

Chapter Five

A Theory of Metaethical Prescriptivism

Abstract: In philosophical literature and in standard dictionaries, there is a general distinction between descriptions and prescriptions. In this chapter, I attempt to precisely define these concepts. In short, I argue that 'descriptions' are assertions that are literally true or false (and possibly knowable) and that 'prescriptions' are not literally true or false (and are not knowable). I maintain that all normative ethical assertions are prescriptions. Practical ethical arguments typically contain both descriptive and prescriptive premises, and all normative conclusions are prescriptions. This theory is offered as an alternative to the anti-realist metaethical theories of Ayer (1946), Stevenson (1944), Harman (1977), Hare (1981), Gibbard (1990), Blackburn (1993), and Timmons (1999).

Introduction

The debate about whether ethical assertions (i.e., normative 'ought' assertions) can be knowable continues into the 21st century. Moral cognitivists maintain that there are objective moral truths independent of what anyone believes. In opposition, non-cognitivists claim that moral assertions are incapable of truth or falsity. Here I present a non-cognitive metaethical theory that I call 'prescriptivism.' I argue that ethical assertions function to *prescribe* and not *describe*. A metaethical theory is about the epistemology, semantics, and ontology of ethical assertion.

The name 'prescriptivism' is the same name that R.M. Hare used in his books *The Language of Morals* (1952) and *Freedom and Reason* (1963), but the theory here has little in common with Hare's work. In relation to Hare's theory, I develop a definition of what a 'prescription' is and eliminate Hare's claim that 'universalizability' is a logical feature of moral claims. The term 'prescription' is chosen to contrast with the term 'description.' Prescriptivism, as presented here, is the theory that all ethical assertions (i.e., normative ought-statements) should be understood as prescriptions (even if moral cognitivists falsely believe them to be descriptions).¹

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.

The Distinction between Descriptions and Prescriptions

What are the dictionary definitions of a 'description' and a 'prescription'? The following are condensed senses from *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*:

A 'description' is an act of describing, a discourse intended to give an account.

A 'prescription' is the action of laying down authoritative rules or directions.

These are ordinary language concepts, and our task is to analyze and clarify these dictionary definitions. At first sight, it seems that a 'description' is 'correct' if it conforms with the *truth*. A 'prescription' is 'correct' if it conforms to *approved standard*.

The following two dictionary senses of 'correct' appear to run parallel to the dictionary definitions of 'description' and 'prescription':

(1) 'Correct' (adjective) means 'conforming or agreeing with fact, logic, or known truth.'

(2) 'Correct' (adjective) means 'conforming to an approved or conventional standard.'

The first sense of 'correct' assumes that *correctness is independent* of what any person thinks. The second sense assumes that *correctness is dependent* upon what persons agree-to. The first sense implies an outward-seeking view involving truth, and the second sense implies an inward-seeking view involving human value. With these definitions, we can initially define the descriptive-prescriptive distinction as follows:

A 'description' is intended to give an account; and is correct if it agrees with fact or known truth.

A 'prescription' involves laying down rules; and is correct if it conforms to an approved or conventional standard.

With these sets of definitions as a guide, I hypothesize that the descriptive-prescriptive distinction can be theoretically defined as follows:

A '**description**' is an assertion that purports to express a *correspondence* (or a representation) 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.

From the concept of a description, the related concept of 'objectivity' can be inferred:

-A description is **objectively true** if it expresses a correspondence (or a reflection) of some state of affairs that is independent of its acceptance (or acknowledgment) by particular persons.

-A description is **objectively false** if it doesn't correspond to; or reflect a state of affairs.

Metaethical Prescriptivism: Ethical Assertions are Prescriptions

That 'ethical assertions' and 'substantive value affirmations' are prescriptions is the thesis of this essay. Ethical assertions are intended to direct, or affect, action. They stipulate a form of practice as an intentional, purposeful activity. Normativity pertains of choice or action, and to rules or standards for choosing or assessing conduct. Ethical assertions range from 'you should place your fork on the left-hand side of the plate' to 'abortion should (or should not) be legal.'

I introduce metaethical prescriptivism:

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

Prescriptivism maintains that ethical assertions may be *accepted* (or not accepted) by humans, 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 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 brain states) manifest themselves in *actions*; the intention to communicate using language is often called 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, the assertion of 'what is valuable' is subjective and dependent upon humans. 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 disjunct 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. Value is often characterized as an inherent, intrinsic property that is found in material objects, actions, and states of affairs. According to some cognitivists, value, virtue, and vice can be investigated with objective reasons and sound deductive arguments to support rational and eternal ethical truths. Other objectivists claim that value depends on extrinsic factors and is highly context-dependent and that ethical truths are empirical and contingent.

(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. Because *x* is wholly good and caring, *x* communicates objective moral truths to persons in the form of written texts (and for some, personal messages). The entity is the infallible purveyor of moral law. Objective moral values are binding on everyone (including those of other religions). Stephen Prothero (2010) describes eight major influential religions.

(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 (1711-76) is a prominent modern philosopher who challenged the objectivity of value in *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Hume (1740) 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. Hume's quote is often cited in ethics texts:

Take any action allow'd to be vicious: Wilful murder for instance. Examine it in all lights and see if you can find that matter of fact, or real existence, which you call *vice*. In whichever way you take it, you find only certain passions, motives, volitions, and thoughts. There is no other matter of fact in the case. You can never find it, till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action... (W)hen you pronounce any action or character to be vicious, you mean nothing, but that from the constitution of your nature you have a feeling or sentiment of blame from the contemplation of it (Nidditch, ed. 1978, 468-469).

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. The principle that 'cold-blooded murder is wrong' is a *widely shared value*. Hume's anti-realist view about 'value' seems true.

The Humean 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. We understand that having (good) value standards doesn't always motivate consistent actions. Lapses in morality happen.

Although 'desires motivate intentional action,' it is obvious that 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 often pursue desires based upon information and self-restraint, which are often called 'informed desires.' Let us illustrate an 'informed' desire. Suppose that Sally desires inexpensive clothing. But suppose that Sally also

deplores low wage sweatshop working conditions, where some clothing is manufactured. 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. A frequent modern question is '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) a respected American educator and philosopher, contended 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 Speaker 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.*²

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 literally more accurate to say that 'I *prescribe* that **S** should do **a**.' Moral cognitivists talk

² This interpretation of value and moral semantics is at complete odds with moral realism. Shafer-Landau (2003) applauds moral realism because it "preserves ordinary talk of moral truth." He says that 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). Fisher (2014) says that in ordinary moral practice, *we believe* that moral judgments are true or false (p. 106). Other modern moral realists include Sturgeon (1985), Boyd (1988), Brink (1989), Smith (1994), Pojman (1995), Korsgaard (1996), Thomson (1996), Hursthouse (1999), Bloomfield (2001), Foot (2001), Railton (2003), Shafer-Landau (2003), Audi (2004) Huemer (2005), Schroeder (2010), Enoch (2011), Parfit (2011), DeLapp (2013), Scanlon (2014) and van Roojen (2015). In a survey taken by Bourget and Chalmers (2023), 62% of philosophers identify as moral 'realist' and 26% as 'anti-realist.'

strongly of values and ethical assertions as being ‘beliefs,’ and many non-realists use this same terminology sometimes for lack of a better word. 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.

Another salient feature of the semantics of moral assertion 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. 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 stance* against conflicting stances, and that the same policy or principle applies in similar situations as a matter of consistency. Of course, as mentioned above, there is the problem of motivation where persons don’t always consistently practice their own stance.

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.

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.

A Descriptive-Prescriptive Semantics in Ethical Arguments

Let us reiterate the basic difference between a moral cognitivist and the prescriptivist perspective by comparing how each of these positions analyze the following informal normative argument which concludes that 'persons should not smoke tobacco.' A cognitivist argues:

(#1) **Description:** Personal health is good.

(#2) **Description:** Tobacco use harms personal health.

(#3) **Description:** Therefore, persons should not smoke tobacco.

According to a moral cognitivist, premise #1 is true. Since premise #2 is also true, it is a fact that persons should not smoke tobacco (conclusion #3).

This interpretation is counter to a prescriptivist's understanding. According to the prescriptivist, the first premise is a value premise. The same argument is reinterpreted using the very same premises above, but with a different semantic understanding:

- (#1) **Prescription (value):** Personal health is good.
- (#2) **Description:** Smoking tobacco harms personal health.
- (#3) **Prescription:** Therefore, persons should not smoke tobacco.

The only difference in the above ethical arguments is that premise #1 and conclusion #3 are variously interpreted as a 'description' or a 'prescription.' The correct interpretation of this argument rests upon one's belief whether premise #1 is objective or subjective. If it is believed that assertion #1 is subjective, then the second form of reasoning will be deemed more accurate. A prescriptivist maintains that a formal deduction is as follows:

- (#1) **Prescription (value):** Personal health is good.
- (#2) **Prescription (ethical principle):** If action *x* harms personal health and can be avoided, then *S* should abstain from *x*.
- (#3) **Description:** Smoking tobacco harms personal health and can be avoided.
- (#4) **Prescription:** Therefore, *S* should abstain from smoking tobacco.

The Elements of Ethical Arguments: Identifying Descriptions and Prescriptions

It might be asked that if prescriptivism denies the existence of moral truth and has no practical implications for substantive moral guidance, of what value is this neutral theory? Prescriptivism allows us to understand that the structure of ethical reasoning involves the interaction of descriptions, prescriptions, facts, and values. Consider how a prescriptivist perspective understands the premises of arguments in the current abortion debate. Let us first examine an anti-abortion (pro-life, pro-birth) argument:

- (1) **Prescription (value):** All human life is valuable and should be respected.
- (2) **Prescription (ethical principle):** A person should not kill a human life, and *ceteris paribus*, any action that kills a human life, is wrong.
- (3) **Description:** Human life begins at conception.
- (4) **Description:** Abortion is the killing (termination) of a human life.
- (5) **Prescription:** Therefore, any abortion is wrong.

A pro-choice abortion argument might reply with the following:

- (1) **Prescription (value):** All persons (i.e., humans with certain mental capacities) are valuable and should be respected.
- (2) **Prescription (ethical principle):** A person should not kill a person, and *ceteris paribus*, any action that kills an innocent person, is wrong.
- (3) **Description:** Human life begins at conception.
- (4) **Prescription (stipulated definition):** A 'person' is a living human with a functional brain (i.e., a highly developed cerebral cortex). Having a functioning human brain is the property that distinguishes 'persons' from other living items in the universe.
- (5) **Description:** A human fetus does not have a functioning brain until after 24 weeks.
- (6) **Description:** Abortion is the killing (termination) of a human life, but abortion is not the killing of a person if the abortion is performed prior to brain functioning at 24 weeks.
- (7) **Prescription:** Therefore, abortion is permissible on human fetuses if it is performed prior to the fetus having brain function and being a person (at 24 weeks).

Again, from a metaethical perspective, the purpose of these arguments is to identify the desires, values, beliefs, and structure of two contemporary arguments about abortion.

What is at impasse in the abortion issue is the question of whether a fetus with no brain function is deserving of protected moral status. For pro-life advocates it is a basic value that 'human life starting at conception is valuable.' A fetus with no mental function is valuable, and preservation of a potential person should outweigh the desires, values, and circumstances of a pregnant woman. For pro-choice advocates, it is a basic value that 'humans having functioning brains are valuable.' If a human fetus has neither mental function nor consciousness, then it is not a person, and should not have a protected status. The pro-choice advocate points out the fact that living humans that have ceased brain-function because of injury are not classified as persons and are often disconnected from artificial life-support systems. According to the pro-choice perspective, it should be legal to terminate a fetus prior to the start of brain function, even though abortion is not advocated as a preferred method of birth control.

The Falsity of Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism is a doctrine about the nature of morality. Cultural relativism follows from the 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 (1932) 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 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) (although this isn't his definition) 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 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.⁷

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). Values define a person's character and are the basis of one's actions. 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).

⁷ The sentence "The *correctness* of a moral **p** is *relative* to the judgments of a culture" is ambiguous. In one sense, the sentence seems to normatively *prescribe* (or describe) that the *correctness* of **p** is *whatever a culture decides*. This seems false. In a *descriptive sense*, it asserts that since there are no universally true normative ethical propositions, the *correctness* of **p** is *relative* to the non-objective judgments of individual persons and cultures. This seems true.

This is a good example for analyzing an ethical question. How do desires, values, beliefs, and intentions fit into this story? Where are the descriptions and prescriptions? Where are the facts? Let's follow the premises and outcomes in the informal 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 makes Jill's decision objectively wrong and no sound deductive argument proving Jill's action is wrong.

The Concept of Goodness

With some contemporary (secular) Western opinion that affirms that personal values are 'subjective' and 'relative,' it might be thought it is obvious that what is 'good' is subjective and relative, and that prescriptivism is just 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. Realists claim 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 'intrinsic 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, harmony and proportion in one's life, power and experiences of achievement, self-expression, freedom, good reputation, honor, and esteem.⁵

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. 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 is 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).⁸

⁵ The traditional question 'what *has* intrinsic value' contrasts with our present 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 'value' are indefensible postulations. They invite belief in the mistaken existence of objective goodness and value. That *S* possesses 'personal values' and has an 'intrinsic interest' in *x*, is a better characterization.

⁸ Similar intuitions are expressed by Spinoza (1677) once stating 'In no case do we strive for, wish, or long for anything because we deem it to be good, but on the contrary, we deem a thing to be good because we strive for, wish, desire, or long for it.' (*Ethics*, III, Prop IX). Harman (1996) asserts 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).

Are There Moral Properties?

Moral realists often talk about 'moral predicates' that refer to 'moral properties.' Most realists have an account of moral properties. What are 'moral properties' and how do they fit into the realist account? A standard description of moral realism is from Andrew Fisher (2014, p.5):

Moral realism: This is about what 'exists' (ontology). The moral realist argues that moral properties exist and are in some way independent from people's judgments. E.g., If moral realism is correct then we can say that the act of killing someone has the property of wrongness, and that it has it independently of whether people think it does.

This contrasts to **Non-realism:** There are no moral properties or facts.

Is a moral realist right? Are there mind-independent 'moral properties' that represent some mind-independent part of reality?

If **S** is honest, does **S** possess the property of honesty? If **S** is courageous, is the predicate 'courageous' to be identified with the property of courage? Or is it a better explanation of these moral judgments, that *persons* attribute (or predicate, evaluate) honesty and courage to persons that 'fall under' (or 'are exemplifiable') under these concepts? Intuitively, it seems to be a better explanation that persons attribute (or predicate) 'honesty' to **S** as asserting '*relations of similarity*' among items as dictated by our interests, evaluations, and shared concepts (as a group resemblance), rather than thinking of properties as objectively '*residing in*' particular entities. When persons attribute the terms 'honest,' 'courageous,' 'tall,' 'white,' or 'circular' to entities that are exemplifiable (or fall under) under these concepts; this predication doesn't really attribute abstract universal properties (honesty, courageousness, tallness whiteness, circularity) to certain particulars. Metaphysical platonic 'forms' do not instantiate on objects.

Talk of 'properties' is informative in some domains (e.g., physical science, mathematics) but it is cautioned that such talk is often *misleading* in other contexts (e.g., ethics, metaphysics, aesthetics, semantics).⁹ The existential positing of *moral properties* as an ontological and epistemic basis for *moral knowledge* should raise serious concerns.

⁹ Whether 'properties' exist (or not) is one of the oldest problems of metaphysics. This is called 'the problem of universals.' The basic questions are whether besides individual entities, are there other things that are properties of individuals, and if there are, where are they, and how do they relate to the individuals that have them. (See chapter 13 for discussion of 'universals' and 'properties.')

Summary: The Observational Evidence for Prescriptivism

Moral realists claim that morality is objective and is independent of us. Is this consistent with the observational evidence of actual moral phenomena? On the contrary, the description-prescription semantic distinction suggests a duality of meaning between assertions intended to be objectively true and assertions not intended to be objective. *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 individual 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 lingers. 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 oneself or others.

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 seek to best represent how *linguistic expressions* in natural languages can *possess meaning*. For Schroeder, 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 (e.g. words) that it is constructed from.

Schroeder's theory about sentence meaning claims that to understand the 'meaning' of a *sentence* is to understand the sentence's compositional structure and to know under what conditions the sentence would be true.¹⁰ The goal of a truth-conditional semantic theory is to

¹⁰ For example, for the sentence 'Colorado is rectangular' to be true; the *thing Colorado* (i.e., the physical entity) must be of a rectangular shape, where the proper name 'Colorado' is about the thing Colorado. We use this sentence to communicate that its truth conditions are satisfied.

represent (or interpret) reality and natural languages in an explicit logical form, similar to how formal mathematical languages map (and evaluate) the validity of deductive arguments.

The Principle of Compositionality

A fundamental part of Schroeder's formal semantics is the adoption of the 'principle of compositionality.' 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).¹¹ 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 is the principle of compositionality empirically true? Do ordinary language sentences (asserted in context) have *meaning* because of their formal syntax and semantics? Is the *understanding of the meaning* of a sentence a matter of 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 linguistic compositionality 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

¹¹ E.g., Michael Devitt (2015) shares this view: "languages are representational systems that are parts of the natural spatiotemporal world and are of theoretical interest because of their causal roles in that world, particular their roles in communicative behavior." Devitt says, "reference along with syntactic properties, are the central notions in an explanation of meanings: they are the core notions in a theory of language." The meaning of 'Jack thinks that Fred loves himself' is largely explained by its syntactic structure and the reference of its expressions (p. 32).

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, interpreting, 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 sentence *for a person* is determined by its content, the pragmatics of a situation, and the person's background beliefs. An alternative (and tentative) theory of 'conceptual compositionality' is proposed in chapter 10.

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 1

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

- 1) If doing a thing is bad, getting your little brother to do it is bad.
- 2) Tormenting the cat is bad.

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

Geach claims that the word 'bad' should mean exactly the same in all four occurrences in the above argument. With respect to its meaning, Geach says the use of 'bad':

... should not for example, shift from an evaluative to descriptive or conventional inverted commas use. But in the major premise the speaker (a father, let us suppose) is certainly not uttering acts of condemnation: one could hardly take him to be condemning just *doing a thing*.

Geach alleges that since in the antecedent of the first premise, 'doing a thing' has an undetermined value, that the father *isn't condemning* any particular thing. And if 'tormenting the cat' in the antecedent of the first 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. In critical response, contrary to Geach's intuitions, why can't it be taken that the father *is condemning* 'doing a thing' in the first premise, when what is said 'bad' is either implicitly morally understood or explicitly stated in the second premise? Geach's intuition that the first premise isn't an instance of condemnation, isn't persuasive.

Geach continues by criticizing R.M. Hare (1952, 1963). Geach says:

Mr. Hare does offer some sort of account of how acts of condemnation, although they are not propositions, can serve as premises. Hare argues forcibly that there is a logic of imperatives, although imperatives are not propositions; and he holds that condemnations like "tormenting the cat is bad" and "Do not torment the cat" are alike in being species of prescriptive or action-guiding language. But we need not go into details of this; for Hare has offered us no imperative-logic model that even looks likely to yield an account of such moral reasoning as occurs in my example; and the fourfold unequivocal occurrence of "bad" in that example is enough to refute the act-of-condemnation theory.

Again, in critical response to Geach's linguistic worldview, Hare's "act-of-condemnation theory" that argues that "tormenting the cat is bad" and "Do not torment the cat" are species of prescriptive or action-guiding language does indeed seem *plausible* and *true*. No semantic model of linguistic reference (and aboutness) for the term 'bad' is required.

Adjusting Geach's problem to prescriptivism, our response is that we should assume that both of the premises and the conclusion are prescriptions. The first premise has the form of 'if prescription, then prescription.' If the antecedent and the consequent of the conditional in the first premise, and the second premise all have the same prescriptive acceptance value (i.e., affirming the positive value of cats and their well-being) and prescriptive meaning, then the moral conclusion is prescriptive, and the argument is indeed valid (but not sound):

- 1) If (it is prescribed that) [doing a thing: tormenting the cat] is bad, then (it is prescribed that) getting your little brother to do it is bad.

2) (It is prescribed that) Tormenting the cat 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 second premise as a prescription would also assert that 'tormenting the cat' in the antecedent of the first premise as having the same prescriptive value as the second premise, as a matter of consistency. The speaker meaning of 'Tormenting the cat is wrong' remains constant. As long as the prescriptivist who advances this argument understands that there is no literal truth value to the premises 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/adoption 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.¹²

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.

¹² As an aside, in other contexts, such as at a public zoo, where food is provided, it could be the case that it is permissible (or *good*) to feed the wolves. Premise 1 cannot be evaluated out of context.

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.

The Contingency of (External) States of Affairs and (Internal) Values

Arguments using prescriptions are just as unequivocal and valid as the following *modus ponens* argument that employs descriptions (adding the implicit parenthesized clauses):

- 1) If (it happens to be the case) it is raining, then (it happens that) the streets are wet.
- 2) (It happens to be the case) It is raining.

Thus: 3) (It happens to be the case) The streets are wet.

In this non-moral argument, it is *contingent* whether the second premise (a description) is truly the case (i.e., that it is raining at a time and place). This is analogous to it being *contingent* in both premises of the moral argument about cats, as to whether it is prescribed (by anyone) that tormenting the cat is bad (i.e., whether a cat's life is valued). When the antecedent of the first premise above is assumed to be (contingently) true, then the conclusion has a 'true' truth value. The form of this argument guarantees a *valid* argument no matter whether it is raining or not. Similarly, in the cat argument, the argument is *valid* no matter whether persons value cats or not.

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.¹³ 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,

¹³ According to Ayer's (1936) *emotivism*, moral judgments express emotions, or sentiments of approval or disapproval; for Blackburn's (1984) *quasi-realism*, moral judgments express our dispositions to form sentiments of approval or disapproval, and for Gibbard's (1990) norm-expressivism, moral judgments express our acceptance of norms. See Miller (2013) for summary (p. 6). Also, Frege-Geach problem (pp. 37-39, 53-67, 89-102).

one is not just voicing one's own attitude, but one is seeking to influence the attitude of others. 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. In precise terms, the prescriptivist contends that moral assertions *function to express a stipulation (or rule) upon a practice*, where the correctness (or incorrectness) of the assertion is *dependent upon its acceptance (or non-acceptance)* by particular persons. 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 metaethical theory. The distinction between 'descriptive' and 'prescriptive' assertions helps provide a positive characterization of how morality and moral language works. 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.¹⁴ The theory that all normative ethical assertions are prescriptive fits the pre-theoretical outlooks of many people. 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.' With a moral argument it can be *assumed* that the value and the ethical premises have a truth value, and that the validity of the argument is determined by the rules of deductive logic. 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.

¹⁴ Moral cognitivists frequently criticize noncognitive theories because it is alleged that non-realist theories cannot explain the concept of a 'moral mistake.' Michael Smith (1994, p. 5) and Michael Huemer (2005, p. 41) claim that a moral 'mistake' cannot be made unless there is a moral proposition (or a moral fact) that is true or false that one might be mistaken about. This objection is without merit. A moral mistake can be clearly explained without positing moral truths. Persons can admit to making a 'moral mistake,' for example, when acting out of anger, greed, lust, selfishness, or as a breach of one's personal standards, or by possessing false non-moral belief(s); without believing that there exists an objective moral reality.