

R.M. HARE AND LANGUAGE OF MORALS

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The greatest discovery of the present century is that the problems of philosophy are fundamentally linguistic in character. This is true of ethical problems as well. The problems of ethics are many-faced. Nevertheless, they can be reduced to a very central question, viz., the question regarding the relation between fact and value. If we go through the history of western ethics we find that conflicting answers have been given to this central question. For some, value is fundamentally different from facts; for others there is no essential bifurcation between fact and value so much so that value can be reduced to fact.

It is easy to object that ethics deals with many other problems besides the problem of the relation between fact and value; for example, ethical philosophers are concerned with the nature of moral judgment and the justification of moral judgment. Nevertheless one can immediately see these problems to be ramifications of the central problems mentioned above; for examples, if moral judgments are claimed to be descriptive then it amounts to suggest that there is no essential difference between fact and value. Further, moral judgments are often justified by naturalistic criterion. A conduct may be considered moral if it succeeds in promoting pleasure or happiness. The point is that it is possible to justify moral judgements on factual basis. A moral judgment is translatable into a factual judgment.

It is not exactly this reducibility or translatability that is our concern here. What is contended is that the problems of ethical philosophy are basically linguistic. Ethical philosophers intend to fix the linguistic character of moral judgments. The answers which they give to ethical problems are all given from linguistic point of view. There are philosophers who have given an overt linguistic analysis of ethical terms and sentences. Stevenson and Hare are important ethical philosophers who had been interested in the language of morals. The books 'Ethics and The Language' by Stevenson and 'Language of Morals' by Hare would testify the above remark. Ayer's analysis of ethical sentences is contained in his book 'Language, Truth and Logic' which expressly devotes to linguistic analysis.

Ethical philosophy of Naturalism has been disputed by many. Apart from the accusation that naturalistic ethics commits a fallacy, there are observations which run to the effect that a descriptive or naturalistic account of meaning of ethical terms cannot be exhaustive. This criticism is not a logical one, but it simply depends on observation which is plainly what do we do when we make an ethical statement? It has been suggested by Hare that in making an ethical statement we do not report something about facts but

we make a kind of recommendation or prescription which is universally applicable. Any thesis to the contrary is counter-intuitive. It is a fact of experience that ethical judgments are prescriptive and also that such prescriptions are universalisable. The special character of ethical language is that it expresses an imperative which is enjoined upon all human beings. This demand for universalisability is typically Kantian. Hare speaks not from a Kantian point of view. He does not suggest that a moral maxim which amounts to a contradiction when universalised is not a moral maxim. He simply means to say that a moral principle is universalisable; otherwise, it cannot be endorsed.

Ayer advocates emotivism because he does not believe in the naturalistic thesis that ethical terms have descriptive meaning. The special feature of Hare's ethical philosophy is that it does not thoroughly depart from naturalism. Although it is true that ethical terms have a descriptive meaning, it is also true that the descriptive is not the whole meaning of ethical terms and sentences. Hare rejects descriptivism not thoroughly, but only partially. An ethical expression has a descriptive meaning as well as a prescriptive meaning. Ethical assessment is not possible quite independent of descriptive meaning of certain terms.

There is apparently an intention to make a compromise between naturalism or descriptivism on the one hand, and sentimentalism or subjectivism, on the other. No ethical predication is possible if we ignore factual properties. The importance of Hare as an ethical philosopher is that he wants to preserve the speciality of ethical judgments while at the same time admitting that it has a factual aspect. Hare's book 'The Language of Morals' is a treatise on these aspects of ethical language.

Ethical philosophers of the present century have engaged themselves to the task of examining the language of morals. This interest in language is very much pronounced in the writings of Ayer, Stevenson and Hare. On analysis of ethical language Hare discovers that it displays two significant features - prescriptivity and universalisability. If any sentence is claimed to be moral then it must contain either directly or indirectly some kind of recommendation or prescription regarding what ought to be done. This is why ethical sentences are expressed in the form of imperatives or are reducible to imperatives. In the second place, Hare observes that a moral sentence must be universal. He believes that any moral pronouncement which is not universalisable is not a genuine moral sentence.

So far as the first feature of moral language is concerned it must be said that such judgments are value judgments. A value judgment is either moral or non-moral. But in each case it must express some kind of commendation or prescription. If it is said that a Knife is good, then it is suggested that if somebody wants to buy a knife he should go for this particular kind of knife. Again, if it is said that the attitude of helping others is a great virtue, then we must approve of the attitude in question and expect that everybody should act in accordance with this principle. Thus it is clear that a central feature of a moral statement is that one can derive an imperative, from such statement.

Hare analyses moral statements and thus finds that such statements are not simply prescriptive. It is not only the case that we express our approval or commendation

in making such statements. An ethical statement expresses an implicit command. Nevertheless it is true that a moral statement cannot be identified by such features. In other words, a language of command is not necessarily a character of moral language. When a person says 'close the door' it is a command. But the command is not moral. On the other hand, "you should speak the truth" is a command and also a moral imperative.

As a matter of fact Hare classifies prescriptive language into two kinds of value judgments - moral and non-moral. It means that a moral statement is fundamentally a species of prescriptive language. As Hare remarks "Moral language belongs to the genus 'prescriptive language' (Language of Morals)".

Second feature of moral language is that it is universal. Hare advances an argument in support of this element of universality characterising ethical judgments. He argues that whenever in making a moral judgment we make a commendation, there must be some grounds for that. It tells us that whenever we commend we have in mind something about the object commended which is the reason for our commendation. In other words, when we say that 'x is good' we intend to commend x to other people on the basis of certain features or properties inhering in the object in question. Commendation, therefore, is made on the objective ground that there are certain properties inhering in the object commended; otherwise the commendation would be baseless and irrational. In fact, one must be in a position to explain why x is commended. Such explanation must refer to certain objective properties. If the conception of 'good' and moral recommendation is based on objective ground then the commendation may also be universal. Anything possessing such properties which are commended are also prescribed as good to all people.

Hare's argument is that "a judgment is not moral if it does not provide a reason for doing something. Such reasons being objective our moral judgments must be universal". Universalisability thus accompanies prescriptivity.

As even a non-moral judgment may be prescriptive and universal because a non-moral recommendation is also made on the basis of objective reason, the question is how to distinguish a moral judgment from a non-moral one. In "The Language of Morals" Hare says that when a prescriptive statement is made in relation to man then it is considered as a moral statement. Otherwise a moral statement does not logically differ from a non-moral statement. Hare explains everyman wants to become a moral personality. Any prescriptive statement made regarding man is moral. In simple terms when the word 'good' is used in order to commend morally we are always directly or indirectly commending people.

An important contention of Hare has to be analysed here. Hare says that 'a judgment is not moral if it does not provide a reason for doing something'. It means that there is an intimate connection between moral judgment and reasonableness. In Hare thus the two are inseparably connected.

This connection seems to be grammatical, linguistic and logical. In 'the Language of Morals' Hare has attempted to analyse the relation. He holds that if the question is

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whether the rules of logic are applicable to moral judgments, he finds that the answer must be in the affirmative. The language of ethics must be logical and the fundamental rules of logic must be applicable to moral statements or moral language. It may be mentioned here that Ayer held a view to the contrary. Hare in the first place has tried to refuse this view.

To do this Hare wants to show that there is no fundamental difference between an indicative and an imperative statement. Both kinds of statements are guided by the same fundamental logical concepts and principles. It may be remembered in this connection that the emotivists and the positivists usually consider indicative judgments alone as true and logical, and the imperatives are not verifiable, and are consequently irrational and meaningless.

The moral judgments are primarily prescriptive. They are commands, when the question is:

“what should I do?” the answer comes in the form of an imperative. This is described as the language of morals at the ‘grass-root level’.

Hare observes that the language of the imperative and that of an indicative are different in their external forms. For example, the sentences ‘shut the door’ and ‘the door is shut’ are different in external form, but they are similar in one important respect: the content of both the sentences is the same – ‘closing the door’. This common content of the two sentences has been called by Hare ‘phrastic’ element. The other element is called ‘neustic’ element which takes different forms in different sentences.

According to the analysis of Hare when the neustic element is connected with the phrastic element different kinds of sentences come into existence. For example, ‘closing the door’ is the phrastic and the neustic may be of various sorts, i.e., ‘the door is closed’, or ‘close the door’ sentences differ in their character depending on the neustic which is added to the phrastic.

The phrastic is the main element. If this element is false or vacuous then the imperative containing it would be non-sense. This is the reason why such sentences as ‘the Absolute is great’ is meaningless since the phrastic here is empty, so whatever neustic is added to it, a meaningless sentence will be constituted.

Hare is of the opinion that in this way we can test whether a sentence is meaningful or not. It is not really necessary, in his opinion, to get a whole sentence verified as Ayer did. We can only see whether the phrastic element of a statement is empty or not.

It is frequently believed that a sentence is meaningful if it is found that the sentence and its negation cannot be accepted at the same time- But two mutually apposed imperatives do not cancel one another, and so they must be equally meaningless. “There has been a train accident yesterday” and ‘there has not been a train accident Yesterday’ are two indicative sentences which are opposed to one another, and cannot be acceptable at the same time. But if a person says ‘shut the door’ and another person says ‘keep it open’ then one cannot cancel the other, although the two imperatives are opposed to each other.

Hare does not accept what is said above. He believes that there is scope for contradiction or opposition in the case of imperatives. This is shown by the fact that no person can follow both the opposing imperatives at the same time. So we can say that 'two orders contradict one another in the sense that the conjunction is self-contradictory' (Language of Morals).

Since contradiction may arise in the case of imperatives also, such statements as describe command should follow certain logical rules. Hare further tells us that an ethical statement may also be the conclusion of a deductive inference. In other words moral language admits of entailment but the rule is that no moral statement can be inferred from premises which are not themselves ethical. In other words from an indicative statement no imperative conclusion follows. Hare tells us that this is something which has been expressed in different ways by Austotle, Hume and Moore. The reason why an ethical conclusion does not follow from indicative or descriptive premises is that an ethical statement is prescriptive in character. Prescription being different from description there is an entailment gap between a descriptive and prescriptive statement.

If we analyse Hare's contention regarding the language of the morals we find that he clearly departs from the naturalistic position. In other words, while the Naturalists would explain a moral sentence to have a pure descriptive meaning Hare would concede descriptive meaning only to a certain extent. As a matter of fact Hare believes that a moral statement may be said to have partially descriptive meaning. The other part of the meaning is non-descriptive and in his opinion it is this other part which makes a statement moral.

This contention of Hare requires explanation. It is ture that we cannot use a moral predicate unless we are convinced of the presence of some relevant property objectively characterizing the thing which we evaluate. Nevertheless a moral property is not reducible to such a non-moral or naturalistic property. Naturalism in Hare's opinion is wrong in believing in this, kind' of reductionism. The reason why Hare objects to this kind of reduction of moral to n on-moral property is that it takes away the very character of a moral language. In 'The Language of Morals' Hare remarks that value terms have a special function in language & the function is that of commanding. If this be true then value terms cannot be defined in terms of other words which do not perform the function of commending. Naturalistic philosophers cannot perhaps deny that a moral statement is intended to perform this special function of commending. It is really strange that they could discover a descriptive meaning in a moral language and also preserve its commending force. Any statement in naturalistic language can at best have a descriptive meaning and there being a fundamental difference between description and prescription such sentence cannot serve the purpose which an ethical statement is believed to serve.

It seems that Hare can substantiate his thesis only by analysing the meaning and function of the word "Good" Apparently when we say that 'x is good' we are commending x. Hares thesis has two aspects - a moral statement has a descriptive meaning and also that a moral statement has a prescriptive suggestion. These two aspects cannot fall apart- The two aspects must be related. This relation can be understood if we follow Hare's analysis of the word "good".

The word "Good" is an adjective which is attached to different kind of subjects or nouns. Since the nouns to which the word 'good' is attached are varied the descriptive meaning of this moral term will vary from one instance to another. The ground for describing a car as good and the ground for describing a cricket bat as good must be different. In other words the objective properties characterizing things, which make us use the word 'good' are different which means that the descriptive meaning of the word 'good' will differ from one to another occasion.

As a matter of fact Hare has noticed that in all moral statements the adjective "good" is attached to different kinds of nouns which are divisible into two broad classes functional & non-functional. "Knife" or "Barometer" are words which are patently functional while the word "sunset" is non-functional. In spite of this difference the same adjective 'good' is used. Hare discovers that x is described as good when x satisfies certain demands or requirements of us. A knife is good for example if it satisfies the requirement of a person making use of it. 'Sunset is good if it satisfies the interest or demand of persons who loves to look at nature.

Hare therefore defines the word 'Good' in the following way :-
Good is such as to satisfy requirements etc. of the kind in question.

If we analyse this description of the term 'good' it transpires that the application of the word indicates that some people have certain purposes or demands or requirements. Some - thing is good if it is capable of satisfying such demands or requirements. As Mackie observes in his "Ethics": 'Inventing Right and wrong', "there is a curious interplay between qualities and relations here. On the one hand Hare's analysis shows that the concept of 'good' indicates a relation with certain requirements or demands which are subjective, on the other hand it indicates the presence of certain objective properties in the thing which enables it to satisfy such demand. The knife can satisfy the demand of the user if it is sharp. Sharpness is a part of the meaning of good but is not its whole meaning. It would be totally wrong to say that sharpness is goodness. Nevertheless it is true that unless we examine the sharpness of the knife we do not have any reason for calling it good. It shows that the thesis that the word good has partially a descriptive meaning cannot be denied - Naturalism is correct to a certain degree. It is correct so far as it believes that one cannot call a thing 'good' without considering its descriptive properties. Where naturalistic ethics fails is that it holds the descriptive meaning as its entire meaning. The falsity of this idea is easily demonstrated by the following example :-

A good strawberry is red, juicy fresh and sweet. But a list of all these properties may state a particular strawberry but such description does not amount to its goodness. A good knife is a sharp one. Nevertheless mere description of its sharpness is not equivalent to the description of its goodness. This very simple thing repudiates the spirit of naturalistic ethics. A description of natural properties is never a description of goodness.

Nevertheless it is true that one cannot describe Strawberry as 'good' without considering its natural properties, one cannot describe a knife as good without resting its

sharpness. Hare consequently describes goodness as a supervenient epithet. It is supervenient in the sense that it is an adjective which is based on naturalistic properties yet which transcends them. This element of transcendence must be admitted because when we use a value word we make some recommendation or prescription.

The primary function of the word 'good' is to commend (Language of Morals Pg.- 127). Whenever we commend we have in mind something about the objective ground for the commendation that we make.

Hare has analysed our employment of value words. It may not be absolutely wrong to discover similarity between the opinions of Hare and Moore regarding the meaning of the word 'good' while rejecting Hedonism. Moore has practically rejected the entire school of Naturalistic ethics by suggesting that we cannot bring out the complete meaning of the word 'good' by referring to naturalistic or descriptive properties. This is also partially Hare's contention. But Hare goes beyond Moore when he says that the meaning of the word 'Good' is not totally independent of the descriptive properties of an object though he agrees that such meaning is not exhausted by descriptive properties. Where he differs from Moore is that the naturalistic or descriptive properties may not be the full meaning of the word good. But it is very well apart of its meaning.

In other words, Hare would say that a value word has a partially descriptive meaning while the other part of the meaning is prescriptive. This partial descriptive meaning of value word must be conceded otherwise we cannot explain the significance of moral debates. Dispute regarding morality is meaningful only because there is some objective basis of our moral valuation. Moreover the possibility of moral advice can be explained only if some objective basis of ethical recommendation is acknowledged. As a matter of fact Hare ridicules Moore as an eccentric because Moore was not willing to accept any naturalistic explanation of 'good'.

Hare's analysis of the meaning of value terms rests upon his basic conviction that the value word has a prescriptive character, besides having a descriptive character. This is a point to which Stevenson already drew our attention. However Hare should be credited for making a compromise between the two extremes of pure objectivism and pure subjectivism. Pure objectivism as displayed in naturalistic ethics does not explain why the value word has a commending force. Pure subjectivism does not make room for moral disagreement or moral advice. Hare's thesis that the moral expression is prescriptive yet descriptive partially solves the problem which disturbs the objectivist and the subjectivist.

This analysis of value terms saps at the foundation of the proposed derivation of a moral conclusion from descriptive premises. This is manifested in Hare's debate with Searle, the neo-naturalist who seems to derive "ought" from is. This is not to be interpreted as an evidence for Hare's total anti-naturalism. He would agree with the naturalists so far he would concede that value terms have a partially descriptive meaning. Nevertheless the element of prescription which he discovers in moral statement distinguishes him from the entire school of naturalistic ethics.

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