A Theory of Metaethical Prescriptivism

Abstract: In the philosophical literature and in standard dictionaries, there is a general distinction between 'descriptions' and 'prescriptions.' In this essay, I precisely define these concepts. 'Descriptions' are assertions that are literally true or false, and 'prescriptions' are assertions intended to be agreed-upon (but not literally true or false). Metaethical prescriptivism maintains that all normative ethical assertions and value affirmations are prescriptions. It is argued here that: (1) cultural relativism is false, (2) the principle of compositionality can be challenged, (3) the Frege-Geach problem is resolvable, and (4) prescriptivism is a better explanatory theory compared to realism and expressivism. The semantic program of Schroeder (2010) is critiqued. The name 'prescriptivism' is not to be associated with Hare's (1963) theory.

Introduction

The debate about whether ethical assertions (i.e. normative 'ought' assertions) can be knowable continues into the 21st century. Moral realists maintain that there are objective moral truths independent of what anyone believes. In opposition, anti-realists claim that moral assertions are incapable of truth or falsity. The 'non-cognitivist' anti-realist theory here makes the claim that moral assertions are neither true nor false; and thus, they are not knowable. I argue that ethical assertions function to prescribe and not describe. The distinction between a 'description' and 'prescription' is hypothesized here:

1 Moral realists hold that morality is a search for the truth about what is right, and where our obligations are. Richard Boyd (1988) contends that: 1) Moral assertions are true or false, 2) The truth or falsity of moral assertions is independent of human opinion, and 3) Ordinary canons of consistent reasoning constitute a reliable method for obtaining moral knowledge.
A 'description' is an assertion that purports to express a correspondence (or a reflection) of some state of affairs, where its correctness (or incorrectness) is independent of its acceptance (or non-acceptance) by particular persons.

A 'prescription' is an assertion that purports to express a stipulation (or rule) upon a practice, where its correctness (or incorrectness) is dependent upon its acceptance (or non-acceptance) by particular persons.

As will be explained below, the descriptive-prescriptive distinction presumes a 'speaker theory' of reference. With a theory of speaker reference (or 'speaker meaning'), a sentence (or proposition) is assumed to be the primitive linguistic entity where its contextual use is studied.

**Part I** of this essay is an exposition of 'prescriptivism.' The intuitions and speaker semantics presented here constitute the observational evidence for prescriptivism. After prescriptivism is defined, its associated assumptions about (1) ontology, (2) value, (3) semantics, and (4) the structure of moral argument are described

**Part II** is a response to Mark Schroeder's (2008, 2010) demand that all non-cognitivist theories should conform to current theories in 'formal semantics' about sentence meaning. Formal semantics is the study of the 'meaning' of linguistic entities where it is taken for granted that words, phrases, and well-formed sentences possess meaning (in context). Schroeder's believes that 'expressivism' cannot fulfill various formal rules that are required for a sentence to have meaning. He thinks that noncognitive theories must be consistent with the principles of formal semantics for forming meaningful sentences. But, skeptically: What is a meaningful sentence? Is it true that for every 'word' that there is something that is its 'meaning' which is 'separable in form' and allows for its compositional use in meaningful sentences?
Part I. Metaethical Prescriptivism: Ethical Assertions are Prescriptions

I introduce metaethical prescriptivism:

**Prescriptivism:** Ethical assertions and substantive value affirmations are prescriptions. The 'correctness' of any ethical assertion (or value affirmation) is dependent upon what persons accept, tolerate, or agree-to, and does not refer to an objective moral reality.

Ethical assertions are intended to direct, or affect, human action. They stipulate a form of practice as an intentional, purposeful activity. Examples of ethical assertions include 'you should place your fork on the left-hand side of the plate' and 'abortion should (or should not) be legal.' Metaethical prescriptivism maintains that ethical propositions may be accepted (or adopted) by persons, but that they are neither true nor false. The pertinent question: Is prescriptivism true or false? The evidence for believing prescriptivism is true is consistent with the following:

1) **Ontology:** A belief-desire-value-intention ontology regarding human behavior is assumed in a materialist philosophy of mind. A 'belief' is understood as a functional mental state involving an attitude of affirming, doubting, or suspending judgment about a propositional assertion. Beliefs function to represent the world. A 'desire' is a functional brain state that is a primitive psychological, emotional, or hormonal state that motivates many of our actions. Beliefs and desires lead us to action. A 'value' is a functional physical brain state that measures the worth or importance of certain physical objects, events or actions. Assertions of value are the product of a person's desires, feelings, interests, beliefs, and other values in a social environment. An 'intention to act' is a determination to behave in a certain way. An 'action' is defined as behaviors that are under our control or could be, if we gave them enough thought. Not only do intentions (as functional physical brain states) manifest themselves in actions; the 'intention to
communicate' using language (i.e. to express one's thoughts) which may be termed a 'speech act.' It is claimed here that in various contexts, persons can assert (i.e. express, utter, communicate) thoughts (i.e. well-formed sentences) that are intended to be either descriptive or prescriptive.

2) The Subjectivity of Value: According to non-cognitivists, claims about 'what is valuable' are subjective and dependent upon human. This responds to the question, 'Do acts and objects have value independent of them being desired, or are actions and objects valuable because we desire them?' Non-cognitivists believe that the second response is true.

The conflict between cognitivists and non-cognitivists is characterized by opposing beliefs about the alleged 'objectivity' or 'subjectivity' of value:

(a) Value is objective (secularism). According to many secular moral cognitivists, value has a real nature and existence that is independent of humans. Moral value is independent of our psychology and of our likes, dislikes, interests, and desires.

(b) Value is objective (theism). According to many theists, there exists a supernatural entity x knowing of all things (including moral duties) whose ethics should be followed.

(c) Value is subjective (secularism). According to secular non-cognitivists, value owes its existence to the interests, desires, and attitudes of humans (and other sentient creatures). Without sentient creatures, there would be no desires, no values, and no assertions about what is good. The attribution of value isn't about the existence of an external element of reality. For the protection and well-being of the species, persons have developed rules (i.e. principles) of what are right and wrong actions, based upon the weighing of various values. Values can be changed or adjusted on the basis of new information, or with sensitivity to value conflicts or differences in value. Values evolve.
David Hume (1740) famously challenged the 'objectivity' of value in *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Hume argued that even in a case of premeditated cold-blooded murder, there is no objective wrongness to such an act, but instead the act is morally wrong because it violates our *shared sentiments* (*i.e.* feelings, emotions, values) of what is good and bad. The prohibition against the killing of innocent persons is the result of moral sentiments including empathy, compassion, and guilt. Ethical assertions are not the perception (or misperception) of a moral truth, but instead express and codify ethical standards (see Nidditch, ed. 1978, pp. 468-469). Hume's fundamental intuition about the subjective core of morality seems to be true.

Hume's 'belief-desire theory' of moral motivation is also accepted here. Moral motivation always involves the presence of beliefs and desires. On this theory of moral motivation, values are adopted (or condemned) for non-random subjective reasons, reflecting desired ways of life. A desire to participate and perpetuate life within civil societies seems to motivate the adoption of basic values. Widely held values (*e.g.* being respectful of people, keeping promises, telling the truth, not stealing, etc.) function to resolve conflicts of interests, develop positive character, promote happiness, and enable society to survive. A person cannot function without values, any more than without beliefs. Individual praise and social rewards lead to the pursuit of socially desired conducts. Feelings of guilt, a fear of social rebuke, and legal penalties constrain our actions. Having (good) standards of value doesn't always motivate consistent actions; lapses in self-prescribed morality happen.

Although desires motivate intentional action, we do not always act upon brute desires (*e.g.* greed, infatuation) because we are 'informed' that some actions may have adverse
consequences (to oneself and others). We most often pursue desires based on information and self-restraint, which are called 'informed desires.' Let us illustrate an 'informed' desire.

Sally desires inexpensive clothing. But, suppose that Sally also deplores low wage sweatshop working conditions. If Sally learns that a certain brand of inexpensive clothing employs sweatshop conditions, Sally may no longer desire (or value, or intend) the purchase of that clothing item, even if it is inexpensive. Sally adopts a value hierarchy that prefers 'boycotting sweatshop items' over 'purchasing inexpensive clothing.'

This simple ontology of beliefs, desires, values, and intentions can explain most of our actions. A moral judgment is a complex mental state exemplifying these four functional states.

Not all ethical disagreements involve a disagreement in basic value. A basic value may be generally agreed-upon, but certain pragmatic issues come into play. For example, a community can agree that childhood education is good, but may disagree on what actions should be undertaken to achieve this outcome on a cost-effective basis. 'Should a new school be built, and if so, at what expense should it be built, and where should it be built?' John Dewey (1939) contends that assertions of what is 'right' or 'good' occur with changing circumstances, involving persons with distinct interests and conceptions of what is good.

3) The Semantics of Moral Assertion: According to metaethical prescriptivism, ethical assertions are prescriptions, even if they are falsely believed to be descriptions by a moral cognitivist. Moral assertions do not function to 'represent reality' as do beliefs, but instead they function to represent choice and guide action. Ethical assertions can be agreed-on, adopted, or accepted by persons having shared values. With prescriptions, a social consensus is typically sought, and not the discovery of ethical truth.
According to a prescriptivist, an ordinary assertion such as ‘I believe that S should do a,’ where a designates an action, is not a statement of belief at all. Instead, it is a prescription. It is more accurate to say that ‘I prescribe that S should do a.’ Moral cognitivists talk strongly of values and ethical assertions as being ‘beliefs.’ But non-cognitivists don’t believe that ethical assertions are beliefs, because ‘beliefs’ are either true or false. It is more accurate to say that values can be adopted and endorsed, and that ethical behavior is prescribed. ²

Another salient feature of moral assertions is that sincere assertions are universalizable and categorical as contrasted to merely stating one’s personal preference, taste, or ideal. This aspect of morality was strongly emphasized by R.M. Hare (1952, 1963, 1981). Persons have specific reasons (i.e. facts and values) for having a categorical commitment for why an action should be done. Sincerely held ethical assertions express a commitment to uphold one’s adopted stance against conflicting stances. In other words, the same policy or principle applies in similar situations as a matter of consistency.

4) The Structure of Moral Argument: Hume’s claim that an ethical ‘ought’ conclusion cannot be inferred solely from a set of descriptive ‘is’ premises is true. On the prescriptivist view, any argument with an ethical ‘ought’ conclusion is necessarily derived from a set of premises which includes at least one prescriptive (ought) assertion.

² This interpretation is at odds with moral realism. Russ Shafer-Landau (2003) applauds realism because it "preserves ordinary talk of moral truth." He says when we face a moral perplexity, "we often see ourselves as engaged in a search for the truth about who is in the right, or where our obligations lie. We can well explain the point and persistence of moral disagreement by attributing to agents the presupposition that there is a right answer awaiting discovery" (p. 23).
Let us observe how descriptions and prescriptions function in practical ethical reasoning. We will consider the enhanced ban on intoxicated driving. Beginning in 1980, a grassroots group called Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) launched a campaign to curb tolerance for alcohol-impaired driving in the United States. In the following example, suppose that Smith has been drinking and driving with a blood-alcohol content of 0.32 (i.e. a high level of alcohol intoxication). How does this fact lead to the conclusion that 'Smith should be subject to legal penalty'? Below is how a prescriptivist identifies ‘descriptions’ and ‘prescriptions’ in this case:

(#1) **Description:** Driver intoxication often causes auto accidents.

(#2) **Prescription (value):** Auto accidents have negative value.

(#3) **Prescription (ethical principle):** Drivers shouldn’t be intoxicated.

(#4) **Prescription (ethical principle):** Intoxicated drivers should be subject to stricter enforcement and higher legal penalty for violation (the MADD principle).

(#5) **Description:** Smith was driving with a high blood-alcohol content of .32.

(#6) **Prescription:** Therefore, Smith should be subject to strict legal penalties.

The above argument illustrates how a prescriptive ethical conclusion #6 is the result of several prescriptive (ought) premises. Premises #2, #3, and #4 are prescriptions and depend upon human agreement of what ought to be valued. In contrast, premises #1 and #5 are descriptions and are true (or false) independent of human agreement.

We can shorten the above ethical argument into a deductive form as follows:

(1) **Prescription (ethical principle):** If S drives impaired, S should be subject to penalty.

(2) **Description:** Smith drove impaired.

(3) **Prescription (ethical conclusion):** Therefore, Smith should be penalized.
Although this short argument has a valid *modus ponens* form, such that if all of the premises are true, then the conclusion must be true; it should be recognized that the argument is not sound, since the first premise is not literally true. In logic, it is stipulated that an argument is ‘sound’ if and only if its premises are true, and its form is valid. Given the definition of a prescription (that it is neither true nor false) *it is impossible to ever generate a sound ethical argument*, given the standard definition of what constitutes a sound deductive argument.

With a moral argument, the best we can do is to present a valid argument, where it is *assumed* (as a fiction) that the value and ethical premises have a truth value, and that the validity of the argument is determined by the standard rules of deductive logic. The assumption that ethical values and principles are 'true or false' is *false*, but there is no harm in assessing the validity of arguments, if it is understood that the value premises don't literally have a truth value.

**What is a 'Proposition'? Are there Prescriptive Propositions?**

Views about 'propositions' are controversial and variable. There is no standard definition of what a proposition is. Some philosophers deny the existence of propositions. Sometimes it is said that a *sentence* expresses a proposition (and not persons). Some maintain that a proposition is the object of a 'propositional attitude' as a relation between a person and a proposition \( p \). Ultimately, I suggest that a 'proposition' shouldn't be defined as a metaphysical *natural kind* concept, nor should it be *stipulated* with fixed definiens. Instead, the definition of a 'proposition' is best determined by analyzing the term's historical philosophical 'use,' and reason for being.

Why do philosophers need to include the concept of a proposition into their explanations? The pragmatic need (or reason) for a distinction between 'sentence' and 'proposition' is illustrated with the following linguistic intuitions (found elsewhere in the literature).
Intuitions About Distinguishing a 'Sentence' and a 'Proposition'

a) The sentence 'It is now raining' (as a linguistic expression) is not by itself literally true or false. The sentence needs to be asserted in an environment and at a certain time to be true or false. It is the proposition expressed (in a context) by the sentence 'It is now raining' that is true when it is raining, and false when it is not raining. Sentences are not literally true or false, but their assertion as a 'proposition' in context is either true or false.

b) The English sentence 'Snow is white' expresses the same proposition as the German sentence 'Der Schnee ist weis.' Given that these sentences are different, it isn't the linguistic entities (i.e. sentences of different language) that make the assertion true, it is the proposition (i.e. meaningful content) that is true.

c) The sentences 'Here is the red book' and the 'The red book is here' when asserted in a context express the same (true or false) proposition. Since different sentences are used, it is not the sentence that is literally true or false, it is the proposition expressed by a sentence that is true or false.

d) The sentences 'Mark Twain wrote *Huckleberry Finn*' and 'Samuel Clemens wrote *Huckleberry Finn*' are different sentences but express the same true proposition, because Mark Twain is Samuel Clemens. It isn't the sentences that are true, it is the proposition expressed by the sentences that is true.

e) The sentence 'Persons should not smoke tobacco' is understood by a metaethical cognitivist as a true or false proposition (i.e. a description). For a non-cognitivist, this sentence has content, significance, and meaning and can be asserted as a prescriptive proposition (i.e. not truth-apt).
The basic idea behind these examples is that sentences in natural language (i.e. linguistic entities) are not true or false, but it is the proposition expressed that is apt for truth or falsity (or not apt for truth or falsity). Based upon these intuitions, I define a "proposition" as a sentence that when asserted at a time and in a context, presents the content of one's thought, with 'content' (or 'significance,' 'meaning') being primitive (undefined) terms. Descriptive and prescriptive propositions, asserted in context, normally have content, significance, or meaning for a speaker. This definition of 'proposition' will be resisted (typically upon metaphysical reasons) by philosophers who maintain that all declarative sentences, propositions, assertions, and statements are either true or false, and some necessarily so.\(^7\)

**The Falsity of Cultural Relativism**

Cultural relativism is a doctrine about the nature of morality. Cultural relativism follows from the empirical recognition that different societies have different moral codes. The modern impetus for the support of philosophical cultural relativism arose in the late 19th century with the Western study of cultural anthropology. Anthropologists were fascinated with a diversity of non-Western cultures, including the Eskimos. An influential scholar was Edward Westermarck (1862-1939). He was a social scientist who wrote anthropological and philosophical works, defending forms of cultural relativism. In 1947, when the United Nations was debating "human rights," the American Anthropological Association issued a controversial statement declaring that moral values are relative to cultures and that there is no way of showing that the values of

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\(^7\) Scott Soames (2017) states "propositions" are "the primary bearers of truth conditions, objects of attitudes, meanings of some sentences, and contents of some mental states" (p. 43). (For Soames, if propositions are the bearers of truth, then there can be no prescriptive propositions).
one culture are better than those of another. What exactly is the doctrine of metaethical cultural relativism? The following is a standard definition (among several existing variations):

**Metaethical Cultural Relativism (MCR):** The truth or falsity of moral judgments, or their justification is neither absolute nor universal, but is relative to the traditions, convictions, or practices of a group of persons. With respect to truth-value, this implies that a moral judgment such as 'Polygamy is morally wrong' may be true relative to one society, but false relative to another. The standards of justification in the two societies may differ, but there is no objective basis for resolving these differences. For any moral sentence and the sentence's negation, it is possible for both to be asserted truly. A proposition about the morality of an action is 'correct' for (or relative to) a society just in case the action conforms to a society's moral code or system of beliefs about morality.

A moral relativist, Gilbert Harman (1996) (not his precise definition above) states that "There are many different moral frameworks, none of which is more correct than the others" (p. 5).

The prescriptivist does not accept cultural relativism as a true description of morality. Prescriptivism doesn't imply that the 'correctness' of an ethical assertion depends upon cultural moral frameworks and that assertions of ethical rightness just means that a certain action has cultural approval. Nor does it imply that any moral framework is 'equally as good' as any other. Instead, prescriptivism allows that there are moral frameworks (e.g. a system of laws, agreements) that can be prescribed as being better than others. For instance, it may be prescribed that 'forced female circumcision is wrong,' or 'human slavery is wrong' in all societies.

The concise (and true) reason why metaethical cultural relativism (MCR) is false, is that if the meaning (and truth) of ethical assertions was about their correctness 'relative to a culture,'
this would indicate that persons would be only be saying something (purportedly true) about the
existing practices and codes of a culture. Persons would not be adopting a position on the
substantive correctness of a practice. This problem has been long recognized by critics of moral
relativism. Harman's theory of non-objective 'cultural agreements' as the source of ethical
normativity and variability, doesn't capture the prescriptive intent behind the bargaining.

What 'Prescriptivism' Is Not

Prescriptivism should not be associated with cultural relativism, conventionalism, anarchy, tolerance, or nihilism. Prescriptivism is a descriptive theory. No normative claims can
be inferred from a descriptive theory. Let us rebut these various claims:

1) Prescriptivism does not make the normative claim that any conduct that is accepted
(or tolerated) at a given time by a culture is morally permissible for that given time and
culture. An ethical proposition isn't 'correct' relative to societal agreements.

2) Prescriptivism does not imply 'conventionalism,' a normative theory that you should
always act in conformity with your society's norms.

3) Prescriptivism does not imply that persons should just arbitrarily pick their own value
system, and merely follow their own interests, inclinations, and impulses without
consideration of others. It doesn't endorse anarchy.

4) Prescriptivism doesn't imply that we should be tolerant of existing (or new) practices.

5) Prescriptivism does not imply moral nihilism (i.e. values are senseless and useless and
should be abandoned). A person's normative character is based upon non-objective values
and principles that he or she adopts and faithfully practices.
A Moral Question: Identifying Descriptions and Prescriptions

That prescriptivism is morally neutral when describing normative situations needs illustration. For example, it makes no judgment about whether Jill should (or should not) cheat on her philosophy test. This case is from Louis Pojman (1995):

Jill is presently getting a D in her philosophy course and sees an opportunity to raise her grade by cheating on an exam. She would like to get a better grade, for if she doesn't do better, her father will very likely take away her automobile, and her chances of getting into professional school will be severely diminished. So, Jill considers cheating. Yet she is troubled by the thought of cheating. Ought she to cheat? (p. 187).

How do desires, values, beliefs, and intentions fit into this story? Where are the descriptions and prescriptions? Let's follow the premises and outcomes in the reasoning of Jill's self-deliberation:

(#1) Prescription (value, principle): Jill accepts that in general, 'it is wrong to cheat.'

(#2) Prescription (desire, value): Jill desires getting into professional school, maintaining possession of her automobile, and getting a B on her test.

(#3) Descriptions: Jill wants to get a B test grade to raise her grade from D to C (true). Jill doesn't have time to study for this morning's test (true). Jill can achieve a B by cheating (either true or false). Jill will not get caught or punished (either true or false).

(#4) Prescription: Therefore, Jill ought or ought-not cheat.

This case illustrates how a moral conclusion involves the personal weighing of (1) values, (2) desires, (3) beliefs, and (4) normative principles in cases of value conflict. There is (most often) a strong connection between a person's values and motivations to act, but at times, following
one's own ethical principles is fallible. As Jill actively deliberates whether to cheat this time (or not), she might vow to herself, to study harder and earlier in the future to avoid this predicament.

In this situation, under ordinary standards of morality and integrity, most of us would want Jill to embrace value premise in #1 as a more important compared to her present desires and values in #2. We urge her to adopt the second option of the ethical decision in #4. Among our reasons for urging Jill not to cheat: (a) if everyone cheated the institution of testing would be disabled, (b) one should respect a test as a means for learning and verifying one's understanding, (c) cheating isn't fair to other students that don't cheat, and (d) she doesn't know that she will get a B by cheating, nor that she won't be caught and punished. But, if Jill is indifferent to the scholarship standards of others, and decides to risk cheating, there is no fact that make's Jill's decision objectively wrong and no sound deductive argument proving Jill's action is wrong.

**The Concept of Goodness**

With the apparent popular contemporary (secular) Western opinion that affirms that personal values are 'subjective' and 'relative,' it might be thought obvious that what is 'good' is subjective and relative, and that prescriptivism is elaborating upon common sense. But this is not the case. The widely favored philosophical view since the time of the early Greeks is that value is objective. Moral realists have claimed that 'goodness' and 'value' are 'natural properties' inherent in material objects, actions, experiences, and states of affairs, and that moral concepts can be defined in non-moral terms. From ancient times, philosophers speculated on what human values and actions are *intrinsically good.* The intrinsic goodness of something is thought to give persons a reason, or moral motivation, to attain it. G.E. Moore (1903) sought to clarify the notion of 'intrinsical goodness' as a 'non-natural' property. One of the most extensive lists of
'intrinsic goods' was collected by William Frankena (1973) and includes: life, activity, health, happiness, contentment, knowledge, aesthetic experience, love, friendship, power and experiences of achievement, self-expression, freedom, good reputation, honor, and esteem.

In contrast, from the perspective of a prescriptivist, Frankena's list is not a set of objective intrinsic goods. It is a list of subjective species and personalized relative goods. The question 'what has intrinsic value' contrasts with our metaethical question, 'what is intrinsic value?' The non-cognitivist asks how could you determine whether an item or action has intrinsic value? What does it mean for an item or action to be 'valuable for its own sake' that is independent of our interests? The concepts of 'intrinsic goodness' and 'inherent value' are indefensible postulations. They invite the mistaken belief of the existence of objective goodness and value.

J.L. Mackie (1977) offers the following response to theories of objective value and goodness. According to Mackie, an item \( x \) (e.g. action, physical item, state of affairs, policy, etc.) is valued, or is good, because we desire it, and not because it has intrinsically desirable properties. A good \( x \) satisfies some set of wants, interests, or requirements. Whether something is morally good is relative to a set of values, moral standards, or point of view. Mackie asserts that attempts to define 'goodness' in terms of non-moral properties or identifying 'goodness' with intrinsic objective properties were mistaken. Instead, 'good' is used as an 'adjective' for an item that satisfies some subjective want or interest. For example, in one context a car can be described (or prescribed) as a 'good car' (e.g. for a small family), but the same car is not a 'good car' relative to the interests of a race car driver (e.g. if it doesn't go over 120 MPH). Harman (1996) observes that "whether something is morally good, right, or just, is always relative to a set of moral coordinates, a set of values or moral standards, a certain moral point of view" (p. 17).
Summary: The Observational Evidence for Prescriptivism

Moral realists maintain that morality is objective and independent of us. Is this consistent with the evidence of actual moral phenomena? On the contrary, shared values among persons seems to better explain a moral consensus than the discovery of objective values. Some value agreements are difficult to attain, and differences may seem intractable. Sometimes there are conflicts in individuals' affective attitudes. 'Affective attitudes' are an emotional affection or repulsion towards an object or practice. Persons can have conflicting attitudes (e.g. the value of a fetus, use of recreational drugs, homosexual relations, and the proper treatment of animals) where a disagreement in value is basic. But with the political appeal to facts, values, consequences, and ethical arguments, changes in beliefs and changes in values can occur within a person and between generations (e.g. marijuana legalization, the legalization of same-sex marriage). Possessing true beliefs is crucial to having informed values. False beliefs and ignorance may lead to misinformed values and action that is harmful to one's self or others.

Part II. Schroeder’s Defense of Moral Realism based upon Formal Semantic Constraints

Mark Schroeder (2010), a proponent of realism, is concerned with problems with the semantics of non-cognitive sentences. Schroeder’s argument against expressivism (and non-cognitive theories) is that these theories do not follow the rules of truth-conditional semantics (p. 26). Truth-conditional theories of semantics as practiced by Schroeder, seek to best represent how linguistic expressions in natural languages can possess meaning.

For formal theorists, with an adequate model, one can learn about the meaning of 'linguistic expressions' and the correlations between ‘linguistic expressions’ and ‘meanings’ by investigating how the meaning of a complex expression (e.g. a sentence) is the result of the
meaning of simpler expressions (words) that it is constructed from. Schroeder's theory about sentence meaning claims that in order for $S$ to understand the 'meaning' of a sentence, $S$ must understand the sentence's compositional structure and know under what conditions the sentence would be true.

**The Principle of Compositionality**

A fundamental part of Schroeder's semantics is the adoption of the 'principle of compositionality.' Like most philosophers, he maintains 'compositionality' is required for understanding how the meanings of complex sentences are put together. This principle asserts that words are the basic components of sentences, and that the meaning of sentences depends (systematically) on the meaning of the words that they are composed of. Schroeder's reasoning is that "This is because there are infinitely many sentences in any natural language, and if you understand the meaning of just a few words, we can construct arbitrarily many new sentences that you have never seen before… because you can figure out their meaning on the basis of their parts and how those parts are put together. This is usually called the *compositional constraint*" (p. 27). The compositional constraint is from writings of logician Gottlob Frege (1879, 1892).

The 'compositional theory' of sentence meaning states that to represent the meaning of a sentence (in a precise logical structure) is to understand how its words contribute in a systematic way to the meaning of the sentence. It is assumed various *forms of linguistic expression* (e.g. proper names, predicates) have 'semantic functions' and may possess 'semantic values' that can *mean* this or *refer* to that. Linguistic items (words, sentences) are said to be *about, stand for,* or *represent* something (a thing, or an object). In order to understand the meaning of a word is to know what the word is 'about.' Frege wanted to explain how certain linguistic forms contribute
to a sentence's meaning, and ultimately its truth value. Semantics as now popularly practiced, utilizes formal models and consists of grammatical modeling and manipulation of linguistic entities in accordance with the standard rules of deductive logic.

Schroeder states a dominant view about 'sentence meaning,' 'truth,' and 'word aboutness': …The ideas that the meaning of a sentence consists of what would make it true and that the meaning of a word consists in what the word is about, are powerful and productive ideas. As a hypothesis about meanings, they have led to an enormously productive and successful research program in both linguistics and philosophy, which has shed light on the meanings of a great variety of kinds of linguistic expressions… a very productive paradigm for understanding linguistic meaning (p. 29).

But are the theories of 'linguistic reference' and 'compositionality' empirically true? Do natural language sentences (asserted in context) have meaning because of their formal syntax and semantics? Is it true that one's understanding of the meaning of a sentence is knowing the sentence's compositional structure and knowing under what conditions the sentence would be true? Are linguistic entities (words, sentences, phrases) asserted in a context about something?

A Rebuttal to the 'Principle of Compositionality'

Is the principle of compositionality empirically true? In opposition to the principle of compositionality, it is evident that persons learn their sentence use, grammar, and semantic rules informally. When learning a natural language (by immersion) the meaning of a sentence (a complex structure) is understood without conscious attention to the individual words and syntactic conventions that give sentences their structure. As a child, sentence use (and meaning) follows immediately from hearing and imitating adults and others. For a child, sentence
meaningfulness comes first, and then comes the (optional) learning of the formal rules of the
compositional grammar. The rules of syntax and semantics (including formal semantics) may
allow explanations (and models) of how new and novel sentences are constructed, but there is no
evidence that these compositional rules are the reason for (or result in) 'meaningful sentences.'
Contrary to compositionality, the meaning of a complex expression (e.g. a sentence) for a person
is determined by its content, the pragmatics of a situation, and the person's background beliefs.
A speaker theory of reference explains the (speaker's) meaning of a sentential p by describing S's
(intended) use in a context, rather than stating the conditions for p to be true.

**A Sketch of a 'Speaker Theory' of Reference**

A standard dictionary defines these three related terms:

1. **Refer** is to direct attention, speak of, mention, or allude to.
2. **Reference** is the act of referring, mentioning, or alluding.
3. **Referent** is (a) what is referred to, or (b) the thing that a word stands for.

A theory of 'speaker reference' adopts the 3a sense of reference where it is believed that it is
fruitful to describe how persons can use expressions pragmatically (e.g. a proper name, a definite
description, a definition) to refer to entities (e.g. a planet, a fictional character, a number, a
word). This is in direct contrast to the 3b sense where linguistic expressions are believed to
acquire meaning and have semantic properties in a context (to mean this or refer to that).

According to a speaker theory of reference, sentences don't possess meaning (in an
object language), instead, persons give (or assume, or understand) sentence meaning when using
a sentence. A speaker theory asks, 'what does S mean when asserting p?' Personal intentions
and context allow a speaker (and audience) to identify the referents (and functions) of linguistic
entities, and the function of a sentence in context. If a listener has doubt about a speaker's reference or intent when uttering a complete sentence, an appropriate question is asked for clarification. The idea of 'speaker reference' is not new. It is recognized by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953), Peter Strawson (1971), Keith Donnellan (1966), and Saul Kripke (1977, 1980).  

With a speaker theory of reference as advocated here, well-formed sentences are the basic units of meaning; not the words that they are built out of. Persons use linguistic expressions to refer to particular entities in a context. Personal intentions and context allow a speaker (and audience) to identify the referents (and aboutness) of linguistic entities in an utterance, and the function of a sentence in context. Persons use sentences to make empirical claims, normative ethical assertions, mathematical assertions, aesthetic judgments, and various kinds of definition. Persons can intentionally assert a sentence as being either descriptive or prescriptive. Philosophers should seek to analyze the concepts and intentions in particular contexts and describe how sentences are used by speakers to communicate various intentions.

With truth-theoretic semantic program, it is assumed that all assertions in a context are either true or false. The correct way to explain the meaning of a sentence is to say under what conditions it would be true. As stated, this is an idea that has flourished since the inception of Frege's logic. Scott Soames (2010) a leading philosopher of language, says:

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8 Kurt Ludwig (2007, p. 150) distinguishes between (1) 'speaker reference' (whom S intends to be talking about) and (2) 'semantic reference' (who the name S uses refers to, taken literally in the language that S is speaking). Max Deutsch (2009, p. 455) says the distinction is "familiar to every philosopher of language and indeed to most philosophers regardless of specialization...".
The central fact about language is its representational character. Exceptional cases aside, a meaningful declarative sentence S represents the world as being a certain way. To sincerely accept, or assertively utter S, is to believe, or assert, that the world is the way S represents it to be… For S to be meaningful is for it to represent the world as being a certain way... the systematic study of meaning requires a framework for specifying the truth conditions of sentences on the basis of their syntactic structure, and the representational contents of their parts (p. 1).

Soames' characterization of sentence meaningfulness as being tied to its truth effectively excludes the concept of 'prescriptive' assertions as being meaningful, since prescriptions are intended to be agreed-upon without being literally true or false. In contrast to formal programs, prescriptivism is not concerned with the meaning of (normative) words, sentence syntax, or proper semantic models. A speaker semantics is hypothesized by interpreting how normative ethical sentences may be used by speakers, and how they can function to attain consensus (or partial agreement, acceptance).

The Frege-Geach Problem

Schroeder pays great attention to the Frege-Geach problem. Peter Geach (1965) alleges that there is a problem in understanding how prescriptive premises (having no truth conditions) can function to produce valid moral arguments. Geach's primary problem with non-cognitive theories is that they do not specify any truth-conditions for a moral assertion. This allegedly presents a problem of equivocation when evaluating deductive arguments. Geach, in effect, asks how can a 'prescription' carry consistent semantic contents (i.e. the same meaning) across both
asserted and non-asserted contexts and where contexts differ. We will review two problems of possible equivocation in ethical deductive arguments.

**Problem #1: The Indeterminate Value of the Antecedent in Premise 2**

This example is from Geach (1965, p. 463):

1) Tormenting the cat is bad.

2) If tormenting the cat is bad, getting your little brother to do it is bad.

Thus: 3) Getting your little brother to torment the cat is bad.

Adjusting Geach's problem to prescriptivism, it is alleged that 'tormenting the cat' in the first premise *is asserted* as a prescription; but in the second premise, 'tormenting the cat' *isn't being asserted* (as a prescription or otherwise). And if 'tormenting the cat' in the antecedent of the second premise isn't asserted (and has an undetermined acceptance or non-acceptance value), then we are representing 'tormenting the cat is bad' in the second premise with potentially two different acceptance-values, and the above argument is invalid on the pain of equivocation.

Our response to this problem is that we should just charitably assume that the second premise has the form 'if prescription, then prescription,' and that the antecedent of the conditional (in the second premise) and the first premise have the same-acceptance value (i.e. affirming the positive value of cats and their well-being) and that the moral conclusion is prescriptive:

1) (It is prescribed that) Tormenting the cat is bad.

2) If (it is prescribed that) tormenting the cat is bad, then (it is prescribed that) getting your little brother to do it is bad.

Thus: 3) (It is prescribed that) Getting your little brother to torment the cat is bad.
In this argument, we would reasonably assume that anyone who asserts the first premise as a prescription would also assert that 'tormenting the cat' in the antecedent of the second premise as having the same prescriptive value as the first premise, as a matter of consistency. The meaning of 'Tormenting the cat is wrong' remains constant with the same value-attitude. As long as the prescriptivist who advances this argument maintains that there is no literal truth value to the first premise, the entire second premise, and the conclusion, then there is no equivocation in meaning.

**Problem #2: The Indeterminate Value of the Consequent in Premise 2**

Another problem is illustrated with the following similar moral argument:

1) Feeding the wolves is bad.

2) If feeding the wolves is bad, getting your little brother to do it is bad.

Thus: 3) Getting your little brother to feed the wolves is bad.

In a context, it could be the case that feeding wolves (e.g. in a residential neighborhood) is *bad* because of ills associated with the congregation of wild wolves among humans. In this situation, the alleged entailment to a moral conclusion might be thought to be invalid because even if premise 1 and the antecedent in premise 2 are consistently adopted (as assumed-true or prescribed), this leaves open as indeterminate the consequent about whether you should get your little brother to do something that is bad. Since the consequent is a separate undetermined value judgment, this leaves the entire conditional in premise 2 with an undetermined truth/adoptions value, and the argument isn't valid.

The solution to this problem is to make explicit an implicit suppressed third premise:
1) (It is prescribed that) Feeding the wolves is bad.\(^9\)

2) If (it is prescribed that) feeding the wolves is bad, then (it is prescribed that) getting your little brother to do it is bad.

3) (It is prescribed that) Getting your little brother to do bad things is bad.

4) Thus (It is prescribed that) Getting your little brother to feed the wolves is bad.

To repeat from above: With a moral argument, the best we can do is to present a valid argument, where it is assumed (as a fiction) that the value and ethical premises have a truth value, and that the validity of the argument is determined by the rules of deductive logic. The assumption that ethical values and principles are 'true or false' is false, but there is no harm in assessing the validity of moral arguments, if it is understood that the value premises don't literally have a truth value. When using prescriptions, there is no equivocation in a speaker's meaning and intent.

**Prescriptivism Compared to Expressivism**

Expressivism, as stated above, when it is treated as a theory of 'moral thought' is a family of anti-realist non-cognitive metaethical theories that characterizes ethical assertions as expressing non-belief-like mental states of a person's attitude (or state of mind). An attitude expresses one's 'approval' or 'disapproval' of an action (or value, policy, and so on). In many theories, moral words and sentences are said to be used to express the emotions, feelings, or attitudes of a speaker. Like the prescriptivist, an expressivist understands that a moral assertion has the function of coordinating actions if adopted by others. When making a moral assertion, one is not just voicing one's own attitude, but one is seeking to influence the attitude of others.

\(^9\) As an aside, in other contexts, such as at a public zoo, where food is provided, it could be that it is permissible (or good) to feed the wolves. Premise 1 cannot be evaluated out of context.
The prescriptivist response to expressivism is to just modify (and make precise) the expressivist thesis that moral assertions function to express mental states as non-belief attitudes. In short, it is maintained here that moral assertions function to express prescriptions. Moreover, the prescriptivist doesn't posit that moral words (e.g. wrong, good) have a different kind of meaning than non-moral words. Instead attention is directed to a speaker's intent and the contextual meaning of complete sentences. In claiming that moral assertions should be understood as being prescriptions, the prescriptivist identifies the 'non-belief attitudes' of the expressivist as identical to 'personal values' that are physically manifested in sentient creatures as described above. Value is internal.

**Conclusion**

Prescriptivism is a new anti-realist metaethical theory. The theory that all normative ethical assertions are prescriptive fits the pre-theoretical outlooks of many people. Prescriptivists talk about 'right and wrong' and 'good and bad' normative conduct (e.g. about intoxicated driving, abortion) without pretense of something that 'lies beyond' the values that we endorse. That values are relative to the existence of persons doesn't imply that what is morally right is relative to cultural convention, or that opposing assertions are 'equally correct.' Despite the fact that there are no objective ethical truths, this doesn't preclude us from making reasoned (and formally valid, but not sound) ethical arguments.
References


