

ics of Morals (New York: Harper & Row, 1964, translation by H. J. Paton, originally published in 1785); and Elizabeth Anscombe's "Modern Moral Philosophy," in *Philosophy* 33 (1958): 24–42. For more on the debate about objective values, see *Essays on Moral Realism* (London and Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), edited by Geoffrey Sayre-McCord. Harry Gensler's *Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) discusses related issues in Chapters 2, 5, and 6.

Related readings in this anthology include Ayer, Hare, Hume, and Sartre (who oppose objective values); and Kant, Moore, Nagel, and Ross (who defend objective values).

Notes

- 1 See Swindal and Spurgin's sketch of the history of ethics on pages 25–40.
- 2 Mackie calls *metaethics* "second order ethics" and *normative ethics* "first order ethics." The introduction to this anthology explains the distinction.
- 3 For more on Mackie's point, see Plato's *Euthyphro* or Chapter 3 of Harry Gensler's *Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

R. M. HARE

Universal Prescriptions

R. M. Hare, a British philosopher born who lived from 1919 to 2002, proposed a highly original "universal prescriptivism" approach to ethics.

According to Hare, moral judgments *prescribe* (express desires) *universally* (about *all* similar cases). To have a moral belief is thus to desire that a kind of act be done in the present case and in all similar cases – including cases where we imagine ourselves in another person's place. This leads to a golden-rule consistency condition. Suppose that I believe that I ought to enslave you. To be consistent, I must desire that I would be enslaved if I were in your place. If I cannot desire this, then I cannot consistently believe that I ought to enslave you.

As you read the selection, ask yourself whether moral judgments are universal prescriptions instead of truth claims. Does Hare's method of moral reasoning make sense? Does Hare succeed in making ethics rational, or are there too many escape routes?

Freedom and reason

The function of moral philosophy – or at any rate the hope with which I study it – is that of helping us to think better about moral questions by exposing the logical structure of the language in which this thought is expressed.

I ask the reader to suppose that someone (himself perhaps) is faced with a serious moral problem – one that calls forth all the powers of thought, imagination, and feeling. I wish to draw attention to two features which any such serious moral problem will have. The first is that a man who is faced with such a problem knows that it is his problem, and that nobody can answer it for him. One of the most important constituents of our freedom, as moral agents, is the freedom to form our opinions about moral questions.

Against this conviction, we have another which seems to contradict it. This is, that the answering of moral questions is, or ought to be, a rational activity. We feel that it matters what answer we give, and that finding an

people grow to understand that in moral questions they are free to form their opinions, they feel this freedom not as an emancipation but as a burden.

This antinomy [paradox] is the source of nearly all the central controversies of moral philosophy. Most moral philosophers have taken their stand on one side or the other, and this left them denying important truths. It is the task of moral philosophy to look for a way of resolving the antinomy between freedom and reason. The key to the problem is the study of the concepts which brought us into perplexity.

Moral judgments are prescriptive and universalizable. Because moral judgments are universalizable, we can speak of moral thought as rational; and their prescriptivity is connected with our freedom to form our moral opinions. I shall use prescriptivity and universalizability to expound a theory of moral reasoning. I shall end with a discussion of moral questions concerning race relations, on which the views which I put forward have some bearing.

Moral reasoning

And as you would that men should do to you,
do you also to them likewise. (Luke 6:31)

The rules of moral reasoning correspond to the two features of moral judgments. When we try to decide what we ought to do, we look for an action to which we can commit ourselves (prescriptivity) and also prescribe for others in like circumstances (universalizability).

I will now try to exhibit the bare bones of the theory of moral reasoning by considering a simple example adapted from a parable (Matthew 18:23). A owes money to B, and B owes money to C, and it is the law that creditors may put their debtors into prison. B asks himself, "Can I say that I ought to take this measure against A?" He wants to do it. But when he seeks to say, "I ought to put A into prison because he will not pay me what he owes," he reflects that this involves accepting "Anyone who is in my position ought to put his debtor into prison if he does not pay." But C is in the same position of unpaid creditor with regard to himself (B), and the cases are otherwise identical; if anyone in this position ought to put his debtors into prison, then so ought C to put him (B) into prison. To accept the moral prescription "C ought to put me into prison" would commit him to accepting "Let C put me into prison"; and this he is not ready to accept. But then neither can he accept the judgment that he (B) ought to put A into prison for debt.

A provisional moral principle has been rejected because its consequences proved unacceptably. Any rational activity has its discipline, and this is the

selves to us by following out their consequences and seeing whether we can accept them.

We must ask what we have to have for such moral arguments to work. The first requisite is that the facts of the case should be given. Secondly we have the logical framework provided by the meaning of the word "ought" (i.e. prescriptivity and universalizability). Because moral judgments have to be universalizable, B cannot say that he ought to put A into prison for debt without committing himself to the view that C, who is in the same position vis-à-vis himself, ought to put him into prison; and because moral judgments are prescriptive, this would be, in effect, prescribing to C to put him into prison; and this he is unwilling to do, since he has a strong inclination not to go to prison. This inclination gives us the third ingredient: if B did not mind what happened to himself or to anybody else, the argument would not touch him. The three necessary ingredients, then, are (1) facts; (2) logic; (3) inclinations. These enable us, not to arrive at an evaluative conclusion, but to reject an evaluative proposition.

The example was made simpler by supposing that B actually stood to some other person in exactly the same relation as A does to him. This is not necessary for the argument; it is sufficient that he should consider hypothetically such a case. That hypothetical cases will do as well as actual ones enables us to guard against a possible misinterpretation. It might be thought that what moves B is the *fear* that C will actually do to him as he does to A. But this fear is not only irrelevant to the moral argument; it does not even provide a strong nonmoral motive unless the circumstances are exceptional. C may, after all, not find out what B has done to A.

In most cases a power of imagination and readiness to use it is a fourth ingredient in moral arguments, alongside logic, facts, and inclinations. The absence of one ingredient may render the rest ineffective. For example, impartiality by itself is not enough. If, in becoming impartial, B became completely apathetic, then there would be nothing to make him accept or reject one moral principle rather than another. That is why those who advocate "Ideal Observer Theories" of ethics¹ sometimes postulate as their imaginary ideal observer an impartially sympathetic spectator. To take another example, if the person had no imagination, then the fact that someone can do the same thing to him may pass him by. If, again, he lacks the readiness to universalize, then the vivid imagination of the sufferings which he is inflicting on others may only spur him on to intensify them, to increase his own vindictive enjoyment. And if he is ignorant of the facts (for example about what is likely to happen to a person if one takes out a writ against him), then there is nothing to tie the argument to particular choices.

Escape routes

The best way of testing the argument is to consider ways in which B might escape from it. There are a number of such ways; and all of them may be successful, at a price. We may classify these maneuvers into two kinds. There are first the moves which depend on using the moral words in a different way. Secondly, there are moves which can be made by B, even though he is using the moral words in the same way as we are.

Two people using the word "ought" in the same way may disagree about what ought to be done in a certain situation, either because they differ about the facts, or because one of them lacks imagination, or because their different inclinations make one reject some prescription which the other can accept. For all that, ethics (i.e. the logic of moral language) is a powerful engine for producing moral agreement, for if two people are willing to use the moral word "ought," and to use it in the way that I have been describing, the other sources of disagreement are eliminable. People's inclinations about most important matters tend to be the same (few people, for example, like being starved or run over by motor-cars). The facts are often, given patience, ascertainable. Imagination can be cultivated. If these three factors are looked after, agreement on the use of "ought" is the only other necessary condition for producing moral agreement in typical cases. And this agreement in use is normally already there; all that is needed is to think clearly.

[Hare then analyzes cases where the opponent either uses "ought" in some non-standard way or else refuses to make moral judgments. In these cases, the opponent is not entering the moral arena and so cannot be defeated by moral argument. The opponent also might say, "Yes, I desire that I would be imprisoned in this case"; this desire would be unusual, especially since imprisonment will not help to get the money back.]

The remaining maneuver consists in asserting that there are morally relevant differences between his case and that of others. In our example, we have ruled this out by assuming that the case of B and C is exactly similar to that of A and B; from this it follows that there are no morally relevant differences. Since the B/C case may be a hypothetical one, this condition of exact similarity can always be fulfilled, and this maneuver is based on a misconception.

Suppose that B alleges that the fact that A has black skin entitles him, B, to put him in prison, but that C ought not to do the same thing to him, B, because his skin is white. The answer to this is implicit in what has been said about hypothetical cases. The fact that no two actual cases are identical has no bearing on the problem. We only have to imagine an identical case in which the roles are reversed. What does B say about a hypothetical case in

relevant even when other people have them. And this rules out special pleading.

Our argument does not involve any deduction of a moral judgment from a factual statement about people's inclinations. We are not saying "You are averse to this being done to you in a hypothetical case; and from this it follows logically that you ought not to do it to another." This would be a breach of Hume's Law ("No 'ought' from an 'is'"), to which I have declared my adherence.² The point is, rather, that his inclinations being what they are, he cannot assent sincerely to a certain singular prescription, and if he cannot do this, he cannot assent to a universal prescription which entails it, when conjoined with factual statements about circumstances whose truth he admits. If he assented to the factual statements and the universal prescription, but refused to assent to the singular prescription, he would be guilty of a logical inconsistency.

If, on the other hand, a man says "I want to be put in prison, if ever I am in that situation," we can accuse him of having eccentric desires. But it is not an incorrect use of words to want eccentric things. Logic does not prevent me from wanting to be put in a gas chamber if a Jew. It is in the logical possibility of wanting anything that the "freedom" in my title consists. And that lets by the "fanatic."

It is possible for a man to hold an ideal which requires that he should be sent to a gas chamber if a Jew. For reason to have a place in morals it is not necessary to close this escape by means of a logical barrier; it is sufficient that, men and the world being what they are, hardly anybody is going to take it with his eyes open. When we are arguing with the vast majority who are not going to take it, the reply that somebody else *might* take it does not help his case.

Race relations

What is needed to consolidate the theoretical suggestions is to apply them to an important moral problem.³ The best problem is that which arises when there is conflict between races. Allusion has already been made to this problem; but it deserves a more extended treatment. By "more extended," I do not mean a comprehensive treatment; for that would take us into history, sociology, psychology, and politics. Any treatment which does not include these other fields is truncated and superficial; for we need to know why (historically and psychologically) people give way to racial bitterness, and what changes in social conditions would remove it. And we discover that there are many people who are unable to adopt the philosophical approach

ing of psychology is required. Moreover, it would be necessary to consider the scientific basis, if there is one, of the classification of people into races, and of the grading of these races in intelligence and other qualities (if such is possible, which seems doubtful). But there is a philosophical problem involved, whose neglect will also make any account superficial. We need to determine what is right and wrong about the way people behave; and to this end we must examine how it is possible to reason cogently about moral questions.

[Hare then analyzes various arguments about racism.] Having dealt with a number of arguments which are unsatisfactory, and with others which are incomplete, in that they appeal to antecedent moral principles, we come now to the constructive part of this chapter. It is based on the account of moral language and moral reasoning given in the preceding chapters.

Let us ask, first, why factual arguments are relevant to moral questions. What need is supplied by the bogus claim that Germans have some special element in their heredity which distinguishes them from other men? Or why does it make a difference that a certain policy would have a certain result? It looks as if facts are held to be relevant to moral arguments. But why is this?

Facts are relevant to moral arguments because they make a difference between cases which would otherwise be similar. Let us consider why the Nazis set so much store by the claim that there is something in the blood of Germans which differentiates them from other races. The explanation is that they were proposing to treat other races in a different way from Germans, and wanted a reason why they ought to do this. It is part of the meanings of the moral words that we are logically prohibited from making different moral judgments about two cases when we cannot adduce any difference which is the ground for the difference in moral judgments. This is one way of stating universalizability. Since the Nazi cannot justify his different treatment of Germans and Jews without adducing some difference between their cases, he invents a difference. What is important to the would-be discriminator is that there should be some qualitative difference between the class of people whom he wishes to oppress, exploit, or persecute and those whom he does not.

Now these examples of spurious moral reasoning are parodies. How do we distinguish the parody from its original? If we do not think that it is an adequate justification for discriminating against a person that his skin is black, how would we distinguish those features which justify different treatment from those which do not?

There are those who try to answer this question in the following way. They look at the differences that people call morally relevant; they list them, reduce them to a system, and then say that we mean by "morally relevant difference" just these differences, and mean by "morality" just that system of

how do we know that we could not get a different list if we did the investigation in South Africa, or Soviet Russia, or ancient Sparta? Secondly, to make such a list does not explain anything; we want to know what leads to things getting put on the list or left off it. The proponents of this view have not gone far enough in their search for an explanation.

Let us suppose that we are having an argument with a man who maintains that a black skin, by itself, is a sufficient ground for discrimination. We tell him, and he believes, the following story. The Soviet Institute of Race Relations (a more enterprising body than its Western counterparts) has just succeeded in breeding a new kind of bacillus, which Soviet agents are at this very moment broadcasting in areas of racial conflict throughout the world. This bacillus is very catching, and the symptom of the disease which it induces is that, if the patient's skin was white, it turns permanently black, and vice versa. Now when the person with whom we are arguing has absorbed this story, we ask him whether he still thinks that skin-color by itself is a sufficient ground for moral discrimination. It is unlikely that he will go on saying that it is; for then he will have to say that if he catches the disease the former blacks will have acquired the right to oppress *him*, and all his formerly white friends.

There are two stages in the process of universalization. The first is when we have found a universal principle, not containing proper names or other singular terms,⁴ from which the moral judgment which we want to make follows, given the facts. This stage is easy to pass, even for proponents of scandalous moral views. It is passed, for example, by the principle that it is all right for black people to be oppressed by white people. But the next stage is more difficult. It is necessary, not merely that this principle should be produced, but that the person actually hold it. It is necessary not merely to *quote* a maxim, but (in Kantian language) to *will* it to be a universal law. Here prescriptivity, the second logical feature of moral judgments, makes its appearance. For willing it to be a universal law involves willing it to apply even when the roles played by the parties are reversed. And this test will be failed by all maxims or principles which look attractive to oppressors on the first test. If we apply these two tests, both founded on the logical, formal features of moral terms, we shall be able to sort out, in the field of race relations, the grounds of discrimination which we are prepared to count as morally relevant from those which we are not.

However there is an escape for the sufficiently determined racist. Let us suppose that there is a racist the mainspring of whose racialism is a horror of miscegenation; the source of this horror is not any belief about the consequences of miscegenation. So he is not moved by alleged facts about the *weakening* of the human stock by mating between people of different colors.

that the offspring of mixed marriages are just as likely to be vigorous and intelligent; or that the bad social effects of miscegenation would be removed if he and people like him abandoned their attempts to enforce a color bar. Rather, his grounds are simply a horror of the idea of a black man mating with a white woman. This cannot be touched by any scientific or factual argument. It may be that, if miscegenation is to be prevented, it is necessary to have a rigid color bar and other repressive measures. Then it will be hard for us to argue with this man. He detests miscegenation so much that he is prepared to live in a police state to avoid it.

And he must be prepared for more than this. He must, if he is going to universalize his moral judgments, be prepared that he should not merely live in a police state, but live in it in the same conditions as he is now prepared to make the blacks live in. He must be prepared that he should be subject to arbitrary arrest and maltreatment on grounds of skin color, and to butchery if he tries to protest.

Now it may be that there are people that fanatical; but there are very few. The repression happens because these few people have on their side a multitude of other people who are not prepared to suffer thus, but who have not thought through the argument. They think, perhaps, that all will be well without too much repression; or that blacks do not mind being treated like this; or that there is a scientific basis for belief in racial superiority. All these beliefs can perhaps be refuted by scientists and others without any help from the philosopher; but they are apt, collectively, to form an amalgam in the minds of racials which makes into allies of the fanatic many people who are not, in themselves, in the least fanatical. The contribution of the philosopher is to take this amalgam apart, deposit such beliefs as are open to scientific refutation in the in-trays of the scientists, and, when the scientists have dealt with them, exhibit the prescriptive remainder of racialism for what it is – something that fanatics may hold but which the bulk of a people – even a people as hard-pressed as the white South Africans – never will.

Study questions

- 1 Explain the antinomy between freedom and reason. How does Hare's view try to resolve the antinomy?
- 2 Explain universalizability and prescriptivity. To what rules of reasoning do these lead?
- 3 Making use of the two-debtor example, explain how golden-rule reasoning works in ethics.
- 4 What four elements are needed for golden-rule reasoning to work?

- 6 How can an opponent escape from Hare's golden-rule reasoning?
- 7 What are some non-philosophical aspects of racialism? Is everyone open to rational argument on such matters as racialism?
- 8 What are some general questions of fact allegedly relevant to controversies about race relations?
- 9 Sketch Hare's argument against racialism.

For further study

This selection has excerpts, sometimes simplified in wording, from Richard Mervyn Hare's *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), pages v, 1–6, 86–111, 203–4, and 213–21. Hare's *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952) gave an earlier form of the view and focused more on moral language. Hare's later *Moral Thinking* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981) used the same general approach to defend utilitarianism. Harry Gensler's *Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) discusses Hare's view in Chapter 6; his *Formal Ethics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) has technical criticisms of Hare's approach in Section 6.5.

Related readings in this anthology include Ayer (who also sees moral judgments as not making truth claims); Mackie (who discusses Hare's view on moral objectivity); Kant, Nagel, O'Neill, and Sartre (whose approaches have some similarities to that of Hare); Hertzler and Ricoeur (who also discuss the golden rule); Singer and Smart (utilitarians who assume something like Hare's analysis of ethical terms); and Benedict, Gensler and Tokmenko, and King (who also discuss racial segregation).

Notes

- 1 There are affinities, though also differences, between this type of theory and my own. Since for many Christians God occupies the role of "ideal observer," the moral judgments which they make may be expected to coincide with those arrived at by the method which I am advocating. [Note from Hare]
- 2 Hume's Law claims that one cannot validly deduce a moral conclusion from descriptive premises alone. For example, "People ought not to kill" does not follow from "Killing is disapproved by society."
- 3 Hare published this in 1963, when Dr Martin Luther King and President John F. Kennedy were opposing segregation in the United States.
- 4 Hare requires that basic moral principles not use proper names (like

4 Intuitionism

Intuitionism:

“Good” is indefinable. There are objective moral truths.

Pick your moral principles by following your basic moral intuitions.

Intuitionism says that “good” is an indefinable notion. There are objective moral truths that don’t depend on human thinking or feeling. And the basic truths of morality, like the basic truths of mathematics, are self-evident to a mature mind.

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

4.1 Ima Intuitionist

My name is Ima Intuitionist. I’ve embraced intuitionism as I’ve come to see that morality is objective and that the basic moral truths are already present inside of us, in our own minds.

I’m a philosophy major and intend to go to law school. So I’m interested in ethics and reasoning. While I’ve read much philosophy, I’ve also found much wisdom in the simple truths of common sense.

My favorite philosophers are the early twentieth-century British thinkers, G.E. Moore and W.D. Ross. They explained and defended commonsense morality. Their view, and mine, is called **intuitionism**. It makes three claims:

- “Good” is indefinable,
- there are objective moral truths, and
- the basic moral truths are self-evident to a mature mind.

I’ll try to explain what these mean and why we should accept them.

Moore started with a simple question: What does the word “good” mean? This question is the key to understanding morality. If we answer it wrongly, we’ll get everything wrong. So what does “good” mean? The answer, simply, is that “good” means “good.” We can’t define “good.” “Good” is a simple idea

You may be thinking, “Surely all ideas are definable—and so ‘good’ must be definable.” But, sorry, that’s wrong. There *must* be indefinable ideas; we can’t define every term without circularity. Suppose that we look up a word in the dictionary, and the word is defined using other words, and these are defined using still other words, and so on. Now there’s only a limited number of words. So if we exclude circular definitions, then we’ll eventually find words that we can’t define further.

A nice example of an indefinable idea is the term “not.” We can’t define “not” using anything simpler. “Not” is a simple building block that we use to define other ideas. Saying that an idea is indefinable doesn’t mean that it’s difficult or obscure (“not” is neither of these), but just that it can’t be broken down further.

I claim that “good,” like “not,” is a simple indefinable idea. Some philosophers disagree with this, and try to define “good.” Some say that “good” means “socially approved.” Others say that it means “liked,” “pleasant,” or even “desired by God.” But these ideas are different from “good.” “Good” simply means “good.”

Moore had an argument to refute any proposed definition of “good.” Let me show how it works. Some of my superficial friends are attracted to this definition:

“Good” means “socially approved.”

Every definition has two parts—the left part (the term defined) and the right part (the equivalent expression). A definition claims that the two parts are interchangeable in normal speech: we can substitute one for the other without changing the meaning. We can test a definition by asking if one part necessarily applies whenever the other does. Here we’d ask, “Are socially approved things necessarily good?” The answer is a clear “no”—which refutes the definition. It’s easy to imagine some bad things being socially approved. For our argument, it need only be *consistent* to imagine things that aren’t good being socially approved. Since this clearly is consistent, the definition is wrong.

Moore’s argument can refute any definition of “good.” Suppose that someone defines “X is good” as “I desire X.” We should ask, “Are things that I desire necessarily good?” The answer clearly is “no,” which refutes the definition. We can refute other definitions of “good” in a similar way. The general strategy is this: if someone claims that “good” means “such and such” (where this represents some descriptive term), ask “Are things that are such and such necessarily good?” Since the answer is “no,” the definition is refuted.

Naturalism is the view that “good” can be defined using ideas from sense experience (like “socially approved” or “desired”). Moore’s argument refutes naturalism; but it also works against supernaturalism. All these views confuse evaluative with non-evaluative terms. Calling a thing “socially approved” (or whatever) puts it in a descriptive category; asking whether it’s “good” asks about its value, which is different.