



Ima  
Prescriptivist  
(PR)

- “You ought to do this” is a universalizable prescription (not a truth claim); it means “Do this and let everyone do the same (including to me) in similar cases.”
- Pick out your moral principles by trying to be informed and imaginative, and then seeing what you can consistently will.

Moral judgments are a kind of prescription (imperative).

Indicative

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“The door is open”



Imperative

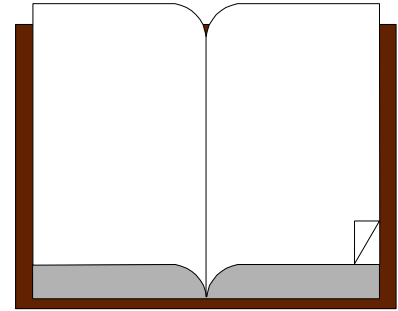
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“Close the door”



R.M. Hare

An ethical  
theory should  
do two things



*Freedom and Reason*

- allow us the *freedom* to make our own moral judgments.
- show us how to make moral judgments in a *rational* way.

**Yes, we *can* reason about  
basic ethical principles!**

Apply prescriptivism to  
this *shortism* principle:



“We ought to beat up  
all short people – just  
because they’re short.”

Two logical rules for “ought” –  
to be logically consistent, we must:

- (U) make similar evaluations  
about similar cases.
- (P) keep our moral beliefs in  
harmony with how we live  
and want others to live.

This combination is logically inconsistent:

- I believe that I *ought* to do something to another.
- I don't desire that this be done to me in the same situation.

I believe that I ought to steal Detra's bicycle.

- ∴ To be consistent, I have to believe that my bicycle ought to be stolen if I were in her place. (from U)
- ∴ To be consistent, I have to desire that my bicycle be stolen if I were in her place. (from P)

To be reasonable in our moral beliefs is to be informed, imaginative, and consistent.



Prescriptivism can  
attack racist ideas, like:

“We ought to put Jews into  
concentration camps.”

To avoid the GR attack, a Nazi could:

1. Use “ought” so that it doesn’t express a universal prescription.
2. Avoid making moral judgments.
3. Not care if he’s inconsistent and irrational.
4. Desire to be treated thusly himself.

Does prescriptivism claim that this combination is inconsistent?

- I hit you.
- I don't desire that I be hit in the same situation.



Are these *true* according to prescriptivism?

“We ought to be consistent.”

“We ought to make moral judgments  
about our actions.”

“We ought to follow the golden rule.”

Prescriptivism goes against the  
commonsense belief that moral judgments  
can be *true* and *known* to be true.



“We ought to put Jews into concentration camps.”

It would be better not to have so many escape routes.

Nazis can escape the argument if they:

- don't choose to play the game of morality,
- don't care about being inconsistent,
- desire to be treated the same way in the imagined reversed situation, or
- say “all right” instead of “ought.”

# Summary

“Good”                      Are there                      To form your moral  
   moral truths?                      beliefs, follow

Intuitionism	is indefinable but objective	yes	your moral intuitions
Emotivism	is emotional – like “Hurrah!”	no	your feelings
Prescriptivism	expresses how we want people to live	no	what you consistently will, after being infor- med and imaginative

# Sartre and De Beauvoir

Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone De Beauvoir were twentieth-century French existentialists. Their ethics somewhat resembled prescriptivism; but it was based, not on an analysis of “ought,” but on a rejection of God.

Without God, they argued, we have to create our own values. But if we do this consistently, then we must take others into account; if we will our own freedom, then we must also will the freedom of others.