A Theory of Metaethical Prescriptivism (Short Version)

Abstract: The 'prescriptivist' metaethical theory argued here makes the claim that moral assertions are neither true nor false; and thus, they are not knowable. The name 'prescriptivism' is *not* associated with Hare's (1952, 1963) theory. This theory hypothesizes that ethical assertions and value affirmations are 'prescriptions.' 'Descriptions' are assertions that are literally *true or false*, and 'prescriptions' are assertions intended to be *agreed-upon* (but not literally true or false). The 'correctness' of any ethical assertion (or value affirmation) is dependent upon what persons accept, tolerate, or agree-to, and does not refer to an objective moral reality.

Introduction

The debate about whether ethical assertions (i.e., normative 'ought' assertions) can be knowable continues into the 21st century. Moral realists maintain that there are objective moral truths independent of what anyone believes.[1] In opposition, anti-realists claim that moral assertions are incapable of truth or falsity. The 'non-cognitivist' anti-realist theory here makes the claim that moral assertions are neither true nor false; and thus, they are not knowable. I argue that ethical assertions function to *prescribe* and not *describe*. The distinction between a 'description' and 'prescription' is hypothesized here:

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[1] Moral realists hold that morality is a search for the truth about what is right, and where our obligations are. Richard Boyd (1988) contends that: 1) Moral assertions are true or false, 2) The truth or falsity of moral assertions is independent of human opinion, and 3) Ordinary canons of consistent reasoning constitute a reliable method for obtaining moral knowledge.

A '**description**' is an assertion that purports to express a correspondence (or a representation) of some state-of-affairs, where its correctness (or incorrectness) is *independent* of its acceptance (or non-acceptance) by particular persons.

A '**prescription**' is an assertion that purports to express a stipulation (or rule) upon a practice, where its correctness (or incorrectness) is *dependent* upon its acceptance (or non-acceptance) by particular persons.

Part I of this essay is an exposition of 'prescriptivism.' After prescriptivism is defined, its associated assumptions about (1) ontology, (2) value, (3) speaker semantics, and (4) the structure of moral argument are described. **Part II** explains why 'cultural relativism' is false. **Part III** describes what Prescriptivism isn't. It doesn't imply relativism, conventionalism, anarchy, extreme tolerance, or nihilism. **Part IV** examines a moral dilemma (viz. 'should Jill cheat on her philosophy test?') and discusses the concept of 'goodness.'

The goal of this essay is to present an overview of prescriptivism. In doing so, the many details about the prominent issues about 'linguistic reference,' 'the principle of compositionality,' 'propositions,' 'propositional attitudes,' and 'properties' will be left aside. In short, I have non-standard intuitions on these matters. A 'speaker theory' of reference and meaning (elaborated upon elsewhere) challenges formal theories of semantics where it is assumed that it is the composition of 'meaningful linguistic entities' (and their referents) that make a sentence 'meaningful.' Instead with a speaker theory of reference, a speaker's referent, on occasion of use, is dependent upon the speaker's intentions. It is *persons* who use linguistic expressions to *refer* to various objects (or

entities) and 'mean something' in a context. It is *persons* who intend that their assertion is 'truth-apt' or not. Words, phrases, and sentences (as linguistic entities) don't literally refer in natural language. 'Linguistic reference' occurs only in stipulated artificial languages. The compositionality of our thoughts is empirically related to the compositionality of concepts expressed, and not linguistic items.[2] Further, I maintain that a 'proposition' can be defined to be either 'descriptive' (truth-apt) or 'prescriptive' (not truth-apt) as stated above. It is misleading to say that we have 'attitudes' toward propositions. Finally, I assume that postulation of 'moral properties' isn't explanatory in metaethics. These viewpoints will be present in this essay, but not all can be defended here.

Part I. Metaethical Prescriptivism: Ethical Assertions are Prescriptions

I introduce metaethical prescriptivism:

Prescriptivism: Ethical assertions and substantive value affirmations are prescriptions. The 'correctness' of any ethical assertion (or value affirmation) is dependent upon what persons accept, tolerate, or agree-to, and does not refer to an objective moral reality.

Ethical assertions are intended to direct, or affect, human action. They stipulate a form of practice as an intentional, purposeful activity. Examples of ethical assertions include 'you should place your fork on the left-hand side of the plate' and 'abortion should (or should

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[2] With a 'speaker theory' of reference, a *well-formed sentence* is the *basic unit of meaning*, not the words that compose it. *Sentences* (and propositions) are the *primary meaningful constituents* of a language, and their *meaningfulnes*s is *not completely attributable* to sentence structure.

not) be legal.'   Metaethical prescriptivism maintains that ethical propositions may be *accepted* (or adopted) by persons, but that they are *neither true nor false*. The pertinent question: Is prescriptivism true or false? The evidence for believing prescriptivism is true is consistent with the following:

1) Ontology: A belief-desire-value-intention ontology regarding human behavior is assumed in a materialist philosophy of mind. A *'belief'* is understood as a functional mental state involving affirming, doubting, or suspending judgment about a propositional assertion. Beliefs function to *represent the world* (and assert something *objective* that is *true* independent of its acceptance by persons). Contrary to moral realism, there are no 'moral beliefs' because *moral assertions* are *not beliefs* (i.e., moral propositions don't represent the world). Moral assertions are not truth-apt, so they are not beliefs. There are no independent metaphysical 'moral facts.'

Against varieties of moral realism, it is assumed that the fundamental existent is *physical entities* (not objects). Mental states are best described in naturalist-like material terms. A *'desire'* is a functional brain state that is a primitive psychological, emotional, or hormonal state that motivates many of our actions. Beliefs and desires lead us to action. A *'value'* is a functional physical brain state that measures the worth or importance of certain physical objects, events or actions. Assertions of value are the product of a person's desires, feelings, interests, beliefs, and other values in a social environment. An *'intention to act'* is a determination to behave in a certain way. An *'action'* is defined as behaviors that are under our control or could be if we gave them enough thought. Not only do *intentions* (as functional brain states) manifest themselves in *actions*; the

intention to communicate using language is often called a *speech act*. In various contexts, persons assert (i.e., express, utter, communicate) thoughts (i.e., well-formed sentences) that are intended to be either descriptive or prescriptive.

2) The Subjectivity of Value: According to non-cognitivists, claims about 'what is valuable' are subjective and dependent upon humans. This responds to the question, 'Do acts and objects have value independent of them being desired, *or* are actions and objects valuable because we desire them?' Non-cognitivists believe that the second response is true. The conflict between cognitivists and non-cognitivists is characterized by opposing beliefs about the alleged 'objectivity' or 'subjectivity' of value:

(a) Value is objective (secularism). According to many secular moral cognitivists, value has a real nature and existence that is independent of humans. Moral value is independent of our psychology and of our likes, dislikes, interests, and desires. Moral properties are often posited to explain eternal moral truths.

(b) Value is objective (theism). According to many theists, there exists a supernatural entity **x** knowing of all things (including moral duties) whose ethics should be followed. Stephen Prothero (2010) describes eight major religions.

(c) Value is subjective (secularism). According to secular non-cognitivists, value owes its existence to the interests, desires, and attitudes of humans (and other sentient creatures). Without sentient creatures, there would be no desires, no values, and no assertions about what is good. The attribution of value isn't about the existence of an external element of reality. For the protection and well-being

of the species, persons have developed rules (i.e., principles) of what are right and wrong actions, based upon the weighing of various values. Values can be changed or adjusted on the basis of new information, or with sensitivity to value conflicts or differences in value. Values evolve.

David Hume (1740) famously challenged the 'objectivity' of value in *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Hume argued that even in a case of premeditated cold-blooded murder, there is no objective wrongness to such an act, but instead the act is morally wrong because it violates our *shared sentiments (i.e., feelings, emotions, values)* of what is good and bad. The prohibition against the killing of innocent persons is the result of moral sentiments including empathy, compassion, and guilt. Ethical assertions are not the perception (or misperception) of a moral truth, but instead express and codify ethical standards (see Nidditch, ed. 1978, pp. 468-469). Hume's fundamental intuition about the subjective core of morality seems to be true.

Hume's 'belief-desire theory' of moral motivation is also accepted here. Moral motivation involves the presence of beliefs and desires. On this theory of moral motivation, values are adopted (or condemned) for non-random subjective reasons, reflecting desired ways of life. A desire to participate and perpetuate life within civil societies seems to motivate the adoption of basic values. Widely held values (e.g., being respectful of people, keeping promises, telling the truth, not stealing, etc.) function to resolve conflicts of interests, develop positive character, promote happiness, and enable society to survive. A person cannot function without values, any more than without beliefs. Individual praise and social rewards lead to the pursuit of socially desired

conducts. Feelings of guilt, a fear of social rebuke, and legal penalties constrain our actions. Having (good) standards of value doesn't always motivate consistent actions; lapses in self-prescribed morality happen. Sometimes a person's 'weakness' of will, in combination with countervailing motivations and emotions may lead to an ethical lapse (or 'moral mistake').

Although desires are the primary motivator of intentional action, we do not always act upon brute desires (e.g., greed, infatuation) because we are 'informed' that some actions may have adverse consequences (to oneself and others). We often pursue desires based on information and self-restraint, which are called 'informed desires.' Let us illustrate an 'informed' desire:

> Sally desires inexpensive clothing. But suppose that Sally also deplores low wage sweatshop working conditions. If Sally learns that a certain brand of inexpensive clothing employs sweatshop conditions, Sally may no longer desire (or value, or intend) the purchase of that clothing item, even if it is inexpensive. Sally adopts a value hierarchy that prefers 'boycotting sweatshop items' over 'purchasing inexpensive clothing.'

This ontology of beliefs, desires, values, and intentions can explain most of our actions. A moral judgment is a complex mental state exemplifying these four functional states.

Not all ethical disagreements involve a disagreement in basic value. A basic value may be agreed-upon, but pragmatic issues come into play. For example, a community can agree that childhood education is good, but may disagree on what actions should be undertaken to achieve this outcome on a cost-effective basis. 'Should a new school be

built, and if so, at what expense should it be built, and where should it be built?' John Dewey (1939) contends that assertions of what is 'right' or 'good' occur with changing circumstances, involving persons with distinct interests and conceptions of what is good.

3) The Speaker Semantics of Moral Assertion: According to metaethical prescriptivism, ethical assertions are prescriptions, even if they are falsely believed to be descriptions by a moral cognitivist. Moral assertions do not function to 'represent reality' as do beliefs, but instead they function to represent choice and guide action. Ethical assertions can be agreed-on, adopted, or accepted by persons having shared values. With prescriptions, *a social consensus is sought, and not the discovery of ethical truth*.

According to a prescriptivist, an ordinary assertion such as 'I *believe* that **S** should do **a**,' where **a** designates an action, is *not* a statement of belief at all. Instead, it is a prescription. It is more accurate to say that 'I *prescribe* that **S** should do **a**.' Moral cognitivists talk strongly of values and ethical assertions as being 'beliefs.' But non-cognitivists don't believe that ethical assertions are beliefs, because 'beliefs' are either true or false. It is more accurate to say that values can be adopted and endorsed, and that ethical behavior is prescribed. [2]

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[2] This interpretation is at odds with moral realism. Russ Shafer-Landau (2003) applauds realism because it "preserves ordinary talk of moral truth." He says when *we* face a moral perplexity, "we often see ourselves as engaged in a search for the truth about who is in the right, or where our obligations lie. We can well explain the point and persistence of moral disagreement by attributing to agents the presupposition that there is a right answer awaiting discovery" (p. 23).

Another salient feature of moral assertions is that *sincere* assertions are *universalizable and categorical* as contrasted to merely stating one's personal preference, taste, or ideal. This aspect of morality was strongly emphasized by R.M. Hare (1952, 1963, 1981). Persons have specific reasons (i.e., facts and values) for having a categorical commitment for why an action should be done. Sincerely held ethical assertions express *a commitment to uphold one's adopted stance* against conflicting stances. In other words, the same policy or principle applies in similar situations as a matter of consistency. This sincere commitment (or desire) to uphold one's own values consistently is compatible with Hume's belief-desire theory of moral motivation.

4) The Structure of Moral Argument: Hume's claim that an ethical 'ought' conclusion cannot be inferred solely from a set of descriptive 'is' premises is true. On the prescriptivist view, any argument with an ethical 'ought' conclusion is necessarily derived from a set of premises which includes at least one prescriptive (ought) assertion.

Let us observe how descriptions and prescriptions function in practical ethical reasoning. We will consider the enhanced ban on intoxicated driving. Beginning in 1980, a grassroots group called Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) launched a campaign to curb tolerance for alcohol-impaired driving in the United States. In the following example, suppose that Smith has been drinking and driving with a blood-alcohol content of 0.32 (i.e., a high level of alcohol intoxication). How does this fact lead to the conclusion that 'Smith should be subject to legal penalty'? Below is how a prescriptivist identifies 'descriptions' and 'prescriptions' in this case:

(#1) **Description:** Driver intoxication often causes auto accidents.

(#2) **Prescription (value):** Auto accidents have negative value.

(#3) **Prescription (ethical principle):** Drivers shouldn't be intoxicated.

(#4) **Prescription (ethical principle):** Intoxicated drivers should be subject to stricter enforcement and higher legal penalty for violation (the MADD principle).

(#5) **Description:** Smith was driving with a high blood-alcohol content of .32.

(#6) **Prescription:** Therefore, Smith should be subject to strict legal penalties.

The above argument illustrates how a prescriptive ethical conclusion #6 is the result of several prescriptive (ought) premises. Premises #2, #3, and #4 are prescriptions and depend upon human agreement of what ought to be valued. In contrast, premises #1 and #5 are descriptions and are true (or false) independent of human agreement.

We can shorten the above ethical argument into a deductive form as follows:

(1) **Prescription (ethical principle)**: If **S** drives impaired, **S** should be subject to penalty.

(2) **Description:** Smith drove impaired.

(3) **Prescription (ethical conclusion)**: Therefore, Smith should be penalized.

Although this short argument has a valid *modus ponens* form, such that *if* all of the premises are true, then the conclusion must be true; it should be recognized that the argument is not sound, since the first premise is not literally true. In logic, it is stipulated that an argument is 'sound' if and only if its premises are true, and its form is valid. Given the definition of a prescription (that it is neither true nor false) *it is impossible to ever generate a sound ethical argument*, given the standard definition of what constitutes a sound deductive argument.

With a moral argument, the best we can do is to present a valid argument, where it is *assumed* (as a fiction) that the value and ethical premises have a truth value, and that the validity of the argument is determined by the standard rules of deductive logic. *The assumption* that ethical values and principles are 'true or false' is *false*, but there is no harm in assessing the validity of arguments, if it is understood that the value premises don't literally have a truth value.

Part II. The Falsity of Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism is a doctrine about the nature of morality. Cultural relativism follows from the empirical recognition that different societies have different moral codes. The modern impetus for the support of philosophical cultural relativism arose in the late 19th century with the Western study of cultural anthropology. Anthropologists were fascinated with a diversity of non-Western cultures, including the Eskimos. An influential scholar was Edward Westermarck (1932) who was a social scientist and wrote anthropological and philosophical works, defending forms of cultural relativism. In 1947, when the United Nations was debating "human rights," the American Anthropological Association issued a controversial statement declaring that moral values are relative to cultures and that there is no way of showing that the values of one culture are better than those of another. What exactly is the doctrine of metaethical cultural relativism? The following is a standard definition (among several existing variations):

> **Metaethical Cultural Relativism (MCR):** The truth or falsity of moral judgments, or their justification is neither absolute nor universal, but is relative to the traditions, convictions, or practices of a group of persons. With respect to

truth-value, this implies that a moral judgment such as 'Polygamy is morally wrong' may be true relative to one society, but false relative to another. The standards of justification in the two societies may differ, but there is no objective basis for resolving these differences. For any moral sentence and the sentence's negation, it is possible for both to be asserted truly. A proposition about the morality of an action is 'correct' for (or relative to) a society just in case the action conforms to a society's moral code or system of beliefs about morality.

A moral relativist, Gilbert Harman (1996) (not his precise definition above) states that "There are many different moral frameworks, none of which is more correct than the others" (p. 5).

The prescriptivist does not accept cultural relativism as a true description of morality. Prescriptivism doesn't imply that the 'correctness' of an ethical assertion depends upon cultural moral frameworks and that assertions of ethical rightness just *means* that a certain action has cultural approval. Nor does it imply that any moral framework is 'equally as good' as any other. Instead, prescriptivism allows that *there are moral frameworks (e.g., a system of laws, agreements) that can be prescribed as being better* than others. For instance, it may be prescribed that 'forced female circumcision is wrong,' or 'human slavery is wrong' in all societies.

The concise (and true) reason why metaethical cultural relativism (MCR) is false, is that if the meaning (and truth) of ethical assertions was about their correctness 'relative to a culture,' this would indicate that persons would only be saying something (purportedly true) about the existing practices and codes of a culture. Persons would not

be adopting a position on the substantive correctness of a practice. This problem has been long recognized by critics of moral relativism. Harman's theory of non-objective 'cultural agreements' as the source of ethical normativity and variability, doesn't capture the *prescriptive* intent behind the bargaining.

Part III. What 'Prescriptivism' Is Not

Prescriptivism should not be associated with cultural relativism, conventionalism, anarchy, tolerance, or nihilism. Prescriptivism is a descriptive theory. No normative claims can be inferred from a descriptive theory. Let us rebut these various claims:

1) Prescriptivism does not make the *normative* claim that any conduct that is accepted (or tolerated) at a given time by a culture *is* morally permissible for that given time and culture. An ethical proposition isn't 'correct' relative to societal agreements.

2) Prescriptivism does not imply 'conventionalism,' a normative theory that you should always act in conformity with your society's norms.

3) Prescriptivism does not imply that persons should just arbitrarily pick their own value system, and merely follow their own interests, inclinations, and impulses without consideration of others. It doesn't endorse anarchy.

4) Prescriptivism doesn't imply that we should be tolerant of existing (or new) practices.

5) Prescriptivism does not imply moral nihilism (i.e., values are senseless and useless and should be abandoned). A person's normative character is based upon non-objective values and principles that he or she adopts and faithfully practices.

Part IV. A Moral Question: Identifying Descriptions and Prescriptions

That prescriptivism is morally *neutral* when describing normative situations needs illustration. For example, it makes no judgment about whether Jill should (or should not) cheat on her philosophy test. This case is from Louis Pojman (1995):

> Jill is presently getting a D in her philosophy course and sees an opportunity to raise her grade by cheating on an exam. She would like to get a better grade, for if she doesn't do better, her father will very likely take away her automobile, and her chances of getting into professional school will be severely diminished. So, Jill considers cheating. Yet she is troubled by the thought of cheating. Ought she to cheat? (p. 187).

How do desires, values, beliefs, and intentions fit into this story? Where are the descriptions and prescriptions? Let's follow the premises and outcomes in the reasoning of Jill's self-deliberation:

> **(#1) Prescription (value, principle):** Jill accepts that in general, 'it is wrong to cheat.'
>
> **(#2) Prescription (desire, value):** Jill desires getting into professional school, maintaining possession of her automobile, and getting a B on her test.
>
> **(#3) Descriptions:** Jill wants to get a B test grade to raise her grade from D to C (true). Jill doesn't have time to study for this morning's test (true). Jill can achieve a B by cheating (either true or false). Jill will not get caught or punished (either true or false).
>
> **(#4) Prescription:** Therefore, Jill ought or ought-not cheat.

This case illustrates how a moral conclusion involves *the personal weighing* of (1) values, (2) desires, (3) beliefs, and (4) normative principles in cases of value conflict. There is (most often) a strong connection between a person's values and motivations to act, but at times, following one's own ethical principles is fallible. As Jill actively deliberates whether to cheat this time (or not), she might vow to herself, to study harder and earlier in the future to avoid this predicament.

In this situation, under ordinary standards of morality and integrity, most of us would want Jill to embrace value premise in #1 as a more important compared to her present desires and values in #2. We urge her to adopt the second option of the ethical decision in #4. Among our reasons for urging Jill not to cheat: (a) if everyone cheated the institution of testing would be disabled, (b) one should respect a test as a means for learning and verifying one's understanding, (c) cheating isn't fair to other students that don't cheat, and (d) she doesn't know that she will get a B by cheating, nor that she won't be caught and punished. But if Jill is indifferent to the scholarship standards of others, and decides to risk cheating, there is no fact that make's Jill's decision objectively wrong and no sound deductive argument proving Jill's action is wrong.

The Concept of Goodness

With some popular contemporary (secular) Western opinion that affirms that personal values are 'subjective' and 'relative,' it might be thought obvious that what is 'good' is subjective and relative, and that prescriptivism is just elaborating upon common sense. But this is not the case. The widely favored philosophical view since the time of the early Greeks is that value is objective. Moral realists have claimed that 'goodness' and

'value' are 'natural properties' inherent in material objects, actions, experiences, and states of affairs, and that moral concepts can be defined in non-moral terms. From ancient times, philosophers speculated on what human values and actions are *intrinsically good*. The intrinsic goodness of something is thought to give persons a reason, or moral motivation, to attain it. G.E. Moore (1903) sought to clarify the notion of 'intrinsic goodness' as a 'non-natural' property. One of the most extensive lists of 'intrinsic goods' was collected by William Frankena (1973) and includes: life, activity, health, happiness, contentment, knowledge, aesthetic experience, love, friendship, power and experiences of achievement, self-expression, freedom, good reputation, honor, and esteem.

In contrast, from the perspective of a prescriptivist, Frankena's list is *not* a set of objective intrinsic goods. It is a list of subjective species and personalized relative goods. The question 'what *has* intrinsic value' contrasts with our metaethical question, 'what *is* intrinsic value?' The non-cognitivist asks how could you determine whether an item or action has intrinsic value? What does it mean for an item or action to be 'valuable for its own sake' that is independent of our interests? The concepts of 'intrinsic goodness' and 'inherent value' are indefensible postulations. They invite the mistaken belief of the existence of objective goodness and value. That **S** possesses 'personal values' and has an 'intrinsic interest' in **x**, is a better characterization.

J.L. Mackie (1977) offers the following response to theories of objective value and goodness. According to Mackie, an item **x** (e.g., action, physical item, state-of-affairs, policy, etc.) is valued, or is good, because we desire it, and not because it has intrinsically desirable properties. A good **x** satisfies some set of wants, interests, or

requirements. Whether something is morally good is relative to a set of values, moral standards, or point of view. Mackie asserts that attempts to define 'goodness' in terms of non-moral properties or identifying 'goodness' with intrinsic objective properties is mistaken. Instead, 'good' is used as an 'adjective' for an item that satisfies some subjective want or interest. In one context a car can be described (or prescribed) as a 'good car' (e.g., for a small family), but the same car is not a 'good car' relative to the interests of a race car driver (e.g., if it doesn't go over 120 MPH). Harman (1996) observes that "whether something is morally good, right, or just, is always relative to a set of moral coordinates, a set of values or moral standards, a certain moral point of view" (p. 17).

Conclusion

Moral realists maintain that morality is objective and independent of us. Is this consistent with the evidence of actual moral phenomena? On the contrary, s*hared values* among persons seems to *better explain* a moral consensus than the *discovery* of objective values. It is observed that some value agreements are difficult to attain, and differences may seem intractable. Sometimes conflicts arise from affective attitudes. 'Affective attitudes' are an emotional affection or repulsion towards an object or practice. Different persons have conflicting attitudes (e.g., the value of a fetus, use of recreational drugs, homosexual relations, and the proper treatment of animals) where a disagreement in value is 'basic.' But with the appeal to facts, values, consequences, and ethical arguments, changes in *beliefs* and changes in *values* can occur within a person and between generations (e.g., marijuana legalization, the legalization of same-sex marriage).

Possessing true beliefs is crucial to having informed values. False beliefs and ignorance may lead to misinformed values and action that is harmful to oneself or others.

Moral cognitivists sometimes criticize noncognitive theories because it is alleged that non-realist theories cannot explain the concept of a 'moral mistake.' It is said that a 'mistake' cannot be made unless there is a moral proposition that is true or false that one can be mistaken about. This objection is without merit. A moral mistake can be talked about without assuming moral truth. Most people in the United States think that it was a moral mistake to deny civil rights to persons of color into the 1960s. A newly converted vegetarian might think that it was a personal mistake to have been once consuming meat. We can also admit to making 'moral mistakes' on a personal level when acting out of anger, greed, lust, selfishness, and a like, or from being unaware of non-moral situational facts, or not having knowledge of other persons' expectations or values; all without believing in an independent moral reality.

The distinction between descriptions and prescriptions helps provide a positive characterization of how morality and moral language works. A prescriptivist's moral talk remains similar to that of a moral cognitivist, but without making any claim of moral knowledge. That values are relative to the existence of persons doesn't imply that what is morally right is relative to cultural convention, or that opposing assertions are 'equally correct.' Prescriptivists can talk about what is 'right and wrong' and 'good and bad' conduct (e.g., about drunk driving, abortion) without pretense of something that 'lies beyond' the values that we endorse. Despite that there are no ethical truths, this doesn't preclude us from making reasoned (and formally valid, but not sound) ethical arguments.

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