

Expressivism and Prescriptivism: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

The paper analyses how speech acts transform the meaning of moral statements from emotive to prescriptive and adheres to the rules of non-cognitivism. It analyses the theory of universal prescriptivism by R.M. Hare (1952) and his flirtations with the theory of speech act to support the thesis of prescriptivism. The paper analyses the notion of the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary in the context of the emotive and prescriptive meaning of morals. There exists an ignorance in admitting the relevance of the illocutionary act in determining the meaning of a moral value judgment. Hare points out this significance but it remains unattended as full-fledged discourse due to the specific aim of his project. This paper will analyse whether there is a scope to venture into a discourse on speech acts in metaethics and what will be the nature of such a discourse.

KEYWORDS-Expressivism, Non-cognitivism, Speech acts, illocutionary and illocutionary, universal prescriptivism and prescriptivism, metaethics and imperatives.

Introduction

The paper will analyse the similarity and dissimilarities between two non-cognitive theories of metaethics; expressivism and emotivism. It will conceptually make a discourse on how emotivists are different from expressivists despite being non-cognitivist, and what is the requirement of the differentiation between them. In this process, it will locate when and how this differentiation came into prominence within the philosophical domain. It will use the theory of universal prescriptivism by R.M. Hare to study the demarcation between emotivism and expressivism. The terms ethical and moral will be used interchangeably throughout the paper. These will be critically evaluated from a non-cognitivist metaethical perspective. The work seeks to broaden the understanding of the meaning (expressive) of ethical terms. It seeks to study emotivism and expressivism in conjunction and further assess the role of linguistic activity and speech acts within them. It limits itself to the study of the importance of human emotions and prescriptive language in understanding the meaning of moral and ethical terms. The process will highlight the importance of linguistic activity in determining ethical meaning.

It will unearth what the two versions of non-cognitivism have in common, the concept of linguistic activity or speech acts. This is an attempt to find a bridging gap among the expressivist theories of non-cognitivism. This reassessment is done to see whether it is possible to find something in common among them, apart from the objection against the cognitive theory, and later to see how metaethics can be benefited from this study. The non-cognitive theories have in common, the concept of linguistic activity. A moral statement can be interpreted as emotive, expressivist, or prescriptive, in all of the three ways to explain the course of morality, speech acts are prevalent. This paper aims to find out if something more can be extracted from this claim that can assist in future metaethical inquiries. To criticize the emotive theory, Hare makes use of Austin's theory of illocutionary acts, which explains the difference

between emotivism and prescriptivism. The theory of Speech acts is utilized like a tool, machinery that helped Hare in evaluating the differences between the logic of an emotive statement and a prescriptive statement. Hare's assessment ends at a place where he is convinced that the distinction between the expressive and the prescriptive is clear. Through this paper, the idea is to see if speech acts should be studied in depth in the light of ethical meaning to enrich the metaethical discourse. One that can be explained under the light of one unified theory unlike several branches of non-cognitivism. It is not a far-fetched idea and can be achieved within the present discourse. At least an understanding that it is possible to study emotivism, expressivism, and prescriptivism with the lens of speech acts for, they all are guided by an external factor that can present a causal explanation.

In this context, it will specifically look into how non-cognitivism in Hare's philosophy work. It will argue that the expressivist and prescriptive ideologies can be consistent with each other if and only if an explanation about the cause for the prescriptive is put forth. The moral language is made of descriptive and prescriptive. The prescriptive is explained in terms of the perlocutionary act. It will argue that the perlocutionary is causally connected with the prescriptive. It is one of the extended objectives of this research to emphasize that meaning of moral language should be viewed from the lens of speech acts and that there is a deep presence of externalism in determining the meaning of morals. Meaning according to speech act theorists is the activity that results from the utterance of a sentence. Similarly, moral meaning from the point of view of a speech act is the activity that results from the utterance of a moral judgment. What you do in making a judgment gives meaning to it. In this regard, it will give importance to the Austenian interpretation of performatives. Although Austin's remarks on ethical imperatives are quite scarce, they are crucial and sufficient to claim that ethical behavior and performatives are interlinked. After all speech act theory is a theory of meaning, and without hesitation, it can be deployed to understand the meaning of ethical terms. Quite interwoven into the thread of linguistic activity and presence of social environment, especially like the one which is often traced from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, speech act theory is all about giving importance to the social environment, linguistic activity, and intentions of the speech. Wittgenstein's mention is of crucial importance within the present discussion due to his pioneering attitude in seeing language as a form of life and meaning as linguistic activity. There is silence about Wittgenstein's work in Austin's project however, it is beyond doubt that both are aligned in their views about the fundamental nature of language.

This paper can be read from a perspective that it gives focus on the fundamental aspect of the meaning of ethical and moral terms, that is, the use of moral language. In Hare's philosophy, the most fundamental notion in ethical discourse is the logic of language of moral and ethical statements, the peculiarity of ethical language. The paper is divided into two sections, first section deals with the conceptual clarification of the theory of non-cognitivism; emotivism, expressivism, and prescriptivism. The second section progresses to understand the theory of prescriptivism and the roots of linguistic behaviour and analysis of speech acts.

Understanding Non-cognitivism

A non-cognitivist thinks that moral statements, values, and expressions are not a matter of fact, true or false, like the statement, 'it is windy today. Non-cognitivism is opposed to the idea of ethical realism, which says that there are moral facts like any other fact. The non-cognitive philosophers do not deny the existence of morality, they

are against the idea of making morality a real truth that can be either justified as true or false. It is not a descriptive domain where one can think that morality is a subjective notion, it differs from person to person and hence there cannot be a moral truth. The non-cognitive metaethical theory contains emotivism, expressivism, and prescriptivism despite some of the differences in how their proponents see it. Emotivism in Ayer and Stevenson is the classic form of metaethical non-cognitive theory, that faces a challenge from Hare's universal prescriptivism. We will see why universal prescriptivism is seen in opposition to emotivism and other forms of expressivism. We do understand that Hare on several occasions has pointed out the shortcomings in the emotive and expressive theories, to an extent that he uses his criticism to structure the theory of universal prescriptivism. The demeanor in which Hare criticizes emotivism has left scope for a substantial philosophical discourse to fit in, one that can explain the rationale for the similarities and dissimilarities among the versions of non-cognitivism. Hare uses Austin's description of the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts to explain the non-exhaustive nature of emotive meaning, which was presented by the emotivists to form a complete explanation of the meaning of moral judgments.

Moral imperatives when uttered, they function like the locutionary and illocutionary acts on the hand and like a perlocutionary acts on the other. A locutionary act in Austin's theory refers to the act of saying or uttering a word or a sentence in a specific composition, with a certain sound, meaning, and reference. The illocutionary act is the deployment of language to express something to do something. It is the act of performing a locutionary act in which the speaker's intention to do something utilizing their utterance is evident. It specifies how we will be using the locutionary act. The doing of a perlocutionary act is conceived by Austin as a speech act that results in the performance or bringing about what we intended in the performance of the locutionary and the illocutionary. 'I hate you for not bringing my stuff again', is a sentence that, on the locutionary and illocutionary level expresses the feelings. The speech situation here is understood and grasped by the hearer, a feeling of sadness, regret, and anger. Hare clarifies that locutionary and illocutionary acts, even to explain the nature of moral emotive statements, are expressed and understood correctly due to the sharing of the conventional paradigm. The expression 'I hate you for not bringing my stuff again' is a speech act that to an extent guarantees the nature of locutionary and illocutionary acts, but perlocutionary acts.

One cannot take for granted the execution of perlocutionary speech acts just because the meaning of the locutionary and the illocutionary is clear in the communication process. It is being said that moral imperatives are like speech acts, they are expressed meaningfully with an 'intention' to make an effect on the hearer, in intending and saying the speaker is acting to express their emotions. What they are not doing is the perlocutionary act. The consequence of the utterance is causally connected with the intention of the hearer to make things happen. The possession of certain intentions is of crucial importance since the speaker may have an intention to not tell a lie because of some beliefs in their mind. But the hearer may not possess those mental states resulting in the lack of an intention to refrain from telling lies. In other words, one person's belief will not be enough to cause something from happening or refrain, someone, to act unless they share the same motivation and belief. The latter part of the speech situation is guaranteed by prescriptive moral language in Hare's philosophy.

Making a moral judgment is logically different from the intention of acting morally, especially when the intention is to make others abide by the judgment. To

make someone act in a certain way only through performing the illocutionary act is like thinking, that my utterance is enough to motivate their belief. This, however, is not the same on the logical level, personal intentions are a result of personal beliefs and by far we don't know the source of the individuation of beliefs. The expression of a belief is a speech act different from the speech act of persuading someone to have similar beliefs. The difference between these is like the difference between two sorts of speech acts; describing and persuading or asserting and patronizing. And Hare argues that moral judgments are not intrinsically persuading, they are advisories and prescriptive. Hare's beliefs about the emotive and expressive elements within metaethics are differentiating points between the beliefs of Ayer (1946) and Stevenson (1944). According to Stevenson, moral judgment is an expression of a person's emotions that acts as a cause to make them behave in a certain manner. Expression of morality is an expression of disagreement or agreement in belief and attitude towards a moral judgment. This accounts for interpersonal relations as disagreement or agreement is targeted towards maintaining and building interpersonal relations. So, in asserting that, 'those who are cowards should not step out of their house' I am expressing my belief with the hope to establish an agreement in belief with the other person. Hare's argument, both making an assertion and making others follow it to have similar beliefs do not fall on the same side of the coin. The expression of a judgment is intended to generate agreement and acceptance in belief, but to execute a moral act based on it is a different ball game.

Speech Act in Non-Cognitivism

Hare's argument is valid, for, 'speaking' is a language-game different from the language game of 'speaking to persuade and make them act'. It is not equivalent to asking someone to pass a glass of water, moral actions require one to possess a belief that can persuade them to act. And this does not happen internally something else is at play when the task is to make someone think the way we want or to have beliefs like us. Emotivists reduced the moral meaning to statements of emotions which in a way undermined the difference between the illocutionary and the perlocutionary act. Hare poses two criticisms to support the idea of universal prescriptivism. The first criticism is that the use of moral language entails locutionary and illocutionary speech acts. This will not necessarily entail the performance of a perlocutionary act. So, one cannot reduce the meaning of moral terms to an expression of feelings and emotions whether it leads to the perlocutionary act or not. There requires a better explanation of the meaning of moral terms, one that can fit in all cases of metaethical inquiry. The second attack on expressivism and emotivism from Hare comes with an introduction to the idea of prescriptivism. According to him, moral language is both descriptive and prescriptive. Prescriptivity is related to the moral imperatives, to act upon an imperative makes it prescriptive. Whoever is committed to a moral judgment is committed to the same judgments wherever relevant facts obtain. Because it is the language of the moral statement that functions in a specific way. The social environment which is attached to the use of language makes it prescriptive.

The emotive meaning is not the primary meaning of a value statement. It is just a piece of information about the state of mind of the individual who makes the judgment. The meaning is prescriptive and it is a universalizable feature of moral language. In the example 'criminals are evil' there are descriptions and prescriptions. It expresses an emotion, 'boo on criminals' but most importantly to interpret it as a moral judgment it should be taken as a prescriptive imperative. Prescriptive language is also used to denote non-moral or ordinary expressions but when they are

employed to express moral judgments, they are universally prescriptive. The universalizability can be understood apart from what Hare describes, as the correct use of the logic of language. If you are asked about the moral values of a person, the only way you can give a proper answer is by analysing their actions. The analysis will involve a judgment, of whether they are behaving in the right manner or not. The application of moral judgment is understood by studying the linguistic activity that corresponds to the judgments one is about to make or has made. The element of prescriptivism is like a rule book, a set of instructions that should be followed to perform certain linguistic activities which are generally acceptable in those situations instructed by the use of prescriptions. It is a claim toward the correct social uses of language that can be described as moral uses of language. As a speech act, an utterance of value judgment can be successful in its scope only when it is successful in persuading action. But the other form of a performative utterance like the locutionary and illocutionary will still be performed, for, an utterance is also designed to express prescriptiveness. The difference is between having personal beliefs and interpersonal beliefs. If the motivation behind the illocutionary act comes from the personal moral beliefs, then the motivation behind the perlocution too comes from a personal belief. If the speaker and the performer that is being referred are the same then there may not be an issue on the part of having a belief. When the speaker and the performers are different people then it seems like a problem thus, Hare's analysis seems quite convincing.

To further understand Hare's criticism one can, study how beliefs are formulated and constituted. But such a study will require a discourse that is based on the analysis of the formation of mental content. This paper is limited in its scope to study the nature of emotivism, expressivism, and Hare's take on it. To delve into an analysis of the constitution of mental content requires another research journey. Considering this limitation, this paper sums up the above study in the following ways.

Conclusion

Prescriptive language in general is a set of instructions that should be followed in logically similar situations. Hare is an emotivist-expressivist in our view, for, he agrees with the claim that moral judgments are expressions of belief, emotions, and feelings. He also believes in the fact that there are no moral objective facts that can be transitioned into truth and falsity. Although he denied that emotive meaning is the primary meaning of a moral statement. This makes him a prescriptivist, but he cannot be considered only a prescriptivist. Unlike other emotivists, Hare considers emotive meaning as secondary but does not reject it. He uses the theory of speech acts to justify the existence and importance of emotive meaning. The emotive meaning is a speech act, the use of language to only state the prescription that is involved in making the utterance. So, it can be said that emotivism in ethics is a kind of speech act that can be studied to understand the use of a moral utterance. This paper worked through the non-cognitivist metaethical theory to highlight the role of studying speech acts, not in a superficial manner. But in a way that the concepts within speech act theory can be utilized to study the language of morals. The inspiration is Hare's project of universal prescriptivism and his use of the theory of speech acts to argue for prescriptive language.

The metaethical discourse has overlooked the concept of speech acts. Giving excess importance to the perlocutionary act is in a way undermining the importance of locution and illocution. It also ignores the fact that there are external factors at play since the illocutionary act of stating one's belief cannot result in shaping someone's

belief. If the role of the locution, illocution, and the perlocution is clear in the utterance of a moral judgment then the constitution of belief can be given its due importance. It is important to understand why and how a moral belief is injected into a person's mind, and what sensations they get before they act in a certain way. This analysis will require conceptualization of a different sort, which is not in the domain of the scope of this study. The credit goes to Hare's philosophy of universal prescriptivism, which points out that moral meaning is not only about expressing one's mental state, rather it is about being able to act. It was possible in this paper to realize that meaning of an utterance is hidden in the linguistic activity and it is out there in the external world for everyone to interpret. This also in a way helps people to identify similar situations that require similar reactions (prescriptivity). A lot of times it is seen that people know something, or they possess awareness about something without knowing the source of their information. Some of the information results from the impressions that are created in the minds of individuals, most of which are unconsciously carried by the neurons in our minds. Faced with a similar situation the mind automatically forms a judgment that is similar to the previous situation. The meaning is interwoven into the entire speech situation that is guided by the illocutionary force, within the conventional setup. In approving of someone's actions you may express your approval in a variety of ways, in each expression you are committed to one of the speech acts. It is worth pointing out what could be the source of the formation of prescriptions. To get to the core of this idea a further conceptualization of the theory of speech acts and its facets is important.

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