VALUES AND ACTIONS:
A CRITIQUE OF PRESCRIPTIVISM

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Abstract:

Providing an accurate account of the relation of moral values to actions is a major objective of moral philosophy. One reason for the attractiveness of prescriptivism is that it appears to do just this. The article is designed to determine whether prescriptivism does succeed in this respect. After extended argument, I conclude that the prescriptivist account of the relation of values to actions rules out the possibility that one's actions might be inconsistent with one's moral beliefs. This view leads in turn to the position that it is impossible on logical grounds for one to lie about one's moral beliefs, an implication which I argue is untenable. It follows that a central feature of the prescriptivist account of moral language is faulty.
Values and Actions: A critique of prescriptivism

One reason for the attractiveness of prescriptivism is its emphasis on the relation of evaluation to action. M.F. Cohen ("The Practicality of Moral Reasoning", Mind, 1969) points out that this emphasis arises from a view which itself has a long history that there is a more intimate connection between moral reasoning and action than exists between other sorts of reasoning and action. L.W. Sumner ("Value Judgements and Action", Mind, 1968, p. 383) argues that "it is this feature (namely that value judgements are practical, or action-guiding, or prescriptive) which is alleged to account for the fact, if it is a fact, that one cannot deduce a value judgement from a conjunction exclusively of statements of fact". Both philosophers then proceed to question the existence of a connection between value judgements and actions of the sort just described. C.C.W. Taylor, on the other hand, takes the strength of prescriptivism to be just its "emphasis on the close logical connection between evaluative judgements and actions" (Mind, 1964, p. 294).

What then is the prescriptivist view of what Taylor describes as "the close logical connection between evaluative judgements and actions". R.M. Hare, a prominent proponent of prescriptivism, suggests (The Language of Morals, p.1) that the connection between evaluation and action is best approached through a recognition of the fact, (if indeed it is a fact) that the purpose of moral evaluation (and presumably other kinds of evaluation as well) is to provide an answer to the question 'What shall I do?' as it arises in various contexts. Thus, the function of moral judgements is to guide or prescribe choices (LM. p. 29). Hare then attempts to encapsulate this view in the suggestion that value judgements entail imperatives (LM. p. 163, for example).

There have been numerous criticisms of the prescriptivist account (outlined in the preceding paragraph) of the relation between evaluation and action. However, in

1 Most future references to The Language of Morals will be abbreviated LM. Similarly references to Freedom and Reason will for the most part be abbreviated FR.
criticizing prescriptivism, they have failed to make explicit what is only implicit in the above description of prescriptivism, namely, the nature of "the logical connection" not between value judgements and imperatives (though that is of course important) but between value judgements and actions. As a consequence they have failed to bring into focus what in my view is the major difficulty with a prescriptivist view.

The purpose of what follows is first to make clear what Hare in both The Language of Morals and Freedom and Reason is committed to by way of an account of "the logical connection" between value judgements and actions. Second, it is to make clear why Hare's account is untenable. More specifically, I shall proceed as follows. In section I, I shall argue that Hare's account of value judgements and imperatives, as provided in The Language of Morals, commits him to the view that value judgements entail actions. In section II, I shall defend this view against a possible objection. I shall go on, in section III, to argue that commitment to the view that value judgements entail actions entails commitment to the view that it is logically impossible for a person's actions to be inconsistent with his values (or moral beliefs or principles). Further, I shall argue that this is the central difficulty with the prescriptivist account of the relation between value judgements and actions. In sections IV and V, I shall argue that Hare's account of akrasia and 'ought implies can' indicates that in Freedom and Reason Hare remains committed to the view that it is logically impossible for one's actions to be inconsistent with one's value judgements. In the remaining sections, by analysing Hare's account of akrasia and moral censure, and by introducing a discussion of lying about one's moral beliefs, I shall show that any account of moral language which includes the view that value judgements entail actions is untenable.

A final note before beginning the discussion. Since the purpose of this discussion is to work out some of the implications of Hare's prescriptivist account of the nature of moral language I shall accept in my discussion much of Hare's thought which seems to me either doubtful or positively mistaken.

I

The official prescriptivist view is that value judgements entail imperatives and enjoin actions. Thus, given the prescriptivist account of the matter, if a person assents to the value judgement 'I ought to do X', he is logically committed to assenting to the self-addressed command, in exactly the way in which assent to 'X is a triangle'
entails assent to 'X is three-sided'.

This, however, is not the end of the story. For, "it is a tautology", on Hare's view, "to say that we cannot sincerely assent to a second-person command addressed to ourselves and at the same time not perform it if now is the occasion for performing it and it is in our (physical and psychological) power to do so." (cf. R.M. Hare, Op.cit., p. 20). Thus, 'Do X now', (given that the command is a second-person command addressed to oneself) entails my doing X now, assuming of course that X is within my power. If the action does not follow, 'Do X now' is not (or is not intended as) a self-addressed imperative; or, to put it another way, if the action does not follow, this is knock-down evidence -- to use Hare's terminology -- that the speaker does not understand the meaning of 'Do X now'.

We can formalize the prescriptivist thesis in the following way:

Let C stand for any second-person self-addressed command of the form, 'Do A now',
Let A stand for the action called for by command-C,
Let T stand for the assumption that now is the time for performing A, and further that A is within the agent's power,

The argument then goes as follows:

Given T, command-C entails action-A. That is, imperatives entail actions.

Add to this account of imperatives the prescriptivist claim that value judgements entail self-addressed imperatives and it follows that prescriptivists are committed to the view that value judgements entail actions.

II

To this account of prescriptivism it might be objected that only propositions entail one another. To state that prescriptivism implies that value judgements entail actions is to ignore the normal use of 'entail'.

It is certainly true that Hare avoids committing himself explicitly to the view that either value judgements or imperatives entail actions. However, a number of comments in LM and FR suggest that Hare would not object to this way of speaking. Take, for example, the following passage:
The fact that the derivation of particular acts (or commands to do them) from principles is normally done non-verbally does not show that it is not a logically process, ..." (p. 63, LM)

Elsewhere, Hare points out (p. 54, FR) that in Aristotle's view, the conclusion of a practical syllogism is an action. This observation is not followed by an objection to Aristotle's view that value-judgements entail actions. On the other hand, Hare suggests that a logical thesis is necessarily restricted to how words and sentences are used.1

However, it is not my purpose to discuss the notion of entailment. Furthermore, such a discussion is easily avoided simply by rephrasing the view that value judgements entail actions to which I have argued Hare is committed. There are two possibilities. First, in the inference outlined in section I above, the word 'actions' can be replaced with action descriptions. Thus, the statement that someone thinks he ought to keep promises entails that, given T, that person will keep his promises. Alternatively, the judgement that I (think that I) ought to keep promises entails that, given T, I shall keep my promise. It follows that if (to use the second example) I do not keep a promise I made to someone given T, then my assertion that I ought to keep promises is not a value judgement.

The second restatement involves looking at both value judgements and the imperatives which they are held to entail as speech acts. The utterance of an evaluation is on this view regarded as a type of behaviour (i.e. verbal behaviour) which is analogous to physical behaviour, which is what the verbal behaviour calls for, assuming of course that it is an evaluative speech act. The prescriptivist thesis now reads as follows: for any evaluative speech act V, where V is a genuine value judgement, V entails a second-person self-addressed command-C which in turn entails an action A, assuming T.

To put the matter in a slightly different way, on this view of the prescriptivist thesis, the meaning of 'value judgement' (or 'evaluation') is such that it can be correctly used to describe a speech act only if that speech act involves or is followed by an imperative (i.e. a self-addressed command) and by the action called for by the

1FR, p. 33.
imperative, given T. This assertion would appear to be similar to the assertion that one cannot call a figure a triangle unless it is bounded by three sides, or the assertion that something is not a cause unless it is followed by something of which it is the cause. Given this view of the matter, there would appear to be no logical impropriety.

It might be argued that there is a third possibility in addition to the two mentioned above. Hare points out (p. 51, FR and elsewhere) that the function of a value-judgement is to provide an answer to the question, 'What shall I do?'. One sort of answer is simply to act (cf. FR, p. 54). According to Hare, (p. 55, FR) the verbal answer to this question is a self-addressed command.

What this verbal answer fails to do is to clarify the relation between committing oneself to a particular evaluation and acting on that evaluation. To clarify this, one must ask, 'What is the relation between addressing a command to oneself and performing that command?'. Hence, the "value judgements entail imperatives" thesis does not in itself clarify the central question namely what is the relation between evaluation and action. This should not be taken to imply that no attempt is made to deal with this issue in The Language of Morals. The treatment given there is in fact that described above. But it is also true that the formula "value judgements entail imperatives" does not encompass the prescriptivist answer to the question 'what is the relation between evaluation and action?'. Thus if we adopt the "value judgements entail imperatives" suggestion as a third alternative answer to the question 'what is the relation of evaluation to action?' the prescriptivist position on this question fails to become explicit.

Another indication that the thesis that value judgements entail self-addressed imperatives does not in itself clarify the relation between evaluations or value judgements and actions is given in the fact that the verbal answer to the question 'What shall I do?' namely, 'Let me do X', need not be uttered or thought by the agent who asks himself the question. However, while the self-addressed command is in this sense superfluous, the action is not. For as Hare puts it (p. 169, LM) it is analytically true that a person always does what he thinks he ought to (in the evaluative sense).

III

It is clear, then, that the prescriptivist thesis can be
restated in a way which avoids the immediate difficulties arising from any view which asserts the existence of a logically necessary relationship between propositions or judgements and actions. However, neither of these restatements alters the fact that the prescriptivist thesis entails that an utterance which appears to be a value judgement or an evaluative speech act, is in fact a value judgement or evaluative speech act only if the act called for by the utterance occurs, given T. And it is just this which is the central difficulty with the prescriptivist account of the relation between value judgements and actions. For on this account, it is logically impossible for one's actions to be inconsistent with one's values (or moral beliefs or principles).

I refer to this as the central difficulty with the prescriptivist account of the relation between values and actions because it rules out as logically impossible a frequently criticized feature of human conduct, namely the tendency of human beings not to act in accordance with their moral principles and ideals. However, before investigating this claim in detail, it is worth asking whether in *Freedom and Reason* Hare is also committed to the view that it is logically impossible for one's actions to be inconsistent with one's values. The answer emerges from an analysis of Hare's account of akrasia together with an analysis of what is implied by the slogan 'ought implies can'.

IV

The following would, I think, be acceptable as a paradigm of akrasia. Some person is committed to the view that to take private profit from a position of public trust is always wrong. However, in a moment of personal financial stress, he decides to take a "gift" of money in return for a favour, e.g., the awarding of a contract. In this situation then, the person involved has done something he knows he ought not to do. To put the matter another way, here is a situation where the individual concerned knows that he ought to reject the bribe but does not. To a prescriptivist, this can mean: (a) either the principle, 'Taking private gain from a position of public trust is always wrong', has no evaluative content for the person involved (i.e. that it is a principle widely endorsed but not accepted by the speaker himself); or assuming (a) to be false and assuming the example in question to be a typical example of moral weakness, (b) the principle, 'Taking private gain etc.', has evaluative content, but does not apply in the given situation on the grounds that the person in question is physically or psychologically
incapable of acting in the required manner, in which case
the behaviour exhibits akrasia.\(^1\) If (b) holds, the principle,
'Taking etc.', "no longer carries prescriptive force in
the particular case" and as a consequence, "the prescription... has to be withdrawn" (p. 80, FR). And if the person in
question was not prevented from doing that thing for physical or psychological reasons and still did not do it, then this
is "knock down evidence" that he does not (sincerely) assent
to the principle in an evaluative sense. It follows that
if a person thinks that he ought to do something but cannot
do that thing for physical or psychological reasons, then it
cannot be the case that he ought (in the prescriptive sense)
to do it. As a consequence, it is logically impossible for
a man's actions to be inconsistent with his principles, except
where ignorance is in play, as, for example, where a man does
not know that his acceptance of a particular principle
commits him to a particular action on some occasion. If the
man in our example accepts the bribe, this entails either
that he does not accept the principle 'to take private profit
etc.'; or alternatively, he accepts the principle but is
incapable of acting on it (for physical or psychological
reasons), with the consequence that the principle "fails to
apply ... because of the impossibility of acting on it"
(p. 53, FR). If the first is the case, the official's action
is not inconsistent with his principles, because the principle
prescribes for everyone but himself (cf. p. 53, FR). The
official's behaviour would be in conflict with his principles
(i.e. with his prescriptive judgement that it is wrong to
accept private gain, etc.) only if the judgement prescribed
for the situation in question and he acted contrary to the
prescription. But, as we have seen, the principle in question
does not prescribe for the situation in question because the
public official cannot act in accordance with the principle.
To put the whole matter in Hare's words slightly paraphrased
to fit with the example, "It is as if we said of the public
official, 'If he were able, it would be the case that he
ought (full force); but since he is not able, that lets him
out'" (cf. p. 53, FR).

\(^{V}\)

That Hare is implicitly committed to the view that
one's actions cannot be inconsistent with one's moral
judgements is also indicated by his (qualified) acceptance
of the slogan 'ought' implies 'can'. Normally, 'implies'

\(^{1}\)cf. LM, p. 82. There are other possible interpretations
offered but, as they are not directly relevant to Hare's
account of akrasia, and since what the argument is focusing
on is moral weakness as it is typically encountered, it is,
I think, acceptable to restrict attention to the two
possibilities mentioned.
would mean 'entails'. However, for reasons given (p. 53 ff., FR), this is not the sense conveyed by 'implies' in this instance. What is conveyed by the slogan is that if a person cannot (for physical or psychological reasons) do something, then the question, 'what ought I to do?' does not arise for that person. If the question does not arise, neither does the answer either in the form of a decision or of an imperative (cf. p. 55, FR). That being the case, the behaviour of the person for whom the question does not arise, could hardly be inconsistent with a principle which implied a decision or imperative for which there was no place.

It might be argued that the above account is in direct contradiction with Hare's assertion (p. 80, FR) that in cases of moral weakness the question 'What shall I do?' does arise for the person in question. However, close examination of the text reveals the fact that the sense in which the question arises is quite different from that which normally is the case. The purpose of the question in such instances is not to provide guidance in the particular case but to "reassert the general prescriptive principle" (p. 80, FR). Once again we have an implicit recognition that one's actions cannot be inconsistent with one's principles. For, if the function of the answer to the question 'What shall I do?' is not to provide guidance for the action in question on the grounds that the action is already psychologically determined, then the action cannot be in conflict with the guidance given, in as much as the guidance being given is for the future not the present.

It should be evident by now that the view attributed to prescriptivists in sections I, II, and III above is also implied by the account given of akrasia and 'ought implies can' in Freedom and Reason.

VI

I take, then, as established that Hare is committed to the view that it is logically impossible for one's actions to be inconsistent with one's values. I have already indicated (see section III above) in a general way the difficulty with adopting such a view. I wish now to offer two reasons for regarding this view to be untenable.

First, if it is logically impossible for one's actions to be inconsistent with one's moral beliefs, it follows that it is logically impossible for one not to do what one believes one ought to do. For this reason, the prescriptivist
account of akrasia must be contrived, and in the last analysis self-defeating.

Second, the prescriptivist view of the connection between value judgements and actions eliminates on logical grounds the possibility that what a person says is right or wrong might be inconsistent with what he genuinely thinks or believes to be right or wrong. This means that to accept the prescriptivist position is to accept by implication the view that it is logically impossible for a person to lie about what he judges to be right or wrong.

In what follows, I shall develop both of these points.

VII

I have suggested that the prescriptivist view of the relation between value judgements and actions is untenable because it renders any account of akrasia self-defeating. The argument of section V has already gone some distance toward establishing this point in as much as it has demonstrated, given the prescriptivist account:

(a) that a person could never say as he proceeded to act that what he was doing or was about to do was in his judgement morally wrong (in the evaluative sense);

(b) neither could a person say, on pain of logical incoherence, that he had done something on some past occasion which he knew and accepted at the time of acting to be wrong (in the evaluative sense);

(c) that back-sliding is not possible on the ground that if a person fails to act in accordance with a principle which he accepted as a moral principle, it follows that the principle does not apply to him, in that situation.

All of this in turn raises the question, namely, is it rational, given the prescriptivist account as described, to censure a person for back-sliding. To censure a person for not doing what he ought to have done, surely implies that he ought to have done that thing and therefore he was capable of doing that thing. But if the person knew that he ought (in the evaluative sense) to do that thing but did not and was not physically prevented from doing that thing, it follows, on the prescriptivist view, that
he could not, for psychological reasons, do that thing. That being the case, the prescription is withdrawn. It can no longer be said rationally that he ought to have done that thing. From which it follows that moral censure for doing what he did is inappropriate.

It follows that moral censure of back-sliding which is not uncommon is irrational and should be recognized as such. But is this conclusion an acceptable conclusion regarding moral censure of back-sliding? I think not.

Hare seems implicitly to accept this criticism of his position in as much as he feels that, given his account of back-sliding, a justification of moral censure of back-sliding is required. His justification takes the form of arguing that the moral censure of back-sliding is designed to prevent yielding to temptation in the future. It is because the condemnation might influence future conduct that it is justified. (cf. p. 80, FR). But this as a sole or partial justification of moral censure of back-sliding is itself immoral. For, on this description, a person is not blaming the public official for doing something which he ought not to do simply because the public official has not in fact done something which he ought not to do. No moral rule has been broken. Now, to blame a man for acting immorally when in fact he has not acted immorally is a paradigm case of injustice. The fact that moral censure may influence his behaviour in the future is beside the point. To take an example, if a parent were to blame his child, who he knows had been pushed into the river by his brother, for swimming without permission, we would say the parent was being unfair or unjust. And if the parent said that the purpose of the moral censure was to prevent the child from swimming in the river without permission in the future, we would still say the censure was unfair. Because the child could not help what he did, he is not to blame for the event or its consequence. Of course, this not quite correct. If the parent argues that the child should not have been playing that sort of game with his brother by the water because he should have known that he was likely to get pushed in the river, then the blame may be justified. But in this case the child is not being blamed for swimming in the river. He is being blamed for playing beside the river, i.e., for not foreseeing what the consequences of his action might be.

It might be objected that this example is not fair? Is it not the case that what is needed is an example exhibiting psychological rather than physical inability? However, the objection fails to take hold. The account given of moral
censure in situations of psychological inability is identical in the relevant respects to that just given in the above example (cf. p. 80, PR).^1

The point, then, of this extended objection is that a prescriptivist account of back-sliding is not correct. And if it were, then it would follow that when we say of a back-slider that he was wrong for acting the way he did, then either we are being unjust, or we are being irrational.

VIII

The second reason for thinking the prescriptivist view of the relation between value judgements and actions to be untenable is that prescriptivism implies that it is impossible to tell a lie about what one conceives to be morally right or wrong. That this is implied can be demonstrated using an example. Assume that A is attempting to decide whether B can be trusted to repay a loan in ten days' time. B has said that he will repay the loan in ten days' time. But A wonders what kind of commitment this constitutes. B, in order to reassure A, says "I can assure you that in my judgement one ought to repay what one owes." However, in saying this, B intends to tell a lie. In fact, he does not believe that people are under a moral obligation to repay their debts.

In this example, the sentence, 'one ought to pay what one owes' can be used to tell a lie only if it can be used evaluatively but insincerely. The matter appears easy enough, but given prescriptivism, the appearance is deceiving. According to Hare, the test that someone is using the judgement (here I paraphrase) 'one ought to pay what one owes' as a value judgement or not is, 'does he or does he not recognize that if he assents to the judgement, he must also assent to the command (here again I paraphrase), given T, 'Let me pay this debt'. Further, assenting (sincerely) to the command involves performing it, given T, such that "it becomes analytic to say everyone always does what he thinks he ought to (in the evaluative sense) (p. 168-9, LM). It follows that if B in our example uses the judgement 'one ought to pay what one owes' as a value judgement, he must perform the imperative entailed by the value judgement, given T. If he does not perform the imperative, given T, it follows that he is not using the judgement as a value judgement. However, B can tell A a lie only if B can use the judgement

^1For an elaboration of this point see C.C.W. Taylor's review of Freedom and Reason in Mind, 1965 p. 283.
'one ought etc.' as a value judgement yet not perform
the imperative entailed by the judgement if it is a value
judgement. But this B cannot do given the prescriptivist
test of what does and what does not constitute a value
judgement. If B does not act on the imperative entailed
by 'one ought to repay ...', then 'one ought to repay ...'
is not being used as a value judgement. Consequently, the
sentence 'one ought etc.' cannot be used to tell a lie.

IX

There would appear to be two major objections to this
attack on prescriptivism. The first objection points to a
distinction between sincere and insincere assent and argues
that to lie about one's moral beliefs is to assent insin­
cerely but assent nevertheless to a value judgement. The
second objection points to the fact that to lie in this
context is to say that one has a particular moral belief
when one does not. To lie in this context is as a conse­
quence simply to deliberately misinform someone about what
is in essence a matter of fact, namely that one does or
does not believe something.

I shall attempt to deal with each of these objections
in turn.

X

It is true that Hare does use the expression, 'sincere
assent' in his account of what one is committed to if one
sincerely assents to a command addressed to oneself by one­
self (cf. p. 20, LM). It is also true that it is only in
connection with self-addressed commands that the expression
'sincere assent' is used. When discussion in The Language
of Morals focuses on the notion of assenting to a value
judgement, no distinction is made (cf. for example p. 168-9,
LM, also p. 79, FR). In fact, the term 'assent' and the
expression 'sincere assent' appear to be used inter­
changeably in both places. Nevertheless, it is possible
to make a distinction between 'assent' and 'sincere assent'
though to do so is almost certainly to mislead and confuse,
for the following reasons. Using 'assent' as it is normally
used, it is mistaken to speak of insincere assent. Insin­
cerity has to do generally with saying something which one
does not really mean. This is to be contrasted with pretence
where one tries to appear to be doing or saying something
which one is in fact no doing or saying. Any example which
could possibly be used to illustrate insincere assent
would turn out to be an example of someone saying 'yes, I
agree' or 'that is what I think also' but not meaning what
he says. There are two ways of describing this. One can
say that the person in question was insincere in what he said. Or, one can say that the person in question pretended to agree or assent but did not. My point is that assenting is not something that one can do insincerely unless one means by 'assent' saying that one assents.

This point is reinforced by the fact that the verb 'to assent' is regularly, if not normally, used in indirect speech. When it is so used, its function is not to describe what someone said. Rather, its function is to describe what someone believes or has committed himself to. As such, the use of the term 'assent' in indirect speech implies that the speaker believes that the person being spoken about holds the position described. If, on the other hand, the use of 'assent' in indirect speech functioned simply as device for conveying what the person being spoken about said, then it would not imply that the speaker believes that the person in question does hold the position in question. For example, if A says, "B assented to what was proposed", A implies that B has in fact committed himself to what was proposed. If on the other hand A simply reports, using direct speech, what B said, A in no way implies that he (A) believes that what was said was said sincerely.

Be this as it may, as I have conceded, the distinction can be made. Is it being made consistently by Hare in The Language of Morals or Freedom and Reason? If the distinction is not made consistently, it is highly likely that the unmodified use of 'assent' means what 'sincere assent' means when the distinction is being made. If, on the other hand, the distinction is being made throughout, then 'assent' is ambiguous between 'sincere assent' and 'insincere assent'. The point here is that if a person wishes consistently to differentiate between sincere assent and insincere assent and then uses the term 'assent' unmodified, the implication is that in that context there is no need to distinguish. This being the case, it follows that it does not matter whether the assent being discussed is sincere or insincere.

Using the foregoing, and assuming that Hare does wish to differentiate consistently between insincere and sincere assent, we can now rewrite the test for deciding whether a judgement is being used as a value judgement in the following way: 'Does he or does he not recognize that if he (sincerely or insincerely) assents to the judgement, he must also (sincerely or insincerely) assent to the command "Let me do X" (cf. p. 168, LM). Could this be what is intended by the passage in question? If so, it is seriously ambiguous and on some of the possible variations of meaning obviously absurd. Here are the possible variations:
i) '... if he sincerely assents to the judgment, he must sincerely assent to the command, "Let me do X".

ii) '... if he sincerely assents to the judgment, he must also insincerely assent to the command, "Let me do X".

iii) '... if he insincerely assents to the judgment, he must also sincerely assent to the command, "Let me do X".

iv) '... if he insincerely assents to the judgment, he must also insincerely assent to the command, "Let me do X".

i) is, of course, at least one of the variations actually intended. In fact, it is the only interpretation of the test which is acceptable as I shall show.

ii) is absurd on Hare's own grounds in that it eliminates any connection between value judgements and actions. For, by implication, insincere assent to a command addressed by oneself to oneself (is such a thing possible?) does not involve doing anything (cf. p. 20, LM). If on the other hand it does involve doing something there is no distinction between sincere and insincere assent.

iii) is absurd on the grounds that it eliminates the distinction being examined.

iv) leads to the following absurdity. The test, whether someone is using the judgement, 'I ought to do' as a value judgement or not is, 'Does he or does he not recognize that if he assents to giving insincere assent to the judgement, he must also assent to giving insincere assent to the command "Let me do X"?' We are now in an infinite regress.

Independent of this point is the additional fact that a central if not the central characteristic of saying something insincerely is that one is simply not committed (or does not regard oneself as committed) to any of the things that utterances of that sort normally commit one to. Included within this is that insincere utterances do not commit one to other insincere utterances. It is of course true that if one wishes to carry on a deception one must be prepared to say all the things that a person would be committed to if he were being sincere. But this is a pragmatic consideration, not a logical one.
If (iv) is eliminated, it follows that insincere assent to a "value judgement" need not logically be followed by assent of any kind to a command of any form. It follows from this that an "insincere value judgement" is not a value judgement at all, given the prescriptivist test (cf. 168, LM). Thus, prescriptivists are logically committed to the position that one cannot say insincerely 'One ought to keep one's promises', where the ought in question is an evaluative one. Consequently, one cannot tell a lie.

It should be noted here in parenthesis that for reasons which will be discussed later this argument does not rule out the possibility that a person might deceive others about the meanings of the words he is using and thus indirectly deceive people about his moral beliefs. But more of this later.

XI

The force of the second objection (see section IX above) lies in redescribing the situation under discussion. When B says, "one ought to pay back what one owes" with the intention to deceive A, what he intends to deceive A about is the fact that he does not possess a moral belief to the effect that one ought to pay back what one owes. If we redescribe the situation in this way, we see that lieing about one's moral beliefs does not involve insincere assent to something. Rather, it involves deliberately misinforming A about a matter of fact, a deception which is carried out simply by B saying that he believes something when he does not.

This objection is easily dealt with. To begin with, from the point of view of the person uttering the sentence there is no difference between 'X is wrong' and 'I believe that X is wrong'. If a person says sincerely that X is wrong, it follows that he believes that X is wrong; what does not follow, of course is that X is wrong. The only qualification necessary here is that normally, if a person says 'I believe something to be the case' the assertion thus made is taken to be weaker than the simple assertion that something is the case. But this does not detract from the point being made here that if someone asserts something sincerely, it follows that he believes what it is that he is asserting. Thus one simply cannot avoid the difficulties which my arguments point to in connection with lieing by sliding from simple assertions of moral belief to assertions that one has a particular moral belief, e.g. from 'One ought to pay what one owes' to 'I, B, believe that one ought to repay what one owes'.

87
This point can be reinforced by approaching the matter from a different direction. When B says 'I believe one ought to pay what one owes', he is indeed providing us with information. But what is this information? What is it that B believes? It is here again that prescriptivism gets into difficulty. For what B believes may be that 'one ought to pay what one owes' or so my parents or society tell me; or B may believe 'one ought to pay what one owes' and that is a universal prescription to which I am committed. Which of these two beliefs are we to attribute to B. There is no way of telling without applying the prescriptivist test. But this takes us right back to the original objection, namely, if we must apply the text, and according to prescriptivism this is the only way to discover that a judgement is a value judgement, then one cannot tell a lie about his moral beliefs.

No doubt at this point and in exasperation the prescriptivist will argue; "Do you not see that all that is required is that B say 'one ought (prescriptively) to pay back what one owes'. B thereby indicates that he intends the 'ought' to be taken prescriptively. Using this mechanism, he can tell a lie."

But this won't do. B is not telling a lie about his moral beliefs if he says this. For the 'ought' in questions is not a prescriptive 'ought' unless it passes the test. (cf. p. 168, LM). If the 'ought' does not pass the test and B says that it does, then what B is lying about is the meaning of 'ought'.

Now we can see where, on the prescriptivist account of moral language, deception can occur. B can try to deceive A about what his assertion 'one ought to pay what one owes' means, by saying that the judgement is a value judgement (as defined cf. p. 168, LM) when it is not. And if B succeeds in this deception, A will be deceived about what B believes. But B had not deceived A about what he believes; B has deceived A about the meaning of a word, or the nature of an utterance. So prescriptivism does not miss the mark entirely. But it does hit the mark wrongly. For is it not the case that a person can lie directly about what moral beliefs he has, as well as being able to lie on occasion about what the words he is using mean? If one can do both, prescriptivism offers a false account of moral language.

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