

Hare's Ethical Theory & Its Implication

Masayasu Yoshizawa

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§ 1 Hume's Two Arguments Concerning Morals

In Book III, Part I of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume develops two arguments: ① moral distinctions are derived from a moral sense; ② we cannot derive any proposition involving 'ought' from propositions involving only 'is.'

(1) Moral Distinctions Are Derived From a Moral Sense

Hume says that moral distinctions cannot be derived from *reason*.⁽¹⁾ Moral distinctions, according to Hume, are drawn as to whether a person's action, sentiment, or character is virtuous or vicious.

If such distinctions cannot be derived from reason, where are they derived from? Hume says, "Moral distinctions are derived from *a moral sense*."⁽²⁾

(1) Hume, D.: *A Treatise of Human Nature*—*Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*, 1739-1740, in: *David Hume — The Philosophical Works*, ed. by T. H. Green and T. H. Grose, 4 Vols, London 1874-1875, Scientia Verlag, Aalen 1964, Vol. II, p. 235.

(2) Hume, D., *ibid.*, pp. 246-247.

If a person's action, sentiment, or character gives us an *agreeable* impression, we feel that his/her action, sentiment, or character is virtuous. If his action, sentiment, or character gives us an *uneasy* impression, we feel that his action, sentiment, or character is vicious. According to Hume, an agreeable or uneasy impression is the criterion of morality.

(2) 'Is' and 'Ought'

Let's turn to the second argument. Hume says that we cannot derive any proposition involving 'ought' from propositions involving 'is.'

"In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark'd, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpris'd to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it shou'd be observ'd and explain'd; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it."⁽⁴⁾

(3) A Fault of Hume's Ethical Theory

If we accept Hume's first argument (that is to say, moral distinctions are

(3) From this point "his" will be substituted for "his/her" and is assumed to be non-gender specific.

(4) Hume, D., *ibid.*, pp. 245-246.

derived from a moral sense), a difficult problem arises. When person A feels person C's action to be agreeable, but person B feels person C's action to be uneasy, is person C's action virtuous or vicious? An ethical theory depending exclusively upon a moral sense or other subjective elements must face the difficult problem of relativism.

In 'Utilitarianism & Welfare Economics,'⁽⁵⁾ I stated the following:

1. One of the characteristics of modern philosophy has been the inclination toward *subjectivity*, and this inclination has entailed *relativism*. [Hume is one of the most important philosophers who have this inclination.]
2. Analytic philosophers in the 20th century have analyzed 'the subjectivity of value judgement,' and their analysis reached its peak with R. M. Hare's *The Language of Morals* (1952).
3. Hare uses the word 'prescriptivity' to describe the subjectivity of value judgement.
4. But a turn in thinking had already begun at that point. Hare's later works can be interpreted as attempts to salvage the cognition of *the subjectivity of value judgement* from the morass of *relativism*.

In § 2~ § 4 I will investigate the effectiveness of Hare's ethical theory when dealing with relativism in the realm of value. In § 5 the relation between 'is' and 'ought' will be discussed.

§ 2 Universal Prescription

I think that the key concepts of Hare's ethical theory are 'universal

(5) Yoshizawa, M.: Utilitarianism & Welfare Economics, in: 『広島経済大学経済研究論集』 Vol. 14, No. 4, March, 1992, p. 43.

prescription' and 'critical moral thinking.' We begin with the first.

(1) *Red and Good*

One of the most important conclusions in *The Language of Morals* is that all value words have *descriptive* and *evaluative* functions.⁽⁶⁾ Let's examine the following three sentences.

1. This is a *red* car.
2. This is a *good* car.
3. He is a morally *good* man.

The word 'red' in the first sentence describes a characteristic concerning the color of the car. What about, then, the word 'good' in the second sentence? A man, who says, "This is a good car," must have criteria of goodness for a car: for example, a car which consumes too much gasoline is not a good car; a car which often has mechanical troubles is not a good car, etc. All cars which meet his criteria are good cars. In other words, it is impossible that one car which meets his criteria is a good car, while another car which, too, meets his criteria is not a good car.

What are the criteria of moral goodness? : for example, a man who often breaks his promises is not a good man; a man who is not kind to others is not a good man, etc. The word 'good', too, describes certain characteristics of the man in question.

Value words, however, have not only the function of *description*, but also the function of *evaluation*. We can understand this by comparing the word 'red' in the first sentence with the word 'good' in the second and third

(6) Hare R. M.: *The Language of Morals*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1952, Chap. 7 / *Freedom and Reason*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1963, Chap. 2.

sentences. A man who says, "This is a red car," tells only the color of the car. On the other hand, when a man says, "This is a good car," he not only tells that the car in question does not consume too much gasoline, and that the car seldom has mechanical troubles, etc., he recommends this car, too. Since value words have the function of evaluation, 'evaluating something to be good' implies 'an attitude to recommend it.' Similarly, a man, who says, "He is a morally good man," not only tells that he has never broken his promises, and that he has always been kind to others, etc., but also praises him.

Thus, moral words have both the function of description and evaluation. Because of the *descriptive* power of moral words, moral principles or moral judgements expressed by them can be universally applied to all things which fulfill the criteria in question. On the other hand, because of the *evaluative* power of moral words, moral principles or moral judgements have power to 'recommend' or 'prescribe.' Therefore, *universal prescription* does exist. In other words, what cannot be universally prescribed cannot be called a moral principle or moral judgement.

(2) Debt and Imprisonment

Let's consider the following example:⁽⁷⁾

1. Person A owes money to person B.
2. Person B owes money to person C.
3. It is the law that creditors may exact their debt by putting their debtors into prison.

Can person B make the judgement "I ought to put person A into prison" ?

(7) Hare, R.M.: *Freedom and Reason*, pp. 90-91.

Of course, he can. But, if he makes this judgement, and if, moreover, he remains a moral man, there will be a curious outcome. If he makes the judgement “I ought to put person A into prison,” because of the *descriptive* power of the word ‘ought,’ he must agree to the judgement “Person C ought to put me into prison,” because the relation between person A and person B is equal to the relation between person B and person C.

Moreover, if he agrees to the judgement “Person C ought to put me into prison,” because of the *evaluative* power of the word ‘ought,’ he must even prescribe person C to put him into prison.

After undergoing the above reasoning, person B will usually abandon the judgement “I ought to put person A into prison.”

§ 3 Critical Moral Thinking

(1) Conflict of Moral Principles

According to Hare, the extent of moral problems, which can be solved by excluding principles, or judgements which cannot be universally prescribed, is not large. On the contrary, most difficult problems of morals arise from the conflicts of moral principles which can be universally prescribed, or the conflicts of moral duties which are derived from universal prescriptions (or, moral principles).

‘Keep your promises,’ ‘Be kind to your friends,’ or ‘Help a drowning person,’ —all these principles can be universally prescribed. But these universal prescriptions can conflict with each other.

For example:⁽⁸⁾

1. I promised my children to take them for a picnic next Sunday.

(8) Hare, R. M.: *Moral Thinking—Its Levels, Method and Point*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1981, pp. 26-27.

- 2 . On Sunday, my friend, who has been abroad for many years, comes to my house and wants to be shown round my workplace.

In this case I must make a choice between *breaking my promise* and *not being kind to my friend*.

A much more serious example⁽⁹⁾:

- 1 . A sailor falls overboard from a naval destroyer while pursuing an enemy submarine.
- 2 . If the commander of the destroyer does not drop depth-charges, the submarine will escape to sink more ships and kill more people.
- 3 . But if he drops them, he will kill the sailor in the water.

Which action should he choose, 'to drop depth-charges' or 'not to drop them' ?

(2) Two Levels of Moral Thinking

To cope with difficult problems resulting from the conflicts of moral duties, Hare presents a theory which divides moral thinking into two levels.⁽¹⁰⁾ To solve moral problems by means of this theory is the main subject of his *Moral Thinking*. He divides moral thinking into the intuitive and the critical. If moral duties conflict, and if man remains at the intuitive level of moral thinking, this conflict of moral duties cannot be solved. But, if man enters the critical level of moral thinking, the conflict of moral duties may be solved. What, then, is done by this critical moral thinking? Before investigating the role of critical moral thinking, I must explain the concept

(9) Hare, R. M., *ibid.*, p. 29.

(10) Hare, R. M., *ibid.*, pp. 25-28.

of *prima facie principle*. Moral principles accepted by people at the intuitive level are *prima facie* principles which are temporarily right. But if two *prima facie* duties derived from two *prima facie* principles conflict, one of them must be abandoned.

Thus, critical moral thinking performs two roles as follow:⁽¹¹⁾

- 1 . It selects the best set of *prima facie* principles for use in intuitive thinking.
- 2 . It solves the conflict of *prima facie* principles.

(3) An Example of Critical Moral Thinking

Probably every doctor will agree with the two following principles: ① man must not give others pain; ② a doctor must do his best to keep the patient alive. These two principles can conflict. Imagine a doctor facing a state in which:⁽¹²⁾

- 1 . the patient will die at once if not put under intensive care;
- 2 . if the patient is put under intensive care, he will suffer a great deal and die in any case within a month or so;
- 3 . the doctor has a very strong moral aversion to omitting any step which could prolong life.

This doctor is forced to make a moral decision, because the two moral principles 'man must not give others pain' and 'a doctor must do his best to keep the patient alive' conflict. If the doctor enters critical moral thinking, his reasoning will be likely to undergo the following process: ① he asks

(11) Hare, R. M., *ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

(12) Hare, R. M., *ibid.*, pp. 177-182.

himself how he would feel if he were the patient; ② he then compares *the amount of pain which he would then suffer and the amount of pain which would result from omitting some steps necessary to prolong life*; ③ if he thinks that *the former exceeds the latter*, he will modify the principle 'a dotcor must do his best to keep the patient alive, and, therefore, must not omit any step which could prolong life,' into the principle 'a doctor must do his best to keep the patient alive, and, therefore, must not omit any step which could prolong life, *except in the case in question.*'

Thus, through modification of the principle, the problem of conflicting duties could be solved.

§ 4 An Implication of Hare's Ethical Theory

Moral judgement derives from a moral sense or some other feeling, both of which are subjective. But it is not a sheer expression of desire. It is a *universal prescription*; that is to say, man who issues a universal prescription is also regulated by it [§ 2]. In the meantime, a universal prescription accepted by a man can conflict with another universal prescription accepted by the same man, and then it is necessary to modify one of them by critical moral thinking [§ 3].

A more serious difficulty arises when *a universal prescription accepted by a man* conflicts with *another universal prescription accepted by another man*. I think Hare's ethical theory implies the following:

Both person A's universal prescription which is acquired by 'perfect' critical moral thinking and *person B's universal prescription* which, too, is acquired by 'perfect' critical moral thinking *are morally legitimate*, even when their universal prescriptions conflict.

If, even when people did 'perfect' critical moral thinking, there would be conflicts of universal prescriptions, we could not get out of the morass of relativism. But I think we need not conclude so, at least not now. Because we human beings are a long distance from 'perfect' critical moral thinking. Namely, we cannot decide, at least not now, which of the following propositions is true; 'even when people did "perfect" critical moral thinking, there would be conflicts of universal prescriptions' or 'when people did "perfect" critical moral thinking, their most fundamental universal prescriptions would converge.'

Before leaving this question, I wish to state that: hoping that *when people do 'perfect' critical moral thinking, their most fundamental universal prescriptions will converge*, I will continue to preach the indispensability of *critical moral thinking*.

§ 5 The Relation Between 'Is' and 'Ought'

I think it is impossible to refute Hume's argument that propositions involving 'ought' are on an entirely different plane from propositions involving only 'is' [§ 1(2)]. But we must not forget the fact that a universal prescription involving 'ought' is issued by a human being, and that he is usually affected by knowledge derived from propositions involving only 'is'. In this sense, 'is' affects 'ought' indirectly. Or, more strictly speaking, propositions not involving 'ought' affects a human being's critical moral thinking indirectly.

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In 'Utilitarianism & Welfare Economics [§ 11(2)]' I presented three conclusions concerning income distribution.

- 1 . We ought to let market mechanism determine people's incomes.
- 2 . We ought to help people whose income is insufficient to provide a decent living. In other words, we ought to establish and maintain an institution of social security which includes health insurance, unemployment insurance, a pension scheme, public assistance and so on.
- 3 . Although we may adopt a progressive income tax and a progressive inheritance tax, we must be careful not to let the degree of progressiveness go too far.

It is my hope that if we succeed in getting the few who, at first, disagree with my conclusions, to do critical moral thinking, they, too, will come to agree with them in the end.

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