The Philosophy of Right and Wrong.

Review Author[s]:
R. M. Hare

The Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 37, No. 149 (Oct., 1987), 451-453.

Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0031-8094%28198710%2937%3A149%3C451%3ATPORAW%3E2.0.CO%3B2-I

The Philosophical Quarterly is currently published by The Philosophical Quarterly.

The Philosophy of Right and Wrong. By BERNARD MAYO. (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986. Pp. 176. Price £4.95.)

The claim on the cover of this book is entirely just, that 'Professor Bernard Mayo has taught philosophy undergraduates for thirty-five years, and has drawn on his wide experience in writing this book. It provides an excellent introduction to moral philosophy, designed with the non-specialist in mind'. Such a book has to find a middle way between the pedantic etching of fine distinctions for their own sakes, and the broad brush-strokes of the impressionist. Professor Mayo has on the whole managed this well, though there are some distinctions which could with advantage have been brought more forcefully to the attention of students.

For example, on pp. 54f. it is not made sufficiently clear that the universalizability thesis binds the utterer of a moral judgement only to consistency in the judgements he nakes at any one time; it does not forbid him to change his mind later. Nor does it require that *other people* should accept *my* moral judgements; so the thesis cannot be used as the basis of an objection to emotivism, to the effect that it is not the case that 'if I feel emotionally moved towards or away from something, then everyone else must do so too'. It is very important to distinguish between the sense of 'universal' in which universal propositions have to be universally quantified and contain no individual constants, and that in which it means 'universally accepted'. And it is also crucially important to distinguish between statements that are *general*, in the sense of 'unspecific', and those that are *universal* in the former sense, which does not preclude universal statements being on occasion highly specific. Many bad arguments in moral philosophy have been, and continue to be, founded on a failure to make this distinction; but on pp. 133ff. Mayo vacillates between the terms 'universal' and 'general', which he seems even to be using interchangeably.

He ought also, on pp. 74ff., to have made clearer than he does that the 'absolutism' which is the opposite of relativism, and is equated by him with realism, is not the same as that which forbids making exceptions to moral principles. A realist can think, and some do, that although there are facts 'out there', they are not hard and fast, but allow of some adjustment to peculiar circumstances. There are a great many other places in the book (too many to list in a short review) where I felt that students ought to have been put on their guard against confusions which have dogged moral philosophy, and prevented the understanding of crucial issues. But I admit that this is partly a matter of expository style: no doubt Mayo was accustomed to clear up these confusions in the discussions after his lectures. I myself try to mention them in my lectures themselves; but even then the students often go on making the same confusions, and so do many professionals.

The book starts, after an introduction explaining what moral philosophy is, with chapters on 'Determinism', 'Naturalism and Intuitionism' and 'Emotivism'. All these are handled in a perfectly standard and orthodox way, and the book would be very useful as a text in the hands of an instructor who was able to add warnings about the confusions I have alluded to. I found the treatment agreeably old-fashioned: some recent modish heresies (revivals of old ones the objections to which have been forgotten) are not mentioned, though Mackie gets, deservedly, an

honourable place. And the book is about metaethics, and does not go much into the disputes between different substantive normative 'moral theories': Rawls, for instance, is mentioned only in passing. I cannot condemn Mayo for this, because my own practice in introductory lectures is the same; students have to understand the basic issues in metaethics before they can see what is wrong with a lot that is written about normative ethics.

A large part of the book is devoted to Prescriptivism, a version of which Mayo favours; there are four chapters with this title and different sub-titles: 'The legal model', 'Natural law', 'Rational autonomy' and 'Objections and replies'. Chapters on 'Relativism' and 'Morals and Religion' are fitted in between these. As a prescriptivist myself, I naturally welcome this extensive treatment, which is on the whole well done; and Mayo is extremely kind to me personally. However, I do have one cause for serious complaint. On p. 120 Mayo, quoting with approval one of my own examples, uses it in a way which implicitly attributes to me a view which I have never held and have consistently campaigned against: what may be called the 'verbal shove' theory about the meaning of imperatives. This quite mistaken view, held by most emotivists and also by such diverse writers as Searle and Castañeda, is that the meaning of the imperative mood is to be explained by saying that it is the mood we use for *getting* people to do things. My view has always been, and was in the early paper from which Mayo gets the example, that this is to confuse (to borrow Austin's terms) illocutionary with perlocutionary acts. One may try to get someone to do something *by* uttering an imperative (or alternatively, as Mayo sees, by many other kinds of utterances or actions); but that is not what one is doing *in* saying it, and so it is not constitutive of its meaning or even of its illocutionary force. This is very important, because the mistaken views of the emotivists are partly founded on the idea that one can explain the meaning of moral judgements *and* imperatives by reference to their perlocutionary effect. In neither case is this true.

In the passage to which Mayo alludes (*Mind* 58 (1949), p. 39) I was arguing that commands (in the generic grammatical sense) are not necessarily more 'evocative' (i.e. emotion- and action-producing) than other sentences, and to support this I said 'If you want a man to take off his trousers, you will more readily succeed by saying "A scorpion has just crawled up your trouser-leg" than by saying "Take off your trousers"'. This shows that an utterance which is *not* an imperative can have more effect on action than one which is. But Mayo takes me as showing 'with a convincing example' that some imperatives 'need not be grammatically imperative at all', i.e. that the statement about the scorpion is really an imperative, though not grammatically so. It may be that not all utterances with imperative illocutionary force are in the imperative mood, but this example does not show it. It would, if the verbal shove theory were correct, because the 'scorpion' statement gives a bigger verbal shove than the other. But the point of my own use of the example was to show that the 'scorpion' statement, although *not* an imperative, does give a bigger verbal shove than an imperative, and that therefore the verbal shove theory must be wrong.

Many other similar examples are mistakenly used to show that sentences which are not gramatically imperatives are 'really' imperatives. For instance, the strict

mistress says to her housemaid 'The stairs are dirty', and this is taken by some philosophers to be 'really' a command to clean the stairs. But it is nothing of the kind. It is a statement from which, in conjunction with an assumed 'standing order' of the house, 'Clean the stairs when they are dirty', any reasonably intelligent housemaid could infer the command 'Clean the stairs', which *is* an imperative. Similarly in the scorpion example, I *state* a fact from which the person addressed can readily, in conjunction with a universal prescription which he presumably accepts to take all practicable measures to stop scorpions crawling up into his crutch, infer that he should take off his trousers. For my arguments against the verbal shove theory, I must refer the reader, besides the above paper, to *Ar. Soc.* Supp. 25 (1951), *The Language of Morals* p. 13, 'Wanting: Some Pitfalls', second part, in *Agent, Action and Reason* edd. Binkley et al. (Blackwell, 1971), and my review of Castaneda, *The Structure of Morality*, *J. Phil.* 73 (1976). It pains me that for thirty-five years Mayo, like many others, has been teaching his undergraduates this error.

He ends with chapters on 'Form and content' (in which he discusses, and compromises too much with, the anti-formalist views of such writers as Geoffrey Warnock) and 'Morality and self-interest' (in which he canvasses some answers, perhaps as good as can be found, to the question 'Why should I be moral?'). In all, the book is to be recommended as a text to instructors who are able and willing to introduce their students to the distinctions which Mayo has (for good reasons of space, I am sure) omitted to rub in.

As a parting shot, I cannot forbear to point out that it is *not* false (p. 150) nor 'just an abuse of language' to say that anybody ever needs a Rolls-Royce, nor 'just true' to say that a starving man needs food. The second statement is indeed true, and elliptical for '. . . needs food if he is to survive', and the first may be true of a top executive, if it is elliptical for '. . . needs a Rolls-Royce if he is to keep up the image of his company'. The form of both statements is the same, and so is the meaning of 'needs'. In both cases a necessary condition is being stated for achieving a certain end, which is not specified in the sentence, and which is not itself needed but rather desired. The difference lies in the ends, one of which is more crucial to the person affected than the other. It is another of the fashionably revived heresies to think that 'needs' has two senses, one conditional and the other absolute, of which the second can be used to establish a bedrock foundation for moral systems. What we should be doing instead is to show why we morally ought to be more concerned to promote the survival of the starving than the images of multinational companies; and this task of moral reasoning is just pushed aside by those who take this short cut.

R. M. HARE

Descartes. BY JOHN COTTINGHAM. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986. Pp. viii + 171. Price £22.50, £7.50 pb.)

In this excellent book, Dr Cottingham does justice both to the boldness and to the subtlety of Descartes' thought. He lays bare the main lines of Descartes' philosophy, uncluttered by excessive involvement in interpretive and evaluative