



Norm and Action: A Logical Enquiry.

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The Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 15, No. 59, Moral Philosophy Number (Apr., 1965),
172-175.

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in argument, lack of bias in belief, absence of dogmatism and so on. The chief enemies of equanimity are said to be anger and fear, and the main cure suggested for them is rational understanding. Now this may be the most desirable way of reacting to them if they are aroused by things done to ourselves, but what about injustice and cruelty to others? Is a rational understanding of their causes an adequate reaction to them? And is justice the whole duty of the good man? Justice is what others have a right to expect from us. The good man demands of himself that he be not only just but generous, forgiving, helping others without counting the cost or looking for any return. However appropriate the ideal which Blanshard describes may be for the member of a community of reasonable men of cultivated intelligence living rational lives, it seems inadequate as an account of the whole duty of the good man in the actual imperfect world in which life has to be lived. It would seem to make intellectual demands which may be beyond the capacity of many a good man and yet to fall short of heights to which in his daily life the ordinary man is capable of rising. For he can be generous as well as just, great as well as good, a moral hero even if he is no advanced thinker or scholar. But no man can say everything at once and Blanshard has in other parts of this work provided the necessary corrective to the one-sidedness which I seem to detect in the ideal presented in his final chapter.

A. MACBREATH

Norm and Action: A logical enquiry. By GEORG HENRIK VON WRIGHT.
(London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1963. Pp. xviii + 214. Price 32s).

There comes a stage in any sort of conceptual enquiry at which the attempt to construct formalized models can shed light on the logic of the expressions of our ordinary discourse. In the case of quantification theory, for example, this stage was reached as early as Aristotle. It may be asked whether the time has now come when normative concepts, imperatives, and the like can be profitably investigated in this formal way. The answer depends on whether the informal exploration of these concepts has proceeded far enough to give us a tolerably clear idea of what we are trying to formalize. Once this stage has been reached, the construction of artificial models and the study of the logic of natural languages can reinforce one another.

Professor von Wright's important book, continuing and to some extent revising his earlier work on deontic logic, is but one of many recent signs of interest in the possibility of formalizing normative discourse. It corresponds to the first series of his Gifford Lectures, and is complementary to *The Varieties of Goodness*, which was based on the second series. He rightly thinks that the logic of 'good' is different from that of the concepts discussed in the present volume, and uses the term 'normative' to mark off

the latter. Since normative utterances typically concern actions, and all actions are the initiations or else the preventions of changes, he starts by discussing, in a penetrating way, the logic of propositions which record changes and actions. The three chapters devoted to these neglected topics are perhaps the most valuable, because the most securely based, in the book.

It is, however, the treatment of normative utterances themselves which will arouse most interest. It can be said at once that the investigation of these questions by a logician of von Wright's distinction yields, as it was bound to, much illumination; his kind of painstaking formal analysis is just what the subject at present needs, and we can take it for granted that the formal part of his exposition is well done. However, this will be of value chiefly for the light it sheds on the crucial problems about these concepts which trouble formalists and informalists alike. Here he is, very naturally, on shakier ground; and in this short review I shall, after paying a far from merely conventional tribute, concentrate on one particular question whose treatment in the book strikes me as inadequate.

What is a norm, and what does the class of norms include? Among utterances expressing norms at least the following seem to be reckoned: some typical kinds of imperatives; of 'ought'-sentences; and of sentences used to give permissions. The class of "norms" is therefore, as von Wright rightly allows, heterogeneous, and requires further classification. This task is best approached by way of what he says about the "parts" or "ingredients" of norms (p. 70). He lists six of these: the character ("obligation" or "permission"); the content (that which ought to, etc., be done); the condition of application; the authority; the subject (i.e. the agent to whom the prescription is given); and the occasion (e.g. "now", "next Monday"). He thinks that the first three of these (character, content and condition of application) are in some way central, and calls the combination of them the 'norm-kernel'. He says that "the norm-kernel is a logical structure which prescriptions have in common with other types of norm". And the logic of norms which he devises is in fact a logic of norm-kernels, and indeed, more narrowly still, "is primarily conceived of as a logical theory of the norm-kernels of *prescriptions*" (p. 130).

To understand this, we have to realize how von Wright uses the word 'prescription'. He does not, as I have elsewhere, use it widely to cover any utterance which is essentially action-guiding (this difference in terminology leads to some purely verbal differences in exposition which need not detain us); he uses it narrowly, in such a way that an utterance does not express a prescription unless it is promulgated by an authority, to a particular subject, and accompanied by a sanction (p. 7). On this definition, the following will not express prescriptions: many 'ought'-sentences, including those where the 'ought' is moral (on the view, at any rate, of those who think, as von Wright apparently does, that there is in morals no question of an authority or a sanction, and that there need be no particular subject); and requests and prayers (because there is no sanction). These

latter, indeed, he excludes, not only from the class of prescriptions, but from the wider class of norms (p. 71.).

We thus have left, as the "norm-kernels" of which he is going to construct a theory, a class which seems at once too narrow in some ways and too heterogeneous in others. Logic is concerned basically with consistency and inconsistency between utterances; and I find it hard to believe that a general theory of norm-kernels which established an inconsistency between two prescriptions in the narrow sense could fail to establish the same inconsistency between two requests or prayers expressed in the same words. To put the point another way; I cannot see how the consistency or inconsistency between a pair of imperatives could depend on whether they were backed up by the sanctions of an authority. The inconsistency of 'Both pick up and do not pick up your rifle' cannot depend on whether it is a military order or a request. It would therefore have been much better if von Wright had given us a general logic of imperatives, noting the elements in it, if any, which do not apply to sanctionless imperatives.

He might reply to this that he only said that his logic was *primarily* concerned with "prescriptions". But he has not actually given us any reasons why "prescriptions" in his narrow sense should be treated as central; and in so far as what he says implies any reasons, they seem to be concerned with matters, such as whether the expression of a norm is or is not accompanied by threats in case of its non-compliance, which must, surely, be extraneous to the logic of norm-kernels.

Far more serious, however, is the fact that von Wright's class of norm-kernels remains utterly heterogeneous. He expresses them (at any rate the "prescriptive" ones) sometimes in the imperative, sometimes by 'ought' (though it may be questioned whether 'ought' *ever* expresses "prescriptions" in his narrow sense); and refers to them sometimes as 'commands' and sometimes as 'obligation-norms' (e.g. p. 71). The same catholicity appears in his treatment of permissions; these seem to include not only utterances of the form 'It is all right to . . .' but also utterances of the form 'You may . ..'. These two are in fact as distinct in logical character as are the imperative and 'ought'—but even if von Wright wished to dispute this, it would surely be unwise for him to construct a normative logic in a way which systematically begs this question. In short, my complaint is that he excludes from his logic of norms expressions which do not differ in their *logic* from those which he includes, while he includes some which do differ radically.

I have no space in which to give the reasons that incline me to think that 'ought' and imperatives express different kinds of norm whose logic could never be formalized by means of any dual-purpose operator. The reasons concern the fact that 'ought' and 'ought not' are contraries and not contradictories, and are "universalizable"; I have argued elsewhere that neither of these things is true of simple imperatives (*Mind*, 1954, pp. 263-8; *The Language of Morals*, pp. 27 n., 175 ff.; *Freedom and Reason*,

pp. 36 f.). If I am right about these two points, it is obvious that the logic of 'ought' is going to be something like the logic of *modal* expressions; and indeed it has been suggested that expression of "obligation-norms" and "permission-norms" fall into a "square of opposition" in the same way as do the alethic modalities (see Prior, *Formal Logic*, p. 220; and cf. von Wright, *Essay in Modal Logic*, p. 2). It by no means follows, however, that the same will be true of simple imperatives; it may be that the reason why it has been thought to follow lies in a simple confusion between the logic of 'ought' and that of imperatives. It is indeed possible to construct a "square of opposition" using affirmative and negative imperatives for two of the corners and 'may'-sentences for the other two; but it can be just as misleading to do this as it would be to treat 'The door is shut', 'The door is not shut', 'The door may be shut' and 'The door may be not shut' as the four corners of an indicative 'square of opposition' and to conclude that 'The door is shut' and 'The door is not shut' are only contraries and not contradictories.

I do not necessarily accuse von Wright of committing the confusions to which this lack of discrimination can lead; he in fact makes a great many (but not all) of the necessary distinctions in other ways. But it is tragically likely that those less expert than he is will take his system and operate it in disregard of what may be (I do not insist that it is) a crucial distinction between 'ought' and imperatives. And this may lead to a good deal of confusion in ethics. At least let us have a formalization which does not beg these questions.

Von Wright does not consider a suggestion made by Professor Castañeda (*Phil. Stud.*, 1955, p. 3; and 1959, pp. 17-23), and by Mr. Mark Fisher (*Mind*, 1962, p. 231), that 'ought' is related to imperatives in the same way as alethic necessity is related to ordinary categorical propositions. This suggestion is attractive enough to merit some discussion, and it may be that a development of it could both help us out of the confusions to which I have referred, and point the way to a satisfactory account of the logic of normative discourse. This we shall not know, until the suggestion has been much more fully developed and investigated by logicians. As yet these studies have barely started; and, useful as Professor von Wright's present book is as a contribution to them, it cannot be said that deontic logic has so far found its Aristotle.

R. M. HARE

The Varieties of Goodness. By GEORG HENRIK VON WRIGHT. (London: Routledge, 1963. Pp. xiv + 222. Price 28s).

As its title implies, this book is a study of the different forms of goodness, or meanings of the word 'good'. Among those considered are the sense in which a knife is good; 'good at'; the sense in which organs and faculties