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Imperative Cognitivism: A Critical Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

A statement conveys thoughts through words and plays a vital role in communication. Although declarative sentences are common in everyday discourse and literature, moral philosophy also recognises imperative sentences, including commands and suggestions, as significant forms of communication. Some philosophers argue that imperatives cannot participate in logical inference; however, in practice, they frequently function as premises or conclusions in everyday reasoning. For instance, an appliance manual employs imperatives to guide users in performing particular actions. The central problem is that such reasoning may appear intuitively valid but cannot be adequately represented by the rules of traditional two-valued logic without compromising truth preservation. Imperative cognitivism addresses this difficulty by treating imperatives as having cognitive content that can, in some cases, be expressed through declarative formulations. For example, "Close the window" may be represented as "I command that the window be closed." However, this approach faces challenges, including unwanted consistency, unwanted validities, and soft imperatives, requiring a more nuanced account of imperative reasoning.

KEYWORDS: Cognitivism; Imperative Logic; Cognitive Pluralism; Declarative Propositions; Speech Acts.

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Introduction:

A statement is a set of words through which we express our thoughts. It acts as a medium for expressing ideas and communication. Sentences are classified based

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on their linguistic structure and function. There are four kinds of sentences based on their function.

1. Declarative sentences
2. Interrogative sentences
3. Imperative sentences
4. Exclamatory sentences

Declarative sentences are the most commonly used sentences in our daily life and in literature. But in moral philosophy, some sentences are called evaluative sentences or, more specifically, imperative sentences. Imperative sentences are very useful in daily life. Some philosophers argue that imperative inference does not exist at all, or that imperative inferences are impossible because imperatives cannot be treated as premises or conclusions of inferences. However, some everyday inferences do include imperatives as premises, conclusions, or both. Imperative sentences may include commands, instructions, orders, suggestions, etc. When you buy an appliance, the sellers give you an instruction manual. Parents give children commands. When we fill out any type of form, instructions are provided. They are used in moral reasoning also. We can say that this type of sentence is important in our everyday life. We can give a series of arguments containing imperatives.

For example:

Do not tell lies!

This is not true.

Therefore, don't tell this!

The point of worry is that this argument is intuitively valid, but it cannot be defined by the rules of traditional two-valued logic. We cannot include them in two-valued logic without preserving truth. To determine whether imperatives require a separate logical formulation, we need to understand the history of imperative logic.

History of Imperative Logic:

Philosophers argue both for and against the possibility of imperative logic. There are different systems offered by the logicians who favour it. In general, there are three approaches, which are—

a) According to the first approach, the logic of imperatives is impossible. This approach depends heavily on analysing imperative sentences. The proponents of this approach are mostly logical positivists.

As a logical positivist, Rudolf Carnap holds that logical reasoning and empirical experience are two sources of knowledge. A statement is cognitively meaningful if and only if it is either analytic or empirically verifiable. A statement is empirically verifiable when it can be proved true or false. This is called the verification principle of meaning. Carnap adopts a Humean approach: imperative sentences express feelings; they do not assert anything. So, there is no question of assigning them truth values. Imperatives are value judgments, and value is neither empirically verifiable nor deducible from any empirical statement. So, it is cognitively meaningless. They are meaningful only in a psychological context.

According to Ayer, ethical statements do not express propositions and cannot be translated into descriptive sentences. “Don’t tell lies” is a non-propositional sentence that is not eligible for truth value assessment. They are useful only insofar as they can evoke the speaker’s emotion. Stevenson interprets ethical statements in terms of two-pattern analysis. According to his first pattern analysis, an ethical statement has two parts. The first one is a proposition, and the second one is an imperative. The imperative part can be supported but cannot be proved.

b) The second trend is to illustrate that imperative sentences can be interpreted as declarative sentences and permit them to be treated in the framework of traditional two-valued logic. This theory is known as the reductionist approach.

c) According to the third approach, imperatives have some distinctive attributes and cannot be reduced to declarative sentences. So, we must construct a new form for imperative sentences. This is known as the non-reductionist approach.

This paper focuses on the second approach, which holds that imperative sentences can be translated into declarative sentences. Thus, imperatives can be treated within the framework of conventional two-valued logic. This approach is commonly called *Imperative Cognitivism*.

I go over five translation models that convert imperatives into declaratives in different ways, making them appropriate for the truth value assignments.

They were suggested as translations that maintain meaning, meaning they are intended to convey exactly the same meaning as their original.

Command Theory: 'Do x' can be translated as the corresponding performative utterance 'I command you to do x'. For example, 'Close the window', which is a simple imperative, can be translated as 'I command that the window be closed'. This is an assertion and can be considered true or false. It is true if the speaker commands that you close the window, and false if the speaker does not command it.

According to David Lewis (1983, p.222), "There is no difference in kind between the meanings of these performatives and non-declaratives and the meanings of the ordinary declarative sentences considered previously."

According to Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit (1998, p.248), "Every competent English speaker knows that producing the words "Shut the door" in the right circumstances is ipso facto to command that the door be shut; that's what is being done. And that is to say that it makes no difference whether I say "Shut the door" or I say "I command that the door be shut" – a point which is independently plausible. But "I command that the door be shut" obviously has truth conditions. And so it follows that "Shut the door" has truth conditions too: it is true in S's mouth at t just if S did indeed command at that the door be shut".

Desire Theory: 'Do x' can be translated as 'I want you to do x'. This theory holds that commands express statements about the speaker's mind. In particular, it might be held that 'Close the door' means 'I want you to close the door'. R. M. Hare (1952) proposed the Desires Theory as an account of the meaning of commands, though he later rejected it. According to this view, commands express something

about the speaker's mental state or desires. The command “Get off my lawn!” could be translated into the declarative statement “I want you to get off my lawn.” Unlike an imperative, this is a straightforward statement that can be considered true or false: it is true if the speaker genuinely wants the person to leave the lawn and false if the speaker does not have such a desire.

This theory may seem unconvincing because a person does not necessarily have to desire an action to command someone to perform it. Furthermore, the theory seems unable to adequately explain contradictions between opposing commands. For example, if one person says “Shut the door!” while another says “Do not shut the door,” the two commands appear to contradict each other. However, if they are understood merely as expressions of different desires—“I want you to shut the door” and “I want you not to shut the door”—both statements could be true at the same time. This creates a difficulty for the Desires Theory. In many ordinary situations, a person gives a command because they want the person being addressed to perform a particular action. Thus, although commands cannot be reduced to statements expressing the speaker’s desires, they are often closely related to wanting the commanded action to be carried out.

Deontic Theory: The most popular reduction traces back to Kant, who equated the imperative sentence 'Shut the door' with the deontic proposition 'you should shut the door'.

According to Kant (1962, pp.35-6), “All imperatives are expressed by the word ought [or shall] and thereby indicate the relation of an objective law of reason to a will,... They say that something would be good to do or to forbear...”

This theory looks like the prescriptivism proposed by Hare (1952), but it is the reverse. For Hare, all moral statements are really disguised imperatives. So, when someone says, “you ought to go for a morning walk”, then he/she actually issues a command: “Go for a morning walk!” This is called Prescriptivism. According to prescriptivism, moral statements express prescriptions, not facts. This Deontic view can hold that imperatives are a proper subset of “you should...” statements.

Elliptic Theory: This theory was proposed by H. G. Bohnert, A. R. Anderson and Moore. According to Bohnert, every command holds some motivating force. In his language, “A situation M motivates a behaviour B of x only if x believes M and x can derive from M with the help of other personally believed sentences “P $\vee$ B(x)”, but not “P” alone, where P is some future situation of directly unpleasant character” (Bohnert, 1945, p.303).

In emergency situations, all sentences become as short as possible. For example, “The shop is on fire!” becomes “Fire!”, but it does not lose its functional quality of being true or false. That is, it is an ellipsis. According to Bohnert (1945, p. 303), “A command is here regarded as simply the more serious ellipsis of omitting the entire penalty clause of the described class of disjunctions, again without sacrificing the truth rules of a disjunction, which, however, remain clear, of course, only if the penalty is understood. “Run!”, then, is permitted to be considered true if the exhorted one stays and burns, where the indicative “you run” would be false.”

Imperative sentences are ellipses of their corresponding disjunctive sentences: ‘Get out of my house’. Here the hidden disjunctive sentence is ‘Either you get out

of my house', or 'I will call other people to make you get out of the house'. This sentence is true if at least one disjunct is true.

Prediction Theory: P.C. Gibbons proposed this theory. According to this theory, imperatives are actually predictions. For example, 'Close the door' can be expressed by 'you will close the door', which is truth-preserving. A command is true if the prediction is correct. A command is false if the prediction is incorrect. For Gibbons (1960, p. 107), "There is no separate logic of imperatives, that from the point of view of logic imperatives are indicatives."

Cognitivist Pluralism

Henry S. Leonard (1959) holds a cognitive pluralist view of imperatives. For him, imperatives are truth-preserving, but not always translated in the same way. In particular, he thinks that some imperatives can be translated into "you will..." statements, and others into "you should..." statements. Leonard (1959, p. 172) believes that "not only declarative sentences, but also interrogatives and imperatives, may be classified as true or false".

This theory is another version of imperative cognitivism.

For example,

A. Jack will go to the school.

B. Jack, go to the school!

A is a declarative sentence, and B is an imperative sentence. For him, there are two types of concern: the absolute concern and the absolute topic of concern. In the case of sentence A, the absolute topic of business or concern is that Jack will go to the school, and the ultimate concern is that the addressee believes the ultimate topic of concern; but for imperative sentence B, the absolute topic of business or concern

is the same: that Jack will go to the school. However, the ultimate concern is that the addressee (Jack) makes it the matter of concern, namely that Jack will go to the school, although the absolute topic of business is the same in both sentences. However, their ultimate concerns are different. The topic of concern is always a proposition, and is thus true or false. According to Leonard (1959, p. 179), “We see the same ultimate topic of concern is indicated in all three speeches, and we see different ultimate concerns expressed in all three speeches.”

Imperatives can be truth-preserving if the propositions which constitute the ultimate topic of concern describe the actual fact. For him, “Imperatives might be said to be true or false according as the propositions which are their ultimate topics of concern are true or false. The addressee may confirm his will to that of the speaker and act in the manner indicated, or he may disregard the speaker’s will and act in a contrary fashion. According as he does the one or the other, he makes the imperative to be true or false”. (Leonard, 1959, p. 184)

An imperative sentence is true if and only if its ultimate topic of concern corresponds to the actual state of affairs. While an imperative expresses the speaker’s will concerning the realisation of a particular state of affairs, its truth or falsity depends upon whether the addressee brings about the state of affairs.

For Leonard, imperatives fall into two types: personal and impersonal. Personal imperatives express the speaker's will, but impersonal imperatives express the speaker’s judgement. For example,

1. Only act on that individual law if you wish that at the same time it may be converted as universal law. (Kant’s Law)
2. Thou shall not lie.

Here the judgements are-

- 1.1 You ought to act on that individual law if you wish that at the same time it may be converted into a universal law.
- 2.1. You should not tell lies.’

According to Leonard (1959) , impersonal imperatives are disguised declaratives because their truth and falsity are not dependent on human conformity. They are translated as ‘you ought’ or ‘you should’ statements, and personal imperatives are translated as ‘You will’ statements. So it may be concluded that Leonard's view is the union of Deontic and Prediction theory.

Although Leonard identifies certain conditions concerning the ultimate topic of concern- particularly its propositional character, truth/falsity, correspondence with the actual state of affairs, and dependence on the addressee’s will- he does not provide systematic parameters or a determining procedure for identifying the absolute topic of concern and translating an imperative into its corresponding declarative proposition.

Problems of Imperative Cognitivism

The cognitivist treatment of imperatives encounters three fundamental difficulties: Unwanted Consistency, Unwanted Validities and the Problem of Soft Imperatives. These are not merely technical problems of formalisation; rather, they raise a deeper question concerning whether the cognitive content of an imperative can adequately represent its distinctive directive character. Now I point out some problems of imperative cognitivism.

1. The Problem of Unwanted Consistencies

Unwanted consistencies occur when contradictory imperatives are translated into corresponding declarative sentences that merely report the speaker’s commands. Consider the following two imperatives:

(1) “Attack!”



(2) “Do not attack!”

These imperatives are inconsistent when they are addressed to the same addressee, at the same time, and with respect to the same action, since the addressee cannot comply with both commands simultaneously. However, if they are reduced to the corresponding declarative sentences, (1.1) “I command that you attack” and (2.1) “I command that you do not attack,” the inconsistency disappears. The two declarative sentences can be consistently asserted by the same speaker in the same situation: a speaker may, in fact, issue both commands, although the commands themselves are incompatible. Thus, (1.1) and (2.1) report the occurrence of two commands rather than expressing the commands themselves. This distinction is important because the declarative translations do not preserve the incompatibility between the original imperatives. The problem therefore arises for a reductionist account insofar as it treats (1) as equivalent to (1.1) and (2) as equivalent to (2.1). While “I command that you attack” is a meaningful declarative sentence, it does not have the same directive function as “Attack!”; it describes or reports the speaker’s commanding act rather than directly issuing the command. Hence, reducing the imperative to such a declarative form appears unable to preserve an essential logical feature of the original imperative, namely its incompatibility with the contradictory command “Do not attack!”

2. Unwanted validities

Consider an argument for illustration of unwanted validities.

“Open the window!”

Therefore, **someone has issued a command.**

This argument appears to be invalid because the imperative sentence “Open the window!” does not, by itself, establish that anyone has actually used it to give a command. The sentence could simply be written down, quoted, or mentioned without anyone actually commanding another person to open the window.

However, according to the view that imperatives can be understood as reports of commands, the premise could be interpreted as: “I command you to open the window.”

Under this interpretation, the argument would appear to be valid because the translated premise explicitly states that someone has issued a command.

I could compare this problem with a similar argument:

“You are opening the window.”

Therefore, “Someone is making an assertion.”

This argument is clearly invalid. A person may be opening a window without anyone asserting it. The fact that an action is taking place does not necessarily imply that someone has made a statement or assertion.

The same problem arises with imperatives. The imperative sentence concerns the action being requested, whereas the conclusion concerns the act of commanding. There is therefore a difference between what the premise is about and what the conclusion is about. The premise concerns opening the window, while the conclusion concerns whether someone has issued a command. This difference

creates an irrelevance problem and raises doubts about treating imperatives simply as reports of commands.

The invalidity of the argument becomes clear once we distinguish between the content of an imperative and the speech act performed in uttering it. The imperative “Open the window” concerns the action of opening the window, whereas the conclusion concerns whether someone has actually issued a command. The occurrence of an imperative sentence does not, by itself, establish that a command has been issued, since the same sentence may be quoted, mentioned, or used merely as a linguistic example without functioning as a command.

Under a reductionist account, however, an imperative may be translated into a declarative report of a command when it is actually used in an appropriate communicative context to command an addressee to perform the relevant action. Thus, in a context in which a speaker addresses someone and genuinely commands them to open the window, “Open the window” may be paraphrased as “I command you to open the window.” Under this interpretation, the conclusion that someone has issued a command follows directly from the translated premise. However, this translation is not licensed merely by the grammatical form of the imperative; it depends on the contextual fact that the utterance is functioning as a command.

Therefore, the original argument is invalid on the ordinary imperative reading but appears valid once the imperative is reduced to a declarative report of a command. This illustrates the problem of unwanted validity: the reductionist translation introduces a conclusion about the speech act of commanding that is not contained in the imperative merely as an imperative.

The imperative can be reduced to a declarative report of a command only when, in the relevant conversational context, it is actually used to issue a command to an addressee; its grammatical form alone does not warrant such a reduction.

3. Problem of Soft Imperative

Soft imperatives are less forceful than commands. For example,

- a) Don't accept his proposal now. Wait some days.
- b) Before using, charge your laptop for the whole night.
- c) Give me another chance; I will prove myself.

All translation schemas proposed by reductionists assume that imperatives express only commands. But it is important to remember that this is just one use of the imperative mood. The imperative mood is also used to express advice, requests and instructions.

In the case of soft imperatives, we cannot use 'I comment that' as an operator, because it makes no sense. So they should be translated differently depending on the types of speech acts that they are being used for.

- a) I advise you not to accept his proposal just yet. I advise you to wait some days.
- b) I instruct you to charge your laptop for the whole night before use.
- c) I request that you give me another chance.

So, here we have to know what kind of speech act is being performed and also need to know the context of the utterance. In the case of declarative sentences, it is not necessary to know the context for determining their logical properties.

In some cases of Imperative arguments, it would be invalid to conclude “do x” from “do x.” For example, in some cases, “Close the door would not imply “Close the door,” because the premise is one kind of speech act and the conclusion is another kind of speech act. As per the Reductionist view, we cannot accommodate imperatives in the framework of conventional two-valued logic due to their non-truth-preserving character. So, we have to translate the imperatives into declaratives based on the context of their utterance. One may be translated as “I request that you close the door,” and the other as “I command that you close the door,” which are not consequences of one another.

It is true that soft imperatives should not be treated as straightforward counterexamples to cognitive imperatives. The distinction between an imperative sentence and a commanding sentence is indeed important. However, merely making this distinction does not completely remove the issue; it clarifies the scope and conditions of the reductionist analysis.

A grammatical form known as an imperative can be used to carry out a variety of speech acts, including requests, directives, advice, suggestions, and directions. In contrast, a commanding sentence is an imperative utterance that truly carries out the commanding speech act. For instance, an imperative like "Take some rest" can serve as advice rather than a demand, yet "Open the window" might serve as an order in another situation. So, a reductionist translation of an imperative into a declarative report, as "I command you to open the window," cannot be applied to all imperatives based only on their grammatical structure. The translation is

suitable only when the imperative is used to carry out the speech act of commanding. If it serves as advice or a request, it would be more acceptable to translate it as "I advise you to..." or "I request that you." The problem of soft imperatives does not constitute a direct problem for cognitive imperatives as such. Rather, it reveals a limitation of any reductionist account that attempts to treat all imperative sentences uniformly as commands. By distinguishing the imperative form from the speech act of commanding, the present account restricts the reductionist analysis to the relevant class of imperative utterances. Consequently, soft imperatives do not undermine the cognitive treatment of commanding imperatives; instead, they demonstrate the need to take the context and communicative function of an imperative utterance into account. So, the translation schema of imperatives has some problems: the problem of unwanted validities, the problem of unwanted consistencies, and the problem of soft imperatives.

Conclusion:

Imperative Cognitivism offers an important alternative to the traditional non-cognitivist understanding of imperatives. According to this approach, imperative sentences need not be treated as expressions that merely issue commands or directly guide action. Rather, they can be understood in relation to cognitive and declarative contents that make them amenable to logical analysis. The possibility of transforming an imperative into an appropriate declarative representation therefore challenges the sharp distinction traditionally drawn between the cognitive content of declaratives and the practical function of imperatives.

Imperative Cognitivism is significant, in particular, for its contribution to the logical treatment of imperatives. If imperatives have cognitive content that can be represented declaratively, then relations such as consistency, incompatibility, implication, and logical consequence may be analysed without reducing imperatives to expressions of desire, command, or practical force. In this respect, the approach provides a promising framework for understanding how imperatives can participate in systematic logical reasoning.

At the same time, the cognitive representation of an imperative does not necessarily capture every aspect of its meaning. An imperative has a distinctive practical or directive dimension: to command someone to perform an action is not merely to communicate information about that action. Thus, the declarative representation may explain the propositional or cognitive component of an imperative while leaving open how to represent its directive force.

Imperative Cognitivism is not without difficulties. These criticisms suggest that transforming imperatives into declarative sentences, although useful for logical analysis, cannot by itself provide a complete theory of imperative meaning. The distinction between cognitive content and directive force remains philosophically significant. A satisfactory theory must explain not only the proposition associated with an imperative but also the normative or practical force with which that proposition is presented.

Therefore, Imperative Cognitivism should not be understood simply as reducing imperatives to declaratives. Rather, its value lies in identifying the cognitive dimension of imperative discourse while leaving room for an independent account of directive force. The problems of unwanted validities, unwanted consistency, and soft imperatives demonstrate that a purely declarative treatment requires further

refinement. The most promising direction, therefore, may be a hybrid account in which the cognitive content of an imperative is systematically represented while its directive strength and practical function are also preserved.

Ultimately, the significance of Imperative Cognitivism lies in showing that imperatives possess a richer logical structure than their grammatical form might suggest. Its success, however, depends on whether it can accommodate both the logical/cognitive dimension and the directive/practical dimension of imperatives without generating intuitively unacceptable consequences. These unresolved issues offer important directions for further research in imperative logic and, more broadly, in representing instructions, norms, and commands in artificial intelligence and multi-agent systems.



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