that this be done to me in the same situation.

This consistency condition is a more precise version of the traditional golden rule ("Treat others as you want to be treated"). We violate it if we think we ought to do something to another but don't desire that this be done to us in the same situation.

To think rationally about ethics, we need to be informed, imaginative, and consistent; the most important part of consistency is to follow the golden rule. This approach can show that Nazi moral beliefs are irrational—since Nazis wouldn't be consistent in their moral beliefs if they knew the facts of the case and exercised their imagination.

However prescriptivism, while it has important insights, seems to rest on a questionable foundation. It says that ought judgments are universalizable prescriptions (or imperatives) and not truth claims. This leads it to deny the possibility of moral knowledge and moral truths—which seems to conflict with how we approach ethics in our daily lives.

6.7 Study questions

1. How does prescriptivism define "ought"? What method does it follow for arriving at moral beliefs?
2. What is a "prescription"? What does it mean to say that ought judgments are "universalizable" prescriptions?
3. How do imperatives differ from indicatives? (6.1)
4. Did Ima reject the idea of moral truths? Did this make his view "just like emotivism"?
5. Are imperatives necessarily emotional? Give some examples to show that imperatives can be highly rational.
6. Explain what Ima said about moral freedom and rationality. (6.2)
7. What was Brian's problem? What did he want from Ima?
8. How is the meaning of "ought" the key to how we can be both free and rational in our moral thinking?
9. What are the two logical rules about moral consistency? What are they based on? (6.3)
10. Explain the GR consistency condition. Does it say how we ought to live?
11. Explain (using the example of stealing Detra's bicycle) how the GR consistency condition follows from the idea that moral judgments are universalizable prescriptions.

13. How did Ima answer Brian's question? How did he say that we can reason about basic moral principles? (6.4)
14. How did Ima argue against Nazi moral beliefs? In what four ways could Nazis evade the GR reasoning?
15. Write about a page sketching your initial reaction to prescriptivism. Does it seem plausible to you? What do you like and dislike about it? Can you think of any way to show that it's false?
16. What do some critics say about prescriptivism's consistency rules?
17. Explain the objection to Ima's analysis of "ought." How might Ima reply to this objection? (6.5)
18. How does the rejection of moral truths make it easier for Nazis to escape the golden rule reasoning?

6.8 For further study

To solidify your understanding, do the EthiCola exercise (see Preface) for "Ethics 06—Prescriptivism." Also do "Ethics 06v—Vocabulary for 4–6," "Ethics 06r—Review of 4–6," and "Ethics 06z—Review of 0–6."

For more on prescriptivism, see Hare's *Freedom and Reason*; I especially recommend Chapters 1, 6, and 11. His earlier *The Language of Morals* focuses on imperatives and moral language; his later *Moral Thinking* defends utilitarianism. For some technical criticisms of Hare's approach, see Section 6.5 of Gensler's *Formal Ethics*. The Bibliography at the end of the book has information on how to find these works.