

Cognitivism about imperatives

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1 Introduction

Sentences in the imperative mood – imperatives, for short – are traditionally supposed to not be truth-apt. They are not in the business of describing the world, but of telling people what to do. They cannot therefore be true or false – for to be true is to succeed in the business of describing the world (and to be false is to fail). Commonly, it is further supposed that though imperatives do not have truth conditions or truth values, they do have something analogous, namely compliance conditions and compliance values. “Attack at dawn!” (addressed to you) is complied with iff you attack at dawn.¹ The meaning of a declarative sentence is its truth-conditions; the meaning of an imperative sentence is its compliance conditions. This position has been held by a diverse range of philosophers; I hold a modified version of it myself.

In this paper I discuss a rival position. On that view, *cognitivism about imperatives*, (henceforth, “cognitivism” for short) imperatives are truth-apt; have truth-values and truth-conditions. I argue that cognitivism can offer a better account of imperative consequence (of under what circumstances imperatives and indicatives entail one another) than can simple versions of the traditional view. Better, I argue, but not good enough – the cognitivist’s criterion of imperative consequence has counter-examples that cast doubt on cognitivism itself.

If imperatives have truth conditions, what are they? There are varying possible answers to this question, but I think the best is as follows: anything you can say using the imperative mood, you could say instead using a performative. For example, instead of saying “Attack at dawn!”, I could have said “I command that you attack at dawn!” The thesis of cognitivism, then, is that imperatives are equivalent to the corresponding performatives, and the performatives in turn are true iff it is so commanded.² That is to say:

“Attack at dawn!” means the same as “I command that you attack at dawn!”

“I command that you attack at dawn.” (spoken by me) is true iff I command that you attack at dawn.

So,

“Attack at dawn!” (spoken by me) is true iff I command that you attack at dawn.

Anyone, cognitivist or not, should agree with part of this. Imperatives are equivalent to performatives that can be used to the same effect; and the sentences that express performatives can also express reports of what the speaker requests, commands, etc; and those reports are truth-apt. If you are *not* a cognitivist, however, you will say that the sentences normally used to express performatives (“I command that you attack at dawn.”) are *ambiguous* between a performative (which is equivalent to an imperative, and is not truth-apt) and a report (which is not equivalent to any

1 Where I use “compliance”, some other authors use “satisfaction” or “obedience”. My usage follows Smart (1984: 16–19).

2 Such a view is explicitly held by David Lewis (1970: 220–226; 1979: 234–236); and by Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit (1998: 248–249). A related position is also held by Huw Price (1988: ch. 3). I have considered calling cognitivism about imperatives “Australian cognitivism” due to its widespread influence among philosophers in or associated with Australia.

imperative, and is truth-apt). It would be an equivocation to suppose that this shows that imperatives are truth-apt. The essence of cognitivism, on the other hand, is the denial that any such ambiguity exists. According to the cognitivist, to make a request just is to report that one is doing so.

2 *An unforeseen advantage of cognitivism*

The problem of imperative consequence is the problem of explaining how it can be that imperatives entail one another or be inconsistent with one another, or how it is that arguments containing imperatives can be valid. This is a serious matter – think about the question of whether the articles of a statute or of a set of exam instructions are inconsistent.³ The trouble is that logical concepts such as entailment, inconsistency and validity are usually defined in terms of truth, but according to non-cognitivism, imperatives are not truth-apt.

This is a big problem for the traditional view, but obviously not much of one for someone who denies the premise that imperatives are not truth-apt. It is worth looking in detail at how cognitivism would handle the problem. Take the case of deciding whether an argument containing imperatives is valid, for example:

(C1) Attack at dawn and take no prisoners!

Therefore (C2) Attack at dawn!

To determine whether (C) is valid, says the cognitivist, simply translate all imperatives into the indicatives that report that the right sort of command has been made, and then check for validity in the usual way. Translating (C) results in (C') below:

(C1') I command that you attack at dawn and take no prisoners.

Therefore (C2') I command that you attack at dawn.

(C') seems to be valid, according to the usual truth-preservation criterion of validity. It can't be true that I commanded that you attack at dawn and take no prisoners, without it being true that I commanded that you attack at dawn. (We have to take “I command that...” as an indirect speech report, so that the truth of (C2') does not require that I ordered you to “attack at dawn” in just those words and no more. If that is impermissible, so much the worse for cognitivism). So, according to the cognitivist (C) is valid, which is the right result.

The cognitivist's criterion of validity also says sensible things about arguments that cause trouble for certain non-cognitivist approaches to the problem of imperative consequence. Take argument (A), below, for example:

(A1) Attack at dawn if the weather is fine!

(A2) The weather is fine.

Therefore (A3) Attack at dawn!

(A) ought to be valid – ought to be an instance of modus ponens even – but there are certain technical problems for non-cognitivists in explaining in what sense it could be. The non-cognitivist could say, for example, that (C) is valid because it preserves compliance, rather than truth. But (A) preserves neither compliance nor truth.

(A1) also raises problems because, at least apparently, it puts the imperative mood inside the scope

3 For an argument that this question deserves to be taken seriously, see Vranas (2010).

of a conditional. Only the consequent of (A1) is in the imperative mood; the antecedent is in the indicative. Non-cognitivists generally write this off as a parochial feature of English and treat (A1) as, in effect, a command that the conditional “You attack at dawn if the weather is fine” be true. That has the odd result that (A1) is equivalent to the contraposed imperative conditional “Let the weather not be fine if you do not attack at dawn!”

The cognitivist has neither of these problems. It is particularly easy for the cognitivist to make sense of an imperative within the scope of a conditional, since on her view, imperatives are truth-apt. Here is the cognitivist's translation of argument (A):

(A1') If the weather is fine, then I command that you attack at dawn.

(A2') The weather is fine.

Therefore (A3') I command that you attack at dawn.

(A') is surely valid, and even an instance of modus ponens just as I claimed that (A) was. So according to the cognitivist, (A) is valid, and is an instance of modus ponens – the right results again, and ones that are difficult for a non-cognitivist to obtain.

3 *Problems for cognitivism*

I said that I hold a modified version of non-cognitivism about imperatives. Why so, given all that I have just said about the merits of cognitivism?

Before I say why I reject cognitivism, let me first dismiss an objection to cognitivism that is commonly heard. This is the objection that cognitivism about imperatives is contrary to common sense. This objection simply confuses long-standing philosophical consensus with common sense. “Truth” in this context is a philosophers' regimentation of the ordinary meaning of the word “true” (as anyone knows who's tried to teach undergraduates not to be truth-relativists). If it suits us to say that imperatives are truth-apt, then why not do so? Besides, the problem of imperative consequence by itself shows that two pieces of long-standing philosophical consensus, both of which have a claim to be supported by common sense – the thesis that imperatives are not truth-apt and the thesis that validity is truth-preservation – are in conflict. I happen to favour rejecting the latter; but I do not think that rejecting the former is intrinsically more outrageous.

My reasons for rejecting cognitivism are flaws in the cognitivist's theory of imperative consequence – interesting flaws, which I hope cognitivists will attempt to repair.

3.1 *Problem 1: unwanted validities*

Consider argument (S):

(S1) Attack at dawn!

*Therefore (S2) Someone commands something.

Here is the cognitivist's translation, (S'):

(S1') I command that you attack at dawn.

Therefore (S2') Someone commands something.

(S') is valid, so if cognitivism is true, then (S) is valid. But (S) seems invalid to me. It's hard to say why without roping in my own theory of imperative consequence, but I can try to say, roughly, and in informal terms, what seems to be wrong with it. (S), it seems to me, has the kind of irrelevance

about it that makes for invalidity even in classical logic – the premise is about who attacks when; the conclusion is about who commands what – the premises and the conclusion have different subject matters, and therefore the argument cannot be valid.

If you're already a non-cognitivist about imperatives, I hope that that sounds reasonable to you. You now have a good reason, by your own lights, to reject cognitivism. But I imagine that cognitivists will reject a premise of my argument here. Shouldn't it be agreed by all hands, says the cognitivist, that the imperative mood is “about commanding”, in the rough and informal sense of “about” that I used in saying why I thought (S) was invalid. So (S1) and (S2) do not have wholly different subject matters – (S1), like every imperative, *is* about who commands what.

In reply to this I think it is best to take another tack in arguing that (S) is invalid – a tack of logical parody. (S), I maintain, is neither more nor less valid than (T), below:

(T1) The weather is fine.

*Therefore (T2) Someone asserts something.

But (T) is invalid by the cognitivist's lights, as it does not preserve truth (counter-example: the weather is fine but no-one is around to comment on it).

I have two points to make about (T). First, if (T) is logically analogous to (S) (and it certainly looks like it is to me) then (S) is invalid, and so the cognitivist's account of imperative consequence is false. It's not on the cards for the cognitivist to accept that (T) is valid, because part of the benefit of cognitivism is retaining the truth-preservation criterion of validity, and (T) does not preserve truth.

Second, imagine someone who, for whatever perverse reason, wanted to maintain that (T) was valid. Suppose I said to that person that (T) was irrelevant – that its premise is about the weather, and its conclusion is about who asserts what. Suppose they gave me a reply analogous to the reply I offered the cognitivist as a reply to my earlier argument that (S) is irrelevant – that I should agree that the indicative mood is “about asserting”, so that the premise and conclusion of (T) do overlap in subject matter after all. That would be a poor defence against the charge that (T) is irrelevant; and I think the defence I anticipated earlier to my charge that (S) is irrelevant is poor for the same reason.

3.2 Problem 2: unwanted consistencies

People can command inconsistently, and when they do, their commands are inconsistent with one another. However, it is not inconsistent to report that someone (even oneself) has commanded inconsistently. Therefore, contra cognitivism, commands are not equivalent to reports of commands.

Let's use an example to make the problem clearer – (1) and (2) are an inconsistent set of commands:

(1) Attack!

(2) Do not attack!

The cognitivist holds that these commands are equivalent to the reports (1') and (2') below:

(1') I command that you attack.

(2') I command that you do not attack.

(1') and (2') are not an inconsistent set, however. For it is not inconsistent to report that an inconsistent set of commands has been made. It is possible to command inconsistently, out of

forgetfulness, or perversity, or out of the desire to make a philosophical point: hey you, reader of this paper, attack and do not attack! I may now fairly and without (further) contradiction report to you what I have just done: I commanded that you attack and I commanded that you not attack. So reporting is all the the set of (1') and (2') does; so (1') and (2') are not an inconsistent set. If cognitivism is true, then (1) is equivalent to (1') and (2) to (2'), so if cognitivism is true, then (1) and (2) are not an inconsistent set. But (1) and (2) are an inconsistent set, so cognitivism is false.

A cognitivist can get (1) and (2) to be inconsistent by tinkering with the details of their cognitivism. Where the cognitivist previously said that a command is equivalent to the report that it is so commanded, let them now say that a command is equivalent to a report that it is so commanded conjoined with a report that the contrary is not commanded. On this view (1) and (2) are equivalent not to (1') and (2'), but to (1'') and (2''):

(1'') I command that you attack and I do not command that you not attack.

(2'') I command that you do not attack and I do not command that you attack.

(1'') and (2'') are indeed inconsistent, so we have no inconsistency problem here. But this revised cognitivism lacks the merit of making the indicative sentences that express performatives unambiguous. “I command that you attack” is now ambiguous between a report that I so command (which is true iff I command that you attack) and a performative having the same effect as (1) (which is true iff I command that you attack and do not also command that you not attack).⁴

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