



Mr. Hare on the Role of Principles in Deciding

E. M. Adams

Mind, New Series, Vol. 65, No. 257 (Jan., 1956), 78-80.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0026-4423%28195601%292%3A65%3A257%3C78%3AMHOTRO%3E2.0.CO%3B2-Y>

Mind is currently published by Oxford University Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/oup.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

MR. HARE ON THE ROLE OF PRINCIPLES IN DECIDING

MR. HARE, in his delightful little book, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1952), especially in Chapter 4 ("Decisions of Principles"), says many wise things about principles of conduct, their teachableness, and their relations to decisions. However, back of it all there seems to be a position about the relation of principles to decisions which if consistently thought through would lead to anything but good sense. It is the purpose of this paper to try to think it through to its absurdities and thereby expose it.

It is clear that for Mr. Hare any "piece of genuinely evaluative moral reasoning" must terminate in a decision to do something or to act in a certain way. The simplest kind of such an argument would contain a general imperative major premise, a factual minor premise, and a singular imperative conclusion that would be a self-given command.

However, the peculiarity of his position is that moral reasoning must terminate in, not a decision, but in a *double barrelled* decision. Mind you, not that merely sometimes in deciding about a particular case we modify some previous principle of conduct, but that every time we make a decision it is twofold. We make a decision about the matter in hand and in doing so make a decision about the principle employed in deciding the particular matter. Suppose, for instance, to use Hare's example, that I am in doubt about whether to tell some particular falsehood. Any moral principle that would help me to decide the matter, along with some factual premises, would have to enjoin me not to tell (or to tell) the falsehood. But "since I am in doubt, *ex hypothesi*, whether or not to make this false statement, I must be in doubt about assenting to the command, 'Do not make this statement'. But if I am in doubt about this command, I must *eo ipso* be in doubt, either about the factual premise 'This statement is false' (and this alternative is ruled out *ex hypothesi*), or else, as must be the case, about the imperative premise 'Never say what is false'" (*ibid.* p. 41). So if there is a decision to be made about the particular matter, there is also a decision to be made about the general principle.

Therefore, on the basis of Hare's account, in order to make a decision about an act *A*, one would have to decide on a principle P_1 ; but in order to decide on P_1 , one would have to decide on P_2 ; and in order to decide on P_2 , one would have to decide on P_3 ; and so on *ad infinitum*, with the embarrassing consequence that no decisions could ever be made. It might seem that a self-evident principle somewhere down the line could break the infinite regress, but Hare has closed this avenue of escape by what he believes to be a con-

clusive refutation of all forms of "Cartesianism" in ethics (*ibid.* 33).

Clearly some slip has been made. Part of the problem arises from the kind of principles selected for consideration. In the above example, although he considers his conclusion to be "Do not make this statement" and speaks of "This statement is false" as a factual premise, it is clear that he takes as his paradigm the application of the principle "Never tell a falsehood" to the problem *whether to tell this falsehood*. And, as he contends, it is much easier to decide not to tell a particular falsehood than to decide never to tell a falsehood, for the decision of principle in this case must wait upon the decisions about telling this and many other particular falsehoods and is subject to being overthrown in its full universality by the decision about any particular one. Yet he also maintains that to decide to do or not to do a particular thing is to adopt a principle for all of its kind (*ibid.* p. 70). There seems to be an inconsistency here. But the apparent inconsistency arises from an implicit recognition of two kinds of principles, which he does not distinguish.

Hare is quite correct in contending that when one decides not to tell a particular falsehood one does not decide never to tell a falsehood. But in deciding not to tell the particular falsehood, one would do it for such and such a reason, perhaps because it is a case of deception under such-and-such conditions, and an appeal would be made to the principle "never do an act that is a case of deception under such-and-such conditions." This itself is a principle which would be adopted for some other such-and-such a reason or reasons, and thereby an appeal would be made to a still higher principle, in terms of which a later modification of the principle under consideration might be made. The two kinds of principles related to a decision about a particular act, then, are (1) a generalized principle pertaining to all acts of the kind under consideration, and (2) a generalized principle pertaining to the reason for doing the particular act.

With this distinction between the two kinds of principles, Hare's paradigm should have been one of the following :

- (1) Never tell a falsehood. Therefore, do not make this statement, because it is a falsehood.
- (2) Never tell a falsehood under such-and-such conditions. Therefore, do not tell this falsehood, because it is a falsehood under such-and-such conditions.

Rather than :

- (3) Never tell a falsehood. Therefore do not tell this falsehood.

In (1) the problem would be *whether to make this statement, not whether to make this false statement*. In (2) the problem would be *whether to tell this falsehood*. In (3), Hare should have had either the problem of (1) or the principle of (2). In either case his theory of the double barrelled nature of decision would not have suggested itself.

With the above distinction between two kinds of principles and the resulting modification of Hare's paradigm, a distinction can be made between *deciding* that a particular act shall come under a certain principle and *recognizing* that it does. Suppose that a judge is in doubt about what law applies to a particular case. From what does his doubt arise? Lack of knowledge of the case or the vagueness of the law? If the former, his doubt can be removed by further study of the case, resulting in its proper characterization and, consequently, *recognition* of what law applies; if the latter, his doubt is removed by a *decision*, resulting in a refinement of the law.

If there were situations in which we decided a particular case *A* in terms of a principle P_1 , which we recognized to apply to *A*; or if we should find ourselves with a doubt that required a decision about applying P_1 to *A*, and found a principle P_2 which we recognized to apply to the case of P_1 's application to *A*, then a decision could be made. But without recognition that some principles applied to some cases so that some single barrelled decisions could be made, we would be in the predicament of the infinite regress outlined above.

E. M. ADAMS.

University of North Carolina