R. M. Hare's Achievements in Moral Philosophy

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In his Axel Hägerström Lectures, given in Sweden in 1991, Dick Hare referred to Hägerström as a pioneer in ethics who had made the most important breakthrough that there had been in ethics during the twentieth century. Although Hägerström's development of a non-descriptivist approach to ethics certainly was pioneering philosophical work, when the history of twentieth century ethics comes to be written, I believe that it is Hare's own work that will be seen as having made the most important contribution.

Twentieth-century moral philosophy begins with G. E. Moore and his famous refutation of naturalism in ethics. That led to Moore's own form of non-naturalism, or to the work of intuitionists like W. D. Ross. Then came the emotivists, and here our anglophone perspective led us to neglect Hägerström, and treat A. J. Ayer as the pioneer, and C. L. Stevenson's writings as the definitive defence. But by the 1960s, when I was an undergraduate at the University of Melbourne, emotivism was widely judged inadequate, and Hare's universal prescriptivism was undoubtedly the leading candidate to replace it. True, the philosophers who taught me ethics in Melbourne were not enthusiastic about Hare's work: one of them favoured a return to Ross's intuitionism, despite its well-known problems, and the other was an Aristotelian who seemed to think that, despite Moore, understanding human nature enabled us to see what we ought to do. But even for my teachers, Hare provided the standard against which other views were to be tested and compared.

Hare's dominance of the field was, of course, part of the general dominance of Oxford philosophy at that time. But it was easier for me to see the substantial importance of Hare's work than to see the significance of other Oxford contemporaries who had made a name for themselves. Honours students in ethics were required to read those two deceptively small books, *The Language of Morals* and *Freedom and Reason*.[1] Hence I became familiar with the clear and logical prose

[1] Full bibliographical details of this and other writings by Hare referred to in this article can be found in the 'Complete Bibliography of Philosophical Writings of R. M. Hare', available at http://web.balliol.ox.ac.uk/official/history/hare/fullbiog.asp

style that was soon to become so familiar to me, and a model for my own writing.

What was, and indeed still is, so important and exciting about Hare's work is summed up in the title of the second of those two books. The emotivists gave a prominent place to our freedom to make moral judgements based on our own attitudes. If the emotivists were right, no one could tell us that we had simply failed to see some moral truth which they, with their sharper moral insight or their more refined moral sense, knew to be true. There were no such truths for anyone to see, only emotions or feelings to be expressed. To young people trying to overthrow the tired and conventional morality of their elders, this was a liberating view. It also seemed firmly grounded in Moore's arguments against naturalism, and in the evident oddity of the claim that we can just 'intuit' non-natural moral truths.

But emotivism is open to the obvious objection, that if morality is simply a matter of emotions or feelings, then your own view is no better than that of anyone else – including that of the Nazis, then as now the paradigm example of a view that we can all agree is wrong – and in saying that Nazism *is* wrong, we want to say something more than 'Boo to the Nazis', or in Stevenson's formulation, perhaps: 'I disapprove of Nazism: Please do likewise'. To this the Nazi can simply reply expressing his disapproval of liberalism, or democracy, or racial equality, and urging us to share his attitude. It then becomes meaningless to ask who is right in this dispute, for to do so is simply to invite the person one is asking to state his or her attitude, which we have no more reason to share than anyone else's. The emotivist has eliminated all other possible meanings that question might have.

Here is where reason comes in. Hare's great achievement – or perhaps I should say, his first great achievement, because it was not the only one, but it was the one that made him the dominant figure in moral philosophy at the time of which I am writing – was to show that you could take over the most important plank of the emotivist platform and still maintain that reason has a role to play in ethics. By 'the most important plank' I mean the rejection of 'descriptivism', the idea that moral judgements are descriptive statements. This he saw as the common element of both naturalism and intuitionism – for the one, moral judgements are descriptions of natural facts, and for the other, of non-natural qualities, but for both, they are descriptions. For the emotivists, moral judgements express attitudes, but they do not, strictly speaking, describe them. Agreeing with the emotivists that moral judgements are not descriptions, Hare argued that they are prescriptions, that is, judgements that entail imperatives, and like imperatives, subject to logical rules. For example, I cannot intelligibly say, at the same time say: 'Close all the windows' and 'Leave the centre

window open'. This opened the door for reason, and Hare's claim that moral judgements are distinguished from other prescriptives by the feature of universalizability pushed it wider open still.

Let me say a little more about this notion that moral judgements are universalizable. The underlying idea has, of course, a long history. It can be found in various forms in the Jewish tradition, in the Christian gospels, with the idea of loving your neighbour as yourself, in writings of the Stoics, in Kant's famous formulation of the categorical imperative, and in the Hindu and Confucian traditions as well. But Hare gave it a logical precision that earlier forms had lacked. Then he showed how in this more precise form it was immune from objections that had plagued some other versions. For example, Kant's idea that you should always act so that the maxim of your action can become a universal law would exclude the sensible commuter's maxim: 'always leave work after the rush hour is over'. Hare's account of universalizability is essentially that a moral judgement must be based on its universal properties, by which he meant it cannot be based on individual properties, such as proper names, personal pronouns, and so on. If I think that it is wrong for you to cheat on your taxes, then I must also hold that if I am in similar circumstances to you, it would also be wrong for me to cheat on my taxes. I cannot claim that because it is I who benefit when I cheat on my taxes, the cases are different. 'I' here refers to an individual, not to a universal property. But Hare's notion of universalizability is not at all the same as generalizability – a universalizable maxim can be quite specific, tailored to particular circumstances, such as those of a commuter who can leave work at a time later than everyone else.

In *Freedom and Reason* Hare concluded with a practical example of how universalizability could work in considering racial conflicts. After distinguishing, with illustrations, between disagreements based on facts and disagreements in values, Hare goes on to criticize some spurious moral arguments used in this area, and then shows how difficult it is to be a racist, if one does not distort the facts, and is prepared to universalize one's belief. For the racists must be themselves prepared to join the victims of their oppression, if it should turn out that they are, contrary to their present beliefs, members of the oppressed race. And while this may be so improbable that it can easily be disregarded as a factual possibility, because universalizability applies even to hypothetical situations, racists must be prepared to apply their principles even in those hypothetical situations in which they are members of the allegedly inferior race. As Hare says in *Freedom and Reason*, while a very few racists may be so fanatical that they can sincerely accept their principles in these hypothetical circumstances, we can be quite sure that the overwhelming majority of them are not.

They are racists only because they belong to the race to which they are giving special status and privileges, and they are not putting themselves in the position of those they are oppressing. Thus a correct understanding of the logic of moral reasoning can show why everyone who is not a fanatic – a term Hare used in a special sense to refer to someone who holds moral ideals that are not based on a consideration of the interests of those affected – must regard racism as morally wrong.

Subsequently, in *Moral Thinking,* published in 1981, Hare argued that even the loophole he had left for fanatics could be closed, thus deriving a form of utilitarianism from the logic of moral language, coupled with an understanding of what it is to really put yourself into the position of someone else. This remains perhaps the most controversial aspect of his moral theory, and I shall say a little more about it shortly. But before I do so, I want to draw attention to the novelty of the final chapter of *Freedom and Reason* and the remarkable way in which it anticipates so much that has happened in moral philosophy since it appeared. For this was a time at which the leading moral philosophers were proudly proclaiming that for deciding what we ought to do, moral philosophy is of no use at all. A. J. Ayer, for example, wrote that it is mistake to 'look to the moral philosopher for guidance'. Hare, on the other hand, saw that if that was the case, then there isn't really a lot of point in doing moral philosophy at all – and moreover, he saw that the prevailing view was wrong. Although there was, in the early 1960s, no such field as practical or applied ethics, Hare strongly believed that moral philosophy can help us to work out what we ought to do, and already in 1962, he was offering a practical example in which it does just that. (Incidentally, in looking again at that final chapter of *Freedom and Reason*, I was suprised to notice something that I had long forgotten. On the second last page of the book, Hare goes beyond racism and – though not in so many words – anticipates the extension of the argument against racism to what Richard Ryder and I have subsequently called 'speciesism'. For he raises the question of 'certain duties towards both men and animals' and writes:

> In all cases the principle is the same – am I prepared to accept a maxim which would allow this to be done to me, were I in the position of this man or animal, and capable of having only the experiences, desires, &c., of him or it? (FR, 223)

To read these lines again just a few days ago was a humbling experience, for although I have received acclaim for writing *Animal Liberation*, I now see that Hare had summed up its philosophical basis more than a decade earlier.)

Since I have now introduced myself into the story, perhaps this is a good time to mention my own contacts with Hare as a graduate

student. I came to Oxford to take the B.Phil. in 1969, but initially I was working on political philosophy with John Plamenatz and saw little of Hare. He was, for a student from Australia brought up on his books, a lofty and somewhat intimidating figure, with a reputation for dealing severely with those he considered muddled – and that, I had been warned, meant everyone who disagreed with him. Despite this formidable reputation I did, at some point during my first year, work up the nerve to send him an essay, written while I was still in Australia, that was critical of his combination of prescriptivity and universalizability. My argument was, in essence, that if morality is necessarily prescriptive, then it cannot also be necessarily universalizable – for what are we to say if someone acts on prescriptions that are based on non-universalizable principles such as: 'I shall always do whatever is in my own interests'? Either we define such a principle as a moral principle, in which case morality is not universalizable, or we acknowledge that such people are not acting on a universalizable principle, in which case, for them, even though they may continue to talk about what actions might or might not be justifiable in universal terms, morality is not prescriptive.

Soon after leaving this essay for Hare at Corpus, I received a note from him inviting me to come to discuss it with him. I went up to his room at Corpus with some trepidation. To my very pleasant surprise, however, Hare was courtesy itself, and his response to my essay was not hostile at all. He did point me to some passages in *Freedom and Reason* that I had misunderstood, in particular those accepting the possibility of the amoralist who refuses to use moral language except in an 'inverted commas' sense. He had, in other words, already anticipated what I thought was a damning objection. Nevertheless, he must have thought that the essay had some promise, because he encouraged me to correct the misinterpretation, but develop the underlying points, and then seek to publish it – which I eventually did.[2] He also offered to supervise me in the following term, when the time came for me to study topics for the paper in moral philosophy.

Looking back, I can see this as a decisive moment in my life as a philosopher. Without Hare's guidance and support, I am sure that my career would have taken a different, and almost certainly far less fruitful path. For Hare then supervised my work for most of the remainder of my time at Oxford, a period that covered not only work in moral philosophy, but also the writing of my thesis, which later became my first book, *Democracy and Disobedience*. His careful, point-by-point criticism of my writing made me strive for the highest standards of

[2] 'The Triviality of the Debate over "Is-Ought" and the Definition of "Moral"', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, x (1973).

clarity and rigour. Even now, when I read over my own writings, I often ask myself whether he would have found the arguments sound. This is, in a way, a different kind of 'putting myself in someone else's shoes' that I practice – specifically, putting myself in Hare's shoes (though I keep my socks on). Doing so has given me the vital skill of being a good critic of my own writings.

Hare was a fine critic, of both students and colleagues, but he had, as I have said, a reputation for being inflexible. I think that reputation was undeserved. Most of us – I mean philosophers, although no doubt this holds more generally – like to think that we are right, and our opponents misguided, and Hare certainly was no exception. But our conversations and exchanges, which of course continued after my graduation, over the two years I was at Oxford as a Radcliffe lecturer, and then over the years by correspondence and occasional personal meetings, convince me that he was ready to change his views when he thought someone had a good objection to them. This is particularly true about the point that I mentioned earlier, the shift in his views from *Freedom and Reason* to *Moral Thinking*, in the extent to which he is able to produce an argument against the fanatic. I and others – John Mackie, Derek Parfit, and Michael Lockwood – tried to persuade him that this could not be done simply by an appeal to moral language. It needed a substantive argument, perhaps one based on something about a mode of reasoning based on taking a universal point of view. This was a long-running debate. I presented my arguments to Hare personally a number of times, and publicly in my contribution to *Hare and Critics*, a volume edited by Douglas Seanor and Nick Fotion that was published in 1988. In Hare's final systematic presentation of his views, the Axel Hägerström Lectures, he discusses the difference between morality and what, following Simon Blackburn, he calls 'shmorality', that is, more limited sets of moral duties which are expressed in language that is not fully universalizable. Here Hare makes it clear that he accepts the need for substantive arguments to show why we should chose to formulate our views in moral language, not in 'shmoral' language. This is, I believe, a crucial point, and one not fully recognized by all those who discuss Hare's views. It is also one aspect of Hare's thought on which there is surely more work to be done, in exploring the ways to further strengthen the arguments for using moral language, as Hare understands that term.

I do not wish to take up much more of your time, for I am sure that not all of you who came here today did so in order to hear a lecture on moral philosophy. Nevertheless, so far I have really only discussed one of Hare's great achievements in moral philosophy, that to do with moral reasoning and universalizability. I must mention, if much more briefly, two others.

Hare's second great contribution is, in my view, his distinction between intuitive and critical levels of moral reasoning, made in its most complete form in *Moral Thinking*. This distinction addresses a long-standing objection to utilitarianism: the objection that utilitarianism leads to consequences contrary to our common moral intuitions. Faced with this objection, utilitarians divided. Act-utilitarians just stuck to their guns and said, yes, utilitarianism does conflict with our common moral intuitions, and so much the worse for our intuitions. Rule-utilitarians, seeking to reconcile utilitarianism and our common intuitions, said that we should use the utilitarian principle only to judge which rules we should have, and then we should obey the rules in all cases, not only in those in which to do so will maximize utility. Neither of these positions is entirely satisfactory. To decide what to do on every occasion by attempting to calculate the utility of each of the alternatives open to us is hardly practical. On the other hand, to obey a rule even when doing so will lead to worse consequences than an alternative open to you seems, as the great Australian act-utilitarian Jack Smart used to say, to be a form of rule-worship. Hare was always critical of reliance on intuitions as a mode of moral thinking, and in particular of the idea that we can test a moral theory by how well it matches our common moral intuitions. Yet he could see that one cannot simply reject moral intuitions without explaining their prominence in our lives. So he introduced a more nuanced distinction than that between the act- and rule-utilitarians. He suggested that we need to have a set of intuitive rules or principles to guide us in everyday life, when we are not able to calculate the consequences of each choice, and when if we tried to do so, we might be swayed by our emotions of selfish interests. But there is also a critical level of reflection at which we might, if we have the time, and are sufficiently dispassionate, think about what is the best thing to do. The intuitive level provides the kind of simple principles that we may wish to use to educate our children, as well as follow ourselves in all normal circumstances; but there is no reason for us to blindly obey these principles in the rare cases in which we can see, beyond reasonable doubt, that there is another course of action that will have markedly better consequences.

This is, I think, a particularly fruitful idea. I like to think that Hare would have felt confirmed in his views of this distinction by recently published research at Princeton in which subjects have been asked to consider moral dilemmas while undergoing brain imaging.[3] The

[3] J. D. Greene, R. B. Somerville, L. E. Nystrom, J. M. Darley and J. D. Cohen, 'An FMRI Investigation of Emotional Engagement in Moral Judgment', *Science*, ccxciii (2001); Joshua Greene and Jonathan Haidt, 'How (and Where) Does Moral Judgment Work?' *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, vi (2002).

preliminary results show that for some dilemmas, some subjects decide very quickly, and give an answer that is in accord with our common moral intuitions. The brain imaging shows that they are using parts of the brain associated with emotional responses. Other subjects, however, take longer to decide, and give a different decision, one that is at odds with common moral intuitions, but leads to a greater number of lives being saved. They also show emotional activity, but more significantly, they show cognitive activity too. Obviously, this research is in its early days, but it is a finding that fits well with Hare's distinction between intuitive and critical levels of moral thinking.

Finally, in order to say something about Hare's enormous contribution to applied ethics, let me return to the period when I was a graduate student here at Oxford, and Hare was my supervisor. But first I need to say something about my own interests at the time – I almost said my 'non-philosophical' interests, for that is how I thought of them, but as we shall see, that very distinction came into question. While I was still a student at the University of Melbourne, the Australian government had re-introduced conscription in order to provide the army with the numbers it needed to send troops to fight alongside the Americans in Vietnam. Convinced, as many of my fellow-students were, that neither Australian nor American troops should be fighting in Vietnam, I had been active in a student group opposed to conscription for Vietnam. We had often discussed issues of disobedience and whether in a democratic country there was an obligation to obey laws directed to fighting an unjust war. Now I wanted to write my thesis on this topic; but there was still no such field as 'applied ethics' and Oxford had a reputation for being conservative in its understanding of moral philosophy. How would such a thesis be viewed? Hare not only said that such a topic was a suitable one, he also referred me to a paper on 'Peace' that he had written a few years earlier – it was in fact one of the very first papers in applied ethics in the modern era – and he positively encouraged me to apply political and moral arguments to practical issues. While he did not always agree with the conclusions I reached, he welcomed not only my thesis topic, but also my subsequent attempts to think about the ethics of our treatment of animals, and about the obligations of the rich to those elsewhere in the world who are destitute.

Hare himself, of course, went on to write a large number of very fine and highly influential papers in applied ethics in general, and in bioethics in particular. He was never afraid to ask the most controversial questions, such as 'What is Wrong with Slavery?' and his answers were always enlightening. (Indeed, that particular paper is one that he was able to write with an authority that few others could possess,

since, as he notes, he had in a manner of speaking *been* a slave, when as a prisoner of the Japanese he worked on the Burma railway.) Among Hare's most influential and insightful papers in applied ethics are his much-reprinted 1975 essay, 'Abortion and the Golden Rule', and the 1974 paper that has become best-known under the title 'Survival of the Weakest', although this was not the title under which it first appeared. He also wrote on the status of embryos, *in vitro* fertilization, the rules of war, moral education, town-planning, punishment, business ethics, and, of particular interest to me, of course, a paper defending his diet, which he described as 'demi-vegetarianism' – a diet based largely on plant foods, but including some animal products when those could be obtained from farmers who had satisfied strict standards of concern for the welfare of their animals.

With that, I have mentioned three of Hare's achievements in moral philosophy: restoring reason to moral argument, distinguishing intuitive and critical levels of moral thinking, and pioneering the development of practical or applied ethics. Each of them are major, lasting contributions to moral philosophy. For giving so extended a treatment of Hare's views, I apologize to those who are not philosophers and did not come here to hear a lecture in moral philosophy. I believe, however, that it is the way in which Hare would have liked to be remembered on this occasion. I know that I shall always count myself extraordinarily fortunate to have had, as my teacher, a man who was not only outstanding as a teacher, but also one of the greatest moral philosophers of the twentieth century – perhaps the greatest. Thank you, Dick.