FREEDOM
& MORALITY

The Lindley Lectures

delivered at the University of Kansas by

RICHARD B. BRANDT   J. N. FINDLAY

RODERICK M. CHISHOLM   ALAN GEWIRTH

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WILLIAM K. FRANKENA   PAUL RICOEUR

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Contents

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Some Confusions About Subjectivity

R. M. Hare

1. I must apologize for presenting to you a lecture which seems to me to go entirely over old ground; and perhaps I should explain what has moved me to do it. There is a certain interrelated batch of confusions connected with the expressions 'objective' and 'subjective' as used in ethical theory, and with the words 'objectivism', 'subjectivism' and also 'relativism', used to describe types of ethical theory—confusions which I myself saw to be confusions quite near the beginning of my career as a moral philosopher, and thought I could put behind me. I saw that they were confusions, not by any original thought on my part, but because, as it seemed to me, *everybody* who had thought about the matter had seen that they were confusions. I did not devote more than a few desultory remarks in my own writings to showing that they were confusions, because I thought it unnecessary—instead, I tried to present my views in such a way that the confusions would be avoided. I hoped (naively as it turned out) that they would not continue to muddle moral philosophers in the future as they had in the past.

I was sadly disappointed—perhaps because I had not tried hard enough. It is no exaggeration to say that I constantly find these confusions being committed, not only by laymen or beginner students, but by well established professional philosophers of good reputation. Worse than this, they are frequently made in relation to my own views, and I find myself either called a 'subjectivist', or assailed with arguments which are indeed cogent against theories which are subjectivist in what I think is the most natural sense of that word, but which my own theory was specifically designed to avoid, and does avoid. Perhaps I am not entirely blameless. It is difficult, even though one is oneself clear about a distinction, to avoid using phrases which those who are not clear about it will misinterpret. This is especially true where, in order to link up one's thought with the history of the subject, one uses expressions which have been used by other people (including sometimes people, all of whose views one would not be prepared to endorse). Thus on pp. 69 and 78 of *The Language of Morals* I spoke of justifying or verifying moral judgments by reference to a standard or set of principles which itself has to be accepted by a decision; I did not mean that *the fact that* this decision had been made guaranteed, auto-

191

matically, those moral judgments as correct, but only that it is no use thinking we can be sure about particular moral questions until we have made up our own minds on the moral principles according to which they are to be answered. *How* we are to make up our minds was a question that I left until *Freedom and Reason*, though there are hints about the answer on p. 69 of the earlier book.

On p. 77 of *The Language of Morals* I unwisely borrowed from intuitionist writers a rather loose use of the term 'subjectivist', which may have misled some readers into thinking that I am a subjectivist in the strict sense which I shall be using in this lecture. And on p. 70 I said 'To ask whether I ought to do A in these circumstances is (to borrow Kantian language with a small though important modification) to ask whether or not I will that doing A in such circumstances should become a universal law'. Kant was hardly a subjectivist, and I did not think that by using his wording with this modification I was expressing a subjectivist view. I had already said on p. 6 that ' "I want you to shut the door" is not a statement about my mind but a polite way of saying the imperative "Shut the door" '; and similarly, when we ask what we will should become a universal law, we are not asking a question of psychological fact to be settled by introspection, but trying to make a decision, or, as I say in the next sentence on p. 70, asking 'What attitude shall I adopt and recommend?' (*not* 'What attitude do I or will I as a matter of fact have?'). I say also that 'attitude', if it means anything, means a principle of action. The late Professor H. J. Paton was the first person I heard assimilate Stevenson to Kant in this way. The question of *how* we decide what attitude to adopt was, again, left for *Freedom and Reason*.

If you want a recent example of what I am complaining of, you need go no further from home than to Professor Alan Gewirth's Lindley Lecture for 1972, *Moral Rationality* (reprinted in this volume). He there attributes to some people whom he calls 'rationalists' (including me—and may I say how delighted I am to be called a rationalist; it is so much more respectable, as well as much nearer to the facts, than the description 'emotivist' which is often wrongly attached to me) the following view:

> Hence, a judgment that doing x is not morally right can be logically justified by showing that doing x is not in this way acceptable to its agent. For from the major premiss that all actions which are morally right are acceptable to their agents when they are the recipients of such actions, and the factual

minor premiss that doing x is not acceptable to its agent when he is the recipient of x, the conclusion logically follows that doing x is not morally right.

Gewirth here confuses the view, which with qualifications I hold, that *to say* (or *think*) that an action is morally right *is to accept* a certain universal permission which will allow a similar act to be done in like circumstances when I am the recipient, with the quite different view, which I have never held, that all actions which *are* morally right *are acceptable* to their agents, when they are the recipients of such actions. To put it more briefly: is Gewirth unable to distinguish between the view that to say that an action is morally right is to accept something, and the view that to say that an action is morally right is to say that, as a matter of fact, you do accept something (or are prepared to accept it, or find it acceptable)? Is he, in general, unable to distinguish between the following statements about the illocutionary force of utterances?

(1)   To say 'p' is to s

(where 's' stands for some speech-act verb), and

(2)   To say 'p' is to say that as a matter of fact you s, or are s-ing.

Thus, is he unable to distinguish between

(1^1)   To say 'Please pass me the butter' is to make a request,

and

(2^1)   To say 'Please pass me the butter' is to say that you are, as a matter of fact, making a request;

or between

(1^{11})   To say 'The tide is high' is to state that the tide is high,

and

(2^{11})   To say 'The tide is high' is to say that as a matter of fact you are stating that the tide is high,

or between other similar pairs? In all these cases, it is a confusion to identify a speech act with that other speech act which consists in the statement that the first speech act is as a matter of fact performed. If, as in (1^1) and (2^1), the first speech act is a request and the second is a statement of fact, they obviously cannot be identical; and even when, as in (1^{11}) and (2^{11}), both are statements, it is perhaps

193

not too hard to see that they are *different* statements, one about the tide and the other about the activities of the speaker. For another and more sophisticated example of the same sort of confusion, you may look at the paper of Mrs. Foot's discussed in my 1963 British Academy Lecture 'Descriptivism' (reprinted in my *Essays on the Moral Concepts*), § vi.

It will be noticed that I have myself put this point in terms of speech acts, because I find that it comes out much clearer that way. Gewirth, Mrs. Foot and others speak in terms of states of mind or of dispositions to action. But they commit essentially the same confusion in failing to distinguish the statement that somebody has a certain state of mind or disposition from the statement, moral judgment, or whatever it is, which is the expression of that state of mind or disposition. Thus it is one thing to say that I as a matter of fact have a wish for a certain thing, and another to say 'Give me that thing'; one thing to say that I have a disposition to choose objects of a certain sort, and another to say (expressing that disposition) that objects of that sort are good ones.

A possible source of the confusion is my use, a good many times in *Freedom and Reason*, of expressions of the following sort:

> The real difficulty of making a moral decision is, as I have said before, that of finding some action to which one is prepared to commit oneself, and which at the same time one is prepared to accept as exemplifying a principle of action binding on anyone in like circumstances (p. 73).

and

> What we are doing in moral reasoning is to look for moral judgments and moral principles which, when we have considered their logical consequences and the facts of the case, we can still accept (p. 88).

As I say in my review of Professor Rawls' *Theory of Justice*, however,

> *Any* enquirer, in ethics as in any other subject, and whether he be a descriptivist or a prescriptivist, is looking for an answer to his questions which he can accept. . . The element of subjectivism enters only when a philosopher claims that he can 'check' his theory against his and other people's views, so that a disagreement between the theory and the views tells against the theory. To speak like this. . . is to make the *truth* of the theory *depend on* agreement with people's opinions. I have myself been so often accused of this sort of subjectivism that it is depressing to find a self-styled objectivist falling as

194

deeply into it as Rawls does—depressing, because it makes one feel that this essentially simple distinction will never be understood: the distinction between the view that thinking something can make it so (which is in general false) and the view that if we are to say something sincerely, we must be able to accept it (which is a tautology). (*Ph. Q.*, 23 (1973) p. 145; repr. in *Reading Rawls: Critical Studies on 'A Theory of Justice'*, ed. N. Daniels.)

Mr. J. O. Urmson (*Ar. Soc.* 1974/5, p. 112) quotes the beginning of this passage, ignores the rest, and, having misinterpreted it in the usual way, uses it to support arguments for what he calls 'intuitionism' (using the word in Rawls' misleading sense for 'pluralism'); but the view he is arguing for is one I would strongly repudiate, since it is subjectivist in the above sense, and does make the truth of moral views depend on agreement with his own opinions.

I have found such confusions irritating enough to make me look around (though not very systematically) for books or papers in which the distinctions that are necessary are clearly made; and I have not found any, though I am sure that they must exist (I am the world's worst bibliographer). So I thought it would be a useful exercise, in this Lindley Lecture, to set out some distinctions which, I am sure, must be familiar to any competent moral philosopher, but which, apparently, some moral philosophers find it extremely hard to grasp.

2. Perhaps the best way to approach the necessary distinctions is by distinguishing between two divisions which exist between types of ethical theory. There is first of all the division between what are sometimes called cognitivist and non-cognitivist theories, but which I prefer to call descriptivist and non-descriptivist theories. The pairs of terms do not mean precisely the same: ethical cognitivism is, presumably, if we are to rely on etymology, the view that moral judgments can be *known* to be true; ethical descriptivism is, rather, the view that their logical character is similar to that of other descriptive statements or judgments. I have attempted at some length to define the expression 'descriptive judgment' in *Freedom and Reason*, ch. 2; here I shall only say (too summarily) that a statement or judgment is descriptive if its meaning (including its reference) determines uniquely its truth-conditions, and vice versa. Although 'cognitivism' and 'descriptivism' do not mean the same thing, I think that for most people they serve to pick out the same sort of theory; so I shall not pursue the distinction between them.

The second division that I wish to note is the division *within* descriptivist or cognitivist theories between those which are subjectivist and those which are objectivist. I repeat, with all the emphasis I can muster, that this is a division *within* descriptivist theories. It is not the same as the division *between* descriptivist and non-descriptivist theories. This is so obvious a point that to elaborate it might seem tedious; but, taught by bitter experience, I will elaborate it. A descriptivist theory holds that moral judgments are descriptive. To forestall another confusion, I must point out that this means that they are *purely* descriptive, i.e. that the meaning which is determined by their truth-conditions *is* their meaning—there is no other element in their meaning which can remain the same although this descriptive meaning changes, as I have maintained is the case with evaluative statements. I have also maintained that evaluative statements *have* a descriptive element in their meaning; in virtue of this it is perfectly proper to call them true or false. But I mention this point now only to prevent it confusing us; it is not strictly needed at this place in my argument, and we shall return to it later.

To revert, then: a descriptivist theory holds that moral judgments are purely descriptive; but it remains to be said what, according to the theory in question, they are descriptive of. According to a *subjectivist* descriptivist theory, they are descriptive of states of mind, dispositions, etc. of people (usually those who make them); whereas an *objectivist* descriptivist theory holds that moral judgments are descriptive of states of affairs other than states of mind, dispositions, etc., of people. To put this another way: according to an objectivist descriptivist theory, a moral statement is true if and only if some state of affairs obtains other than a state of mind or disposition of some person; according to a subjectivist descriptivist theory, a moral statement is true if and only if some state of mind or disposition of some person obtains.

From this it should be immediately clear that the division between objectivist descriptivist theories and subjectivist descriptivist theories is not the *same* division as that between descriptivist theories *in general* and non-descriptivist theories *in general*. Non-descriptivists must in consistency dissent (and with all the emphasis I can muster I *do* dissent) from the view that moral judgments are true if and only if some state of mind or some disposition of some person obtains. It is not true of any non-descriptivist theory (other than a thoroughly muddled one) that it makes the truth of moral state-

196

ments depend on what somebody thinks or feels or how he is disposed towards something or other. In so far as a non-descriptivist ethical theory allows that a moral statement can be true or false (and I shall revert later to the sense in which it can allow this) it will hold that its truth or falsity will depend on whether states of affairs obtain *other* than states of mind, etc., of people.

3. I must apologize for rubbing in this point at such tedious length; but the apology is not entirely sincere, because if it were sincere I would desist. I am, however, not going to desist, because it really seems to be necessary, surprisingly, to reiterate this obvious point. I am indeed going to rub it in further by illustrating it in terms of a particular non-descriptivist theory of a very simple sort. This is not a theory which I myself have ever held, though I have often enough been accused of holding it; but I choose it because, being very simple, it illustrates my point very clearly. In particular it avoids complications about the sense in which moral statements can be called true or false, because it holds that they *cannot* be called true or false (unlike my own theory). The theory which I am going to discuss I call *imperativism*. It is the theory that moral judgments are equivalent in meaning to ordinary imperatives. I repeat that I have never held this theory. According to this theory, for example, 'Jones ought to do *A*' is equivalent to the ordinary third person imperative 'Let Jones do *A*' (in Latin '*Jonesius A facito*').

Let us ask whether on such a theory the truth of a moral statement depends on whether some state of mind of some person obtains. It obviously does not, because on such a theory the moral statement 'Jones ought to do *A*' does not have a truth-value at all, being equivalent to an imperative. But this may seem too short a way with the people whose muddles I am attacking. So I am going to put the matter in slightly different terms. I am going to substitute the notions of assent and dissent for the notions of truth and falsity, in the following way. The *gravamen* of the objection which most of us feel to subjectivist theories of ethics is that they force a person who has assented to the statement that another person is in a certain state of mind to assent, in consistency, to the moral statement that that person is making. For example: if someone says to me 'Jones ought to do *A*', then according to one kind of subjectivism this is equivalent to 'I (the speaker) approve of Jones doing *A*'. According to this kind of subjectivism, therefore, if I assent to the psychological statement that the speaker approves of Jones doing *A*, I am com-

197

when they draw conclusions from a theory which it by no means entails. But here is one attempt to say how people can come to think (as undoubtedly some people do think) that imperativists are committed to holding that if I say 'Jones ought to do *A*' everybody has to agree with me (which is the revised version of the earlier doctrine, put in terms of truth and falsity, that according to imperativism one makes moral judgments true simply by uttering them). Suppose that someone says 'Jones ought to do *A*'. Call the person who says this '*X*'. I suppose that someone who was not very particular about the opacity of intentional contexts might think that, if I agree that *X* said that Jones ought to do *A*, then I am, according to imperativism, committed to agreeing that *X* issued the command that Jones do *A*. This step in the argument depends on the thesis of imperativism itself, namely that 'Jones ought to do *A*' is equivalent to 'Let Jones do *A*'.

Now according to the *other* theory that I mentioned, and *distinguished* from imperativism, the factual report 'I am issuing the command that Jones do *A*' is equivalent to the moral judgment 'Jones ought to do *A*'. So, if we now switch, confusedly, to this *other* theory and away from imperativism proper, we can take the second step in this muddled argument (waiving, indulgently, the difference between '*X* issued' and 'I am issuing'): having by the first step got by the thesis of imperativism proper from '*X* said that Jones ought to do *A*' to '*X* issued the command that Jones do *A*' we can now, by this *other* thesis, get from the latter (from '*X* issued the command that Jones do *A*') to 'Jones ought to do *A*'. So, you see, by this train of confusions, it can be made out that the imperativist is committed to the view that if we agree to the statement that someone has said 'Jones ought to do *A*', we cannot consistently dissent from the statement that Jones ought to do *A*.

I dare say some other train of confusions would do. You may think it tedious of me to go on so long distinguishing between two ethical theories which nobody in his right mind would hold once he was clear about what they were saying, and establishing that one of them, imperativism, does not have a consequence which some people have thought it had. The point of doing this has been that many people *also* think that the same absurd consequence can be drawn from my own variety of prescriptivism. They do this, either because they confuse my variety of prescriptivism with imperativism (a confusion which is extremely common, in spite of several explicit statements of mine to the contrary, starting on p. 2 of *The Language*

of Morals); or because, although they do not make this confusion, they think, rightly, that my theory resembles imperativism in the important respect that according to both theories moral judgments are typically prescriptive, and this resemblance, so to speak, tars my theory with the imperativist brush, and makes it legitimate to draw from it the absurd consequence that you can make moral judgments true, or make it impossible for other people to dissent from them, just by uttering them—a consequence which, by the series of muddles I have just exposed, they think can be drawn from imperativism itself. And that is why I have thought it necessary to go into the muddles at such boring length.

5. Now let us turn to something a bit less boring. I want in the rest of this lecture to consider another argument which is probably valid against old-style subjectivism (i.e. against the variety of descriptivism which holds that moral statements are really statements about the states of mind of people), but is constantly being raked up in order to attack non-descriptivism, which is quite immune to it. This argument concerns the use of the words 'right' and 'wrong' with reference to moral statements. Now I agree readily that these words are used of moral statements that people have made. We say, for example, that somebody was right in thinking that Jones ought to have done *A*. Those who attack non-descriptivism often try to base an argument on this admitted fact. It is said that, if two people disagree about a moral question, one of them must be wrong. Let us take a particular example. *X* says 'It was wrong to take the money'. *Y* says 'No, it was not wrong'. One of these parties, says the argument, must be wrong; and with this we must agree. But to agree with this is not to admit nearly so much as is sometimes claimed. 'One of the parties must be wrong.' This, if expanded, means 'Either it is wrong to say that it was wrong to take the money, or it is wrong to say that it was not wrong to take the money'. Let us abbreviate the proposition 'It was wrong to take the money' as '*p*', and the proposition 'It was not wrong to take the money' as 'Not *p*'. What is being maintained, then, and what we have agreed to, is that either it is wrong to say that *p*, or it is wrong to say that not *p*.

Let us see how much an opponent of non-descriptivism can legitimately argue on the basis of this admission. First of all, it can be argued that it follows that the law of the excluded middle applies to some moral statements. For if it is either wrong to say that *p* or wrong to say that not *p*, then (ignoring some obvious complications

201

for a moment) the following proposition must be true: 'Either not *p* or not not *p*'; and by elimination of the double negation and reversing the order we get 'Either *p* or not *p*'. There are some pitfalls here. It has first to be assumed that '*p*' and 'not *p*' are contradictories where '*p*' stands for 'It was wrong to take the money'. Now of course it is notorious that in the case of some moral statements we do not get the contradictory of a given statement by adding 'not' injudiciously to it: for example, 'You ought not to' is not the contradictory of 'You ought to'. I have, however, been careful to choose an example in which this difficulty does not arise. For 'It was not wrong to take the money' *is* the contradictory of 'It was wrong to take the money'. And I have been careful to say that this argument only shows that the law of the excluded middle applies to *some* moral statements. Actually it applies to them all; but only when we are careful about what is, and what is not, the contradictory of a given moral statement. However, this complication need not concern us, because it does not affect the main point I wish to make, which is that this argument, so far, is not going to help the opponent of non-descriptivism in the least, because he has done nothing to show that the law of the excluded middle does not apply equally to imperatives, and therefore has not, by this argument, shown even that moral statements are not equivalent to imperatives. I think myself that the law of the excluded middle *does* apply to imperatives, but this is hardly the place to argue the matter (I have already done it in *Mind* 1954 and 1968).

6. In order to use this argument to refute non-descriptivism, our opponents will have to extract more from it than the bare fact that the law of the excluded middle applies to moral statements. What more can they extract? One further thing is that we can use the words 'right' and 'wrong' when speaking of moral statements that people have made. Some opponents of non-descriptivism have made a great deal of play with this fact, as they have with the similar fact that we also use the words 'true' and 'false', in certain contexts, of moral statements. But there is no reason why a non-descriptivist should not readily admit that these words are used in speaking of moral statements, provided at any rate that he is prepared, as most non-descriptivists have been since Stevenson, to allow that moral statements do have, as *one* element in their meaning, what is usually called 'descriptive meaning'. For it may be this element to which we are adverting when we call a moral statement true or false; and

this does not prevent there being other, non-descriptive elements in its meaning, which are sufficient to make it altogether misleading to call it a descriptive statement *tout court*. Thus, if I have been saying that a man is a good man because I think he spends all his week-ends working as a scoutmaster, but then discover that that was another man of the same name—*this* man spends all his week-ends seducing other men's wives—having discovered that he does not in fact possess the characteristics which, according to the standards which I and my listeners share, are the criteria for being called a good man, I may well say, adverting to the descriptive meaning of the term, that what I had been saying was false, or not true. But there is nothing in this which need disturb a judicious non-descriptivist.

What I have just said about 'true' and 'false' might, I think, be said about 'right' and 'wrong' in some of their uses. It may be that in some contexts when we say that the moral statement that somebody has made was right, or that he was right in making it, all we mean is that the subject of the statement does have the characteristics ascribed to it by his statement, if that is taken in its accepted descriptive meaning, or even with some other descriptive meaning, provided that it is obvious from the context what we are taking this to be. Thus, if somebody has said 'Jones is a bad man', I may say 'That's right' or 'You are right', meaning no more than that Jones does indeed have those characteristics (for example a habit of seducing other people's wives at week-ends) which are commonly regarded, or regarded by us the parties to the conversation, as sufficient criteria of badness in men.

Although, however, I think that this may be the whole story with the word 'true', I cannot believe that it is with the word 'right'. For we do sometimes seem to use the words 'right' and 'wrong' of moral statements when we are not adverting to the descriptive meanings of the words used in the statements—and even when it is their descriptive meanings themselves which are in dispute. For example, suppose that a pacifist is arguing with a militarist, and says 'You are not right to say that it is glorious to mow down the enemy in swathes with a machine-gun', it need not be the case that the two parties are in agreement about the descriptive meaning of the word 'glorious' (about the necessary and sufficient criteria for the application of the word), and are disputing merely about whether the act of mowing down the enemy in swathes does have the characteristics specified. It is much more likely that they are in fundamental disagreement

about what characteristics acts have to have before one is entitled to call them glorious.

7. A move that might be tried, and which I was at one time inclined to make, is the following: we might say that sometimes the function of the word 'right' is simply to express agreement with what has been said, and similarly that of the word 'wrong' to express disagreement. So if someone has said 'Shut the door', I can express agreement by saying 'That's right'; and this is as if I had repeated the same words 'Shut the door'. Similarly if I had said 'That's wrong', this would be tantamount to repeating the words with the word 'not' inserted: 'Shut not the door', or, in modern idiom, 'Don't shut the door'. So, at any rate, it might be claimed; and the claim would receive support from the usage, now very common, by which 'Right' is used almost as the equivalent of 'Yes'. The usage is, unfortunately, misleading as to the logical properties of 'Right' in most of its other uses. If this move were admissible, we could say that the fact that we can use the words 'right' and 'wrong' of something that somebody has said tells us very little indeed about the logical character of what he has said; the fact, for example, that when a man has uttered a moral statement we can say that he was right or wrong does not even show that moral statements are not equivalent to plain commands; for we can agree with or disagree with, associate ourselves with or dissociate ourselves from, even plain commands, and use the words 'right' and 'wrong' for expressing this agreement or disagreement, as this example shows.

But this move will not quite do, for a reason which it will be interesting to examine. It is connected with the 'universalizability' of statements containing the words 'right' and 'wrong'. You will be familiar, I hope, with the thesis, now generally accepted, that in moral and other evaluative contexts the words 'right' and 'wrong', like other value-words, give to the statements in which they occur a covertly universal character. When I say that a man acted rightly I imply that there is some universal moral principle according to which his act was right. I will not now go into the complications and confusions which easily arise in connexion with this thesis, because I have tried to sort them out in *Freedom and Reason*, ch. 3. I merely want to point out that we have here a particular case of universalizability.

When I say, of something that somebody has said, that it was right, or that *he* was right, I am not merely expressing my agreement

204

with him, or associating myself with what he has said—as I would be if I repeated his words after him. I am implying that his utterance conforms to some principle or standard, which I am invoking. What sort of principle this is will vary with the type of utterance in question; but in all cases to cite it would be to give the reason why the utterance was called right—and unless we are prepared to admit the propriety of the demand for such a reason, we cannot (except in the somewhat degenerate usage mentioned earlier) properly use the word 'right'. This is not so with the word 'Yes', used to express agreement, or with a mere repetition of the utterance. If somebody says 'Shut the door', and I then say 'Yes, shut the door', I may have no reason at all for saying this—though of course I normally will have; but if instead I say 'That's right, shut the door', I am doing more than merely associating myself with the command or request; I am implying that the command to shut the door conforms to some principle or standard. I could properly be asked 'Why is it right?'; and, if asked, I could not properly reply 'No reason at all'. The reason might be, that doors should be shut when there is a draught, or when privacy is lacking; these are both principles, and are universal. I think that (apart from the 'degenerate' usage mentioned earlier) 'right' and 'wrong' are not normally used unless there is some such reason or principle in the background.

However, it still will not be the case that we can learn very much about the logical character of moral judgments by observing that we can use 'right' and 'wrong' of them. Perhaps we can learn a little. We noticed earlier that, when two people make mutually self-contradictory moral statements, one of them must be wrong. The question at issue is, How much does this prove about the logical character of moral statements? It proves, I think, that they are not equivalent to simple singular imperatives. For if one man says 'Shut the door' and another says (to the same person) 'Do not shut the door', it is not logically necessary that one or the other of them should be *wrong*. It is, indeed, logically impossible consistently to *agree* with both of them (or, for that matter, to *disagree* with both of them). A man who agreed with both would be saying what would be equivalent to 'Both shut the door and do not shut the door', and would be contradicting himself; a man who disagreed with both would be saying what would be equivalent to 'Neither shut the door nor do not shut the door', and would likewise be contradicting himself. It is on such grounds that I have maintained that 'Shut the

205

door' and 'Do not shut the door' are contradictories, and that the law of the excluded middle applies to them. But it might be the case that the two people who said 'Shut the door' and 'Do not shut the door' were just voicing mutually self-contradictory whims; or it might be that they were two serjeants trying an experiment on a recruit to see which of them he would obey; and in such cases it would be inappropiate to say that either of them was wrong (or for that matter right). But if one said 'You ought to shut the door' and the other said 'You ought not to shut the door', it would be appropriate to say either of these two things.

The reason for this is that, as I have repeatedly maintained, 'ought' is universalizable whereas the simple imperative is not. It is because an 'ought'-statement (owing to the universalizability of 'ought') already has to have a reason, that we can say of it that it is right or wrong; and so, naturally, to say these things of it commits us, in turn, to admitting the propriety of the question, What is *our* reason for agreeing or disagreeing with the moral statement? In short, the fact that we can say that one of the two parties to a moral disagreement must be wrong, shows us that moral judgments are universalizable. It does not, as some descriptivists have maintained, show that they are descriptive—in the sense of having descriptive meaning but no other.

8. This point is obscure, so I must explain it a bit more fully. If moral statements were descriptive (in this narrow sense) then the *meaning of the words* used would by itself determine the rightness or wrongness of the statement, given the situation about which the judgment was made. If we understood the meaning of the words used, and correctly observed the situation, we could no longer be in any doubt about the rightness or wrongness of the statement. This, I think, is what descriptivists want to prove to be the case; and it is to this end that they use the premiss that of two parties to a moral disagreement, one must be wrong. But the premiss does not justify so strong a conclusion. For suppose that we have two people who utter contradictory moral statements. I cannot, first, without self-contradiction, repeat their two moral statements after them with 'and' in between. But this a non-descriptivist can admit. Secondly, I cannot consistently agree with, or associate myself with, both of them. But this too need not trouble the non-descriptivist. Thirdly, I must admit that one or other of them is wrong. But from this it does not follow that there was some *pre-existing*, pre-determined

principle or rule (whether a meaning-rule or some other sort of rule does not matter) which determines *which* of the two is wrong. I might think for a long time, and then decide that one, and not the other, was wrong. When I had done this, I should have necessarily taken up or adopted some principle or standard—and my use of the word 'wrong' would be improper unless I had done this.

But the point to notice is that it did not have to be the case that *what* principle I adopted was already fixed for me by the meanings of the words in the original two statements. That is what would have to be the case if descriptivism were correct. I cannot say that neither of the two parties is wrong, for they are in disagreement with each other, and they are therefore each implying that the other is wrong—and, moreover, wrong in accordance with some principle or other, which may be different in their two cases; for they are making moral statements, and these have, because of universalizability, to be in accordance with principles. Since the principles in question result, in this case, in divergent moral statements (given that the facts are agreed) one of the principles has to be rejected, by me or by anybody else who considers the matter. But *which* of the two principles I shall reject, and on *what* principle I shall base my rejection, is not determined in advance of my moral thought about the matter. And in particular it is not determined, as descriptivists would have it, by the meanings of the words the two parties used, and the situation of which they were speaking.

So, though I am bound to say that one of the two parties is wrong, and though, in saying which of them is wrong, I am bound to commit myself to a principle of judgment in accordance with which I say it, it is not predetermined for me what this principle is to be. Therefore this long and involved argument results, not in a victory for descriptivism, but only in a conclusion which I have always embraced, namely that moral statements are universalizable, and therefore have descriptive meaning among other kinds of meaning.

9. In America, as in other places, you will find a great many philosophers who believe that they have not done their duty unless they have established the objectivity of moral statements. And you will also find a great many (the majority of American students, in my experience) who are convinced of their subjectivity. Please take a good look at me, because I am a very rare bird: one who is neither an objectivist nor a subjectivist, but believes that both these schools of thought are vitiated by the same error, namely descriptivism, and

are thought to exhaust the field only because of muddles, some of which I have been trying to expose in this lecture. It is high time that these muddles ceased to waste the time of moral philosophers, and divert them from what should be their proper task, that of asking how we can validly *reason* about what we ought to do—a task to which descriptivists have, *qua* descriptivists, contributed little that is durable.