Communicating with Commands

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Abstract:

A command is that which expresses imperative sentences or requests or instructions. Arguments are made with commands or imperative sentences. Those arguments cannot be accommodated within the scope of the classical logic. Philosophers and logicians do not take the same stand regarding the existence of imperative arguments. This paper is an attempt to undertake the issue of the possibility of inferences with commands or prescriptions. In conclusion, it is shown that those arguments exist as in our every-day life we face many arguments like these and they can also be determined as valid or invalid.

Keywords: Commands, Prescriptions, Imperatives, Imperative arguments, Extended logic, Defense of imperative arguments.

Introduction

A command is that which expresses a request or prescriptions or imperatives that gives advice or instruction. It is also sometimes called mandates.

For example, Post the letter.

It may be symbolically expressed as "!P" [where P be the event of posting the letter, "!" be the operator of a command or imperative.

Commands generally possess some features:

1. They have performative dimension.
2. They occur in a context.
3. They are neither true nor false.

Classical logic is ordinarily defined as the study of arguments consisting of propositions which are declarative sentences. But in our experience, we find many arguments consisting of commands or imperative sentences.

Example,

1. Post the letter. [!P]

   Therefore, post the letter or burn it. [!P v !Q]

2. If you want your presentation on slide-show, press F5. [P]

So, the question which arises is this: how can 'imperatives in the form of arguments' be defended? It is the fact that imperatives and declaratives are different forms of speech acts and imperatives do not have truth-values or truth conditions. The problem is that due to the absence of any truth value and the inapplicability of the rules of two-valued logic, they cannot be handled within the framework of classical two-valued logic. So a new logical system is needed in order to deal with imperative arguments.

However, philosophers do not take uniform stand in this matter. Philosophers who are skeptics are not ready to accept that imperative inferences exist. This paper is an attempt to

deal with the possibility of imperative inferences. The first section of the paper discusses the arguments of Bernard Williams (1963) who denies the possibility of imperative inferences because of conflicting presuppositions in the premises. The second section includes the views of Nicholas Rescher and John Robinson (1966) who defend imperative inference by making a distinction between two kinds of disjunction for refuting Williams's argument and the view of Peter B.M. Vranas (2008) who reformulates Williams to establish the position that imperative inferences not only exists but possible, useful, and straight forward. The concluding section contains some comments on the issue.

Argument of Bernard Williams (1963):

Bernard Williams argues that "there is not in general anything that can be called imperative inference."[1]

It is worth quoting a paragraph from Williams's writing to understand the issue.

We see an objection to construing the schema ["do x or do y; do not do x; so do y"] as anything that could be called a pattern of inference. For the first premiss presupposes permission to do x, and permission to do y; but the second premiss, 'do not do x', obviously has the force of denying permission to do x. Thus, the speaker implicitly gives permission or admits something with his first utterance, which he withdraws with the second; and this can be construed only as the speaker changing his mind, or going back on what he first said. This destroys any resemblance of this sequence of commands to an inference; it is essential to the idea of an inference of q from a set of premises P that in reaching q, the speaker should not go back on or change his mind about any of the members of P – the form of an inference is 'given P, q.[2]

Williams intends to show that in a disjunctive imperative inference for example,

Do x or Do y!

Do not do x!

Therefore, do y!

The first premise presupposes the permission to do x or do y. But in the second premise the permission for doing x is withdrawn. Thus, the speaker admits something in the first premise, which he withdraws with the second. It can be considered that it is a case of the speaker's changing his mind, or going back to what he first said.

It is noteworthy that Williams excludes the possibility of imperative inferences but he is of opinion that there are some relations between imperatives but that does not mean that imperative inferences are possible. To quote Williams:

I do admit that there are certain logical relations between imperatives… What I deny is that this fact enables us in general to apply the notion of inference to imperatives.[3]

Nicolas Rescher and John Robinson's view

In their article, 'Can one infer Commands from Commands?'[4] Nicholas Rescher and John Robinson (1966) make a distinction between 'Choice–offering' and 'Alternative-presenting' disjunctive commands. They hold that the command 'Do x or do y' is inconsistent with 'Do not do x' if we take 'or' in 'choice-offering' sense, but it is not

inconsistent if 'or' can be used in its 'alternative-presenting' sense. Rescher in *The Logic of Commands* calls this the 'alternative indicating disjunction'. According to Rescher and Robinson, "an alternative indicating disjunctive command is not to be taken as offering a choice but as indicating that one of certain alternatives is to be done."[5] They intend to mean here that one of certain alternatives is to be done is true of any disjunctive command and some such commands do not have the permissive presuppositions claimed by Williams.

The issue centres round the function of "or" in a single command or as a connective between distinct commands. They are of opinion that "or" functions "as a legitimate connective between a pair of commands and not merely as a choice –indication element within a single command."[6]

In *The Logic of Commands* Rescher defines "choice-offering" and "alternative-indicating" disjunctive commands. His definitions are as follows.

Given the command requirements $A_1, A_2,\ldots\ldots A_n$

i) The complex choice-presenting command requirement, to be symbolized 'v $(A_1, A_2 \ldots\ldots., A_n)$' which requires realization of at least one of the A_1 to be chosen indifferently from the entire group.

ii) The complex alternative-indicating command requirement to be symbolized '$\tilde{v}$ $(A_1, A_2\ldots\ldots.A_n)$, which requires realization of certain (and so at least one) of the A_1 – not to be selected indifferently but—to be identified with a view to 'other considerations' which single out one or more of the A_1 as the single out one or more of the A_1 as the 'appropriate' alternatives.[7]

It may be symbolically expressed as follows.

Given two commands addressed to same recipient and operative

$C_1 = [X! A_1 /P]$

$C_2 = [X! A_2 /P]$

$C_1 v C_2 = [X! (A_1,A_2)/P]$ { choice offering disjunction}

$C_1 \tilde{v} C_2 = [X! \tilde{v} (A_1, A_2)/P]$ {alternative-indicating disjunction}

It is clear from the above given definitions that it is not always the case that the recipient of a disjunctive command can choose the alternative to be carried out at his own pleasure. 'Other considerations' are needed to be taken care of. It can be explained with the help of an example.

Suppose little Munia's mother tells her to put on her coat or come inside the house. This would seem a clear case of 'choice-offering' use of 'or'. But if soon after having given this order, it began to rain, she might reasonably expect Munia not to put her coat on and stay outside.

Rescher himself gives examples for both 'choice-offering' and 'alternative-presenting' disjunctive commands.

i) Pupils, write a synopsis either of Hamlet or of Macbeth.

ii) John, do your work quietly or leave the room.

In the first case, her command is clearly choice-presenting. In the second case, her command is not choice-presenting but alternative-indicating.

a) John, do your work quietly or leave the room!

The alternative-indicating characteristic is not obvious in this case. This position has been endorsed in the article by Rescher and Robison.

Teacher: 'John, stop that foolishness or leave the room! John gets up and starts to leave. Teacher: 'Don't you dare leave this room!' Here Teacher's second order is neither incompatible with the first nor an abrogation of it, but gives a clarification by excluding one of the initial alternatives.[8]

Rescher's other examples of alternative-indicating disjunctive commands are:

b) …. a signal from headquarters to a field-unit: 'Executive Order 32!'

Do not take route (1), where Order 32 is 'Set out for objective 365 at 8 a.m. tomorrow along either route (1) or route (2)!'

Another example occurs in the pair of orders:

c) Either the door or the window is to be kept open at all times!

The door must be closed whenever conferences are in progress! [9]

An example similar to the first of these is also given by Hare in his article "Some alleged differences between imperatives and indicatives". [10]

A transport officer says to the commander of a convoy "Go via Coldstream or Berwick; I'm not saying which at the moment, and I'm not authorizing you yet to take the Coldstream route; report to the Transport Officer at Newcastle and he will give you a further message from me" The transport Officer then relays the message "Don't go via Colstream," and the convoy commander makes the appropriate inference. This seems to me much less plausible than Rescher's example in that the transport officer surely would not include in his original the directive to go by Coldstream or Berwick. Instead he would no doubt say "Report to the Transport officer at Newcastle. There you will receive a further order from me to proceed either via Coldstream or Benwick."

B. M. Vranas's view (2008)

Vranas reformulates Williams's argument in the following four steps:

(1) The standard utterances of any (nonequivalent) imperative sentences have conflicting permissive presuppositions.

Thus: (1.1) No one can standardly utter any (nonequivalent) imperative sentences without changing her mind. [From (1)].

Thus: (1.2) No one can standardly utter first the premises and then the conclusion of an imperative argument (if they include any nonequivalent imperative sentences) without changing her mind. [From (1.1)]

(2) An inference corresponding to a given argument can exist only if someone can standardly utter first the premises and then the conclusion of the argument without changing her mind.

Thus: (C) No imperative inference (corresponding to an imperative argument whose premises and conclusion include any nonequivalent imperative sentences) can exist. [from (1.2) and (2)][11]

From the above reconstruction Vranas proves three points:

1. (1.1) is false even if (1) is true. For that he takes an example that in an examination there are two instructions in the question paper as follows:

a) Attempt exactly two out of the three questions.

b) Do not to attempt both the first and the last.

These two prescriptions have conflicting permissive presuppositions because in the first prescription the instructor permits one to answer both the first and the last question in the first sentence. But while uttering the second imperative sentence he deters one not to do the same. Hence it is a case of changing the mind of the instructor and hence it cannot be an inference. Vranas shows that instructor does not need to change his mind if he utters only the single sentence 'answer exactly two out of the three questions, but don't answer both the first and the last question. More specifically in the case of a disjunctive syllogism, one who utters "do x or y", "do not do x" and So "do y". So the examinee is instructed to answer either the first two or the last two questions but not both. Thus (1.1) is false though (1) is true.

2. Vranas takes another example to show that (2) is false.
a) Answer exactly two out of the three questions —any two questions, at your choice.

But after few minutes, he utters

b) Do not answer both the first and the last question.

c) Answer either the first two or the last two questions (not both), at your choice.

Though it is a case of changing the mind of the instructor, it may be the case of inferring the last imperative sentence from the first two.

Hence (2) is false.

3. Two examples have been taken to show that (1) is questionable.

a) Do not smoke immoderately.

b) If you smoke, do not smoke immoderately.

These two sentences have the same meaning because they are the guidelines for not smoking immoderately but are not equivalent since the first sentence implies the other but the second does not. Both the sentences have the same permissive presuppositions because these two sentences forbid smoking immoderately. Hence 1 is questionable.

Conclusion

Now it is the time to make concluding remarks on the views I have discussed so far. Bernard Williams denies imperative inferences on the ground of conflicting permissive presuppositions. But the possibility and usefulness of it cannot be denied. Nicolas Rescher and John Robinson attempt to defend imperative inference by making a distinction between choice- offering and alternative-indicating disjunction which makes an imperative inference free from the problem raised by Williams.

1. Nicholas and Robinson distinguish between two kinds of disjunctions- choice-presenting and alternative-presenting disjunction. It has been mentioned that imperative sentences are context-based. The meaning of a disjunction depends upon the context of an imperative sentence.

2. In classical two-valued logic we use disjunction or 'vel' (v) in its inclusive sense which means 'p or q, or both'. But in dealing with imperative arguments the exclusive sense of 'or' i.e., p or q, but not both has been preferred.

X: Start → [Choose either A or B (as you please)] → [Did you do A?] (if yes) → Do A! (If no) [Do B].

It is the command:

X do either A or B (you are free to choose either one you please, but must do at least one.

3. Peter Vranas defends imperative inference by reformulating Williams's argument. He is of opinion that imperative inferences are not only possible but a separate full-fledged logical system may be formulated for them. I endorse vranas's on the following grounds.

Firstly, like declarative sentences, logical connectives can be applied to imperative sentences. Two imperatives may be connected with conjunction, disjunction etc. For example, "Love him" and "Help him" may be conjoined as "Love him and help him." An imperative sentence may also be conditional and bi-conditional.

Secondly, prescriptions can be inconsistent with each other. For example, "Sing" and "Do not sing" are inconsistent with each other which mean that both the prescriptions cannot be satisfied at the same time.

Thirdly, arguments may be formed involving imperative sentences and they can be determined as valid or invalid. For example, "Help him". Therefore, "Help him or hate him".

Hence it can be said that imperative inferences are possible and very useful in our daily life. But they need a separate system for them and for that the vocabulary of classical two-valued logic may be extended to accommodate imperative sentences and as a result we get imperative logic as a variety of extended logic.

Notes and References

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7. *Ibidem.*

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