



## Objectivism and Mr. Hare's Language of Morals

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## OBJECTIVISM AND MR. HARE'S *LANGUAGE OF MORALS*

MR. HARE'S important book has recently been given the full and interesting reviewing which it merits by Professor R. B. Braithwaite (*MIND*, April 1954) and Professor Alan Gewirth (*Ethics*, April 1954). Braithwaite is in sympathy with Hare's basic position, whereas Gewirth is not; but both writers highly commend Hare's book. The substantial coincidence of their interpretations is good testimony to the book's clearness, as well as to the reviewers' interested reading. Without trying to duplicate their accounts, I wish to focus on Hare's central thesis about value, and to argue that he does not provide a satisfactory criticism of or substitute for the 'objectivist' account of value.

Braithwaite and Gewirth both regard Hare as a 'prescriptionist', not an 'imperativist', in ethics. For Hare conceives ethical language as chiefly a "telling" what ought to be done and not as a "getting" others to do it by command or persuasion. Braithwaite stresses the "subjectivism" of Hare's view, and offers a very interesting development of it (with which he is not sure Hare would agree), in which he makes moral "subscription", and personal resolve to adhere to a moral principle, the central moral factor. Certainly Hare separates himself from Professor Stevenson's view, which stresses the social function of ethical language. Hare does lay great stress on the use of evaluations in moral teaching, but he also stresses that one thing the parent must teach the child is a capacity to make his own new decisions. So Braithwaite seems warranted in his notion that moral "subscription" is very important in Hare's view. In any case, the point I wish to attack is the more general principle, that evaluations primarily function to guide the choices of anyone, either of the evaluator or of his hearers.

This criticism has some affinity to the criticism which Gewirth suggests but which he does not take space to develop in detail, namely, that Hare too sharply separates the prescriptive from the descriptive elements in moral judgment. I believe my criticism agrees with Gewirth's in suggesting that Hare exaggerates the practical to the neglect of the theoretical features of evaluation. But my criticism is not just that of Gewirth—that the "evaluative" and the "descriptive" features of a thing are more closely related than Hare believes. My contention is that value is one of the "descriptive" (or 'objective') properties of a thing. I cannot hope fully to establish this contention by way of criticism of a contrary contention; but I can hope to show that where this contrary account seeks to establish itself it instead suggests the truth of objectivism.

Hare maintains that the "primary function of the word 'good' is to commend" (p. 127), and that "When we commend or condemn

anything, it is always in order, at least indirectly, to guide choices, our own or other people's, now or in the future" (p. 126). I shall suggest that the "primary function" of the word 'good' is not to guide choices, but to state a property which a thing has. Such statements do guide choices, for we (at least often) choose things because we believe them to possess this property. Our choice is guided by the belief in the existence of this property.

But Hare writes: "Suppose that I say 'The South Bank Exhibition is very good'. In what context should I appropriately say this, and what would be my purpose in so doing? It would be natural for me to say it to someone who was wondering whether to go to London to see the Exhibition, or, if he was in London, whether to pay it a visit. It would, however, be too much to say that the reference to choices is always as direct as this. An American returning from London to New York, and speaking to some people who had no intention of going to London in the near future, might still make the same remark. In order, therefore, to show that critical value-judgements are all ultimately related to choices, and would not be made if they were not so related, we require to ask, for what purpose we have standards" (p. 127). A little further on he answers: "We only have standards for a class of objects, we only talk of the virtues of one specimen as against another, we only use value-words about them, when occasions are known to exist, or are conceivable, in which we, or someone else, would have to choose between specimens. We should not call pictures good or bad if no one ever had the choice of seeing them or not seeing them (or of studying them or not studying them in the way that art students study pictures), or of buying them or not buying them" (p. 128). This statement requires scrutiny.

Hare says that we would never call pictures good or bad if no one ever had the choice of seeing them or not seeing them. Now he might mean that we would never call a particular picture or set of pictures good unless someone had the choice of seeing (a) *this* particular picture or set of pictures, or (b) *some* particular picture or set. Certainly we would not call a picture good to a person who never had the choice of seeing any picture whatsoever; but this could well be, not primarily because the statement would be unable to guide choice, but just because the person could not understand to what we are referring. For if a person would never have had the choice of seeing or not seeing pictures, it must be that he would never have had the choice of seeing pictures (I cannot conceive of a person not having the choice of shutting out the view of pictures); and in this case a person could not understand what a 'good picture' would be. I can well conceive our saying to a person who had seen pictures but had become blind, that such and such a picture is good; though perhaps this would be cruel. Similarly, I can conceive of our saying to a person who had been blind all his life that there are things called 'pictures' which persons with sight can see, and that

some of these are good—though to say this would be cruel indeed. Finally, and most easily, I can conceive of the case which Hare mentions in the above quotation, of our telling someone in New York who will not get to London that a particular set of pictures is good. Hare does not explain how this case can fit his account of commending as guiding choices, but turns the matter aside by saying that we require to ask the general question, for what purpose we have standards. He says that we have standards to guide choices, but this just returns us to the problem of the dubious case. Here we invoke a standard, and commend, but whose choice are we guiding?

Evidently there are several ways in which such a statement could be construed as guiding choice. One way is to say that a person who commends a particular object unavailable to the listener's choice is really praising not this particular object but a general class, other members of which are available to his choice. That is, the speaker is not commending the exhibition in London but pictures of this kind. But clearly this interpretation will not account for all cases of commendation. For the speaker may say that this set of pictures is good, adding that this is so although it is the only set of pictures of this kind (say of painter or school) which is good. Another way of construing the statement as choice-guiding is to say that its function is to guide the choices of the speaker: it is a way by which the speaker calls to his own mind a kind of thing which he ought to choose in the future. But this will not do either. For it is quite possible that the speaker does not expect to have (and will not have) another experience of the thing he commends.

Now in one sense it may be true, as Hare says, that "all value-judgements are covertly universal in character, which is the same as to say that they refer to, and express acceptance of, a standard which has an application to other similar instances" (p. 129). But it is true only if we give great weight to the word "covert". I think anything which is indeed good will possess one or more good-making characteristics which are general in the sense that they might be embodied in other particular things and if so embodied would tend to make these things good. But certainly in judging a thing good we do not always have in mind the thing's possession of these general characteristics. I think the more usual case is that first we judge the thing good, and then look for such characteristics. And if this could happen, then it could happen that we would not always look further for such characteristics. Such a value judgment may be ill-founded, but it is nonetheless a value judgment. Surely Hare would recognize the occurrence of valuations which are quite spontaneous and indiscriminating. I may look at a painting and judge and say that it is good, yet not have in mind *why* it is good, or what general characteristics it has in common with other good paintings. Such singular judgments could not be meant to guide choice to other similar instances.

I think we encounter yet more striking cases of valuation which are not choice-guiding. Here are two. During the conversation of a party of elderly persons one of them happens to say that the best time of all was when they were young, and the others meditatively agree. Whose choices are here being guided? A second case. In his Preface Hare writes: "I dedicate this study of moral language to those good men and women without whose lives the moralist would be wasting his breath, and especially to my wife." Whose choice is Hare guiding? The obvious answer might be, the readers' choice. But the only person named is his wife; and of course she is not generally available for imitation or choice. Though it is possible that Hare is guiding his own choice, surely the better interpretation is the objectivist one, that Hare is simply ascribing a property to Mrs. Hare.

I can see only one way in which an attempt might be made to deal with these cases. This would be to say that in them, though 'good' is used not primarily to guide choices, one ought not to use 'good' as it is used in these cases, or that, at any rate, in such uses 'good' is not being used in its "primary function". But how can Hare determine what this "primary function" is? He cannot get his conclusion by observing how educated persons use the word, for they use it in ways other than that of guiding choices. Nor can he ask them how it ought to be used, or is used primarily, for they furnish a standard not by their deliberate judgment but by their customary use. The only other way I can conceive of determining the primary function of the word 'good' is to determine the primary nature of the thing to which the word refers.

The nearest Hare approaches to such an inquiry or to an explanation of why "choice is central to morals" is his account of why good is not a property, either simple or complex. He says that words for properties, such as 'red', can be explained to one who doesn't understand their meaning in a way that good cannot be explained. This way is to point to things differing in nearly all properties except that of red and to things that are alike in nearly all properties except colour, while telling the person that in the first group all are red and in the second only particular indicated ones are red. Words which cannot be explained in this way are 'this', 'good', and, if I understand Hare aright, a large group which he calls "functional words". We know the meaning of a "functional word"—"auger" is his sample—only if we know the use of the thing it refers to. Hare does not explain how we teach a foreigner the meaning of 'this', but he explains that we teach him the meaning of 'auger' and 'good' by causing him to have the thought of *choosing*. He writes: "if we can explain to him what choosing is—or if he knows already—then we shall be able to explain how to find out, in the case of any instrument, what it is for; and if we can explain this, we can also give him some rudimentary explanation of how to tell a good member of any class of instruments from a

bad one" (p. 102). Hare does not, so far as I can find, say that the meanings of 'good' and of 'choose' are the same; but he says that one who understands the word 'choose' will be able to understand the word 'good'. He says that to teach the meaning of 'good' to someone who doesn't know it, but who knows the fictitious game of "shmakum", which he the teacher doesn't know, he could proceed as follows. Hare would ask: "'Suppose you are buying a new shmakum . . . what sort of shmakum would you choose?'; and he [the one who doesn't know what 'good' means] replies, 'All other things being equal, I would choose the one that I could make the most *smashes* with'. I then make a bold venture, and say, 'Ah! I see, then you think the *best* shmakum is the one that you could make most *smashes* with!'" (p. 104). Further, Hare declares: "I have attributed to him an opinion, not about the meaning of words, but about what, as a matter of substance, is the best shmakum" (p. 105). Again: "I have caught him, as it were, *having the thought* about shmakums for which the appropriate linguistic expression is A ["A" being: 'The best shmakum is the one that I could make the most *smashes* with']. It is a thought which has something to do with choosing or being inclined to choose" (p. 105).

I do not know why Hare is imprecise here, saying that this thought merely "has something to do with" choosing. I should think that the only way of understanding Hare's point is that the thought of what one would choose is either *identical* with the thought of what is good, or *contains* as a part of it the thought of good, or at the least *implies* the thought of good. Now surely these thoughts are not *identical*. For it makes sense to say a person has the thought of choosing good; whereas it does not make sense, good being supposed identical with choosing, to speak of a person having the thought of choosing choosing. Moreover, on this interpretation it would not make sense, as it clearly does, to speak of the thought of good choice and bad choice; for these would mean respectively a choosing choice and a non-choosing choice, the first being redundant and the second contradictory. That it is possible to think of a bad choice, or to choose what is bad, also shows that the thought of choosing cannot *contain* the thought of good, and that it cannot *imply* the thought of good in the sense of logically entailing it. One alternative remains: that the one thought *suggests* the other, because the two are commonly connected. This is surely the case, and this justifies Hare in supposing that a person who does understand choice also understands good. When one chooses deliberately, then he usually chooses what he thinks good; so that it is likely, as Hare urges, that if one can be brought to engage in (or conceive engaging in) deliberate choice, then he can be brought to have some thought of good. I believe that this is all Hare's point establishes. It does not establish that we can be certain of explaining the meaning of good in this way, or that the thoughts of good and choice are the

same. Nor does it establish that good is not a property. Good may be just the property which is the usual or proper object of deliberate choice.

Hare offers his account of the way we might explain good because he thinks we cannot explain good in the way that we explain red, by pointing to instances of it in different combinations with other properties. Hare makes his argument with reference to 'instrumental' good, for though people "have usually been most interested in 'intrinsic' good . . . they have also ignored the immense difficulties of dealing with 'instrumental good' . . ." (p. 98); moreover, he seems to think that the distinction between intrinsic and instrumental good is, really, a "distinction without a difference" (p. 139). In any case, he says that the two possible suggested procedures for explaining instrumental good as a property are unworkable. One procedure would suppose that the property is "that of being conducive to good in the 'intrinsic' sense" (p. 98), the other that the property is that of being "conducive to the end that it is used for" (p. 99). The first is unworkable because "we call many things 'good so-and-sos' in an instrumental way which are not conducive to 'intrinsic' good; for example good pistols (which are good pistols in the hands of the murderer as in those of the police)" (p. 98). The second procedure Hare holds unworkable because the various things which are called good instruments—things such as pistols, watches, pumps—all have different ends. "We call them all 'the ends for which the objects are used'; but this common designation presents the same difficulty as we were having with the word 'good' itself. For unless we can teach him [who doesn't know the meaning of 'good'], in the case of any new class of objects, to recognize without assistance for what end they are being used, we shall still have to go on giving him a new lesson each time, though it will not be about the word 'good' but about the word 'end'" (p. 99). Again: "To teach *what makes* a member of any class a good member of the class is indeed a new lesson for each class of objects; but nevertheless the word 'good' has a constant meaning which, once learnt, can be understood no matter what class of objects is being discussed" (p. 102).

Let us consider only the second procedure, which Hare takes more seriously. What is the argument? Hare does not deny that "conduciveness to the end it is used for" is, like 'good', something common to pistols, pumps, etc. But he says the common something is not like the property red. His point seems to be that, because the end of each kind of thing is different, any thing's conduciveness to its end could not be learned except with reference to that particular kind of thing; whereas if conduciveness to an end were a property, it could be learned about some kinds of things and then discovered without special learning in the case of other kinds of things, in the way that, once we know what red is, we can discover it without someone showing us. But surely we can discover the ends of things

which are new to us. Savages are not long discovering the ends of pistols. A thing's end is harder to discover than its colour, but that would indicate only that the end is more complex or more subtle than colour. And Hare says that his arguments tell equally against the theories that good is a simple or a complex property (p. 94). The several spices in a pudding are also harder to discover than the pudding's colour or temperature, but this does not lead us to say that the spice flavours are any less a property of the pudding than is the colour. Surely there is hardly anything whose end could not be discovered by attentive observation and experiment.

It is clear why this is so. A thing's end is one of the effects of that thing, and a thing's effects are observable. The only problem is in determining which of the several effects or possible effects is the end. Would Hare say that we can determine this only by asking the user which is the effect he chooses? This is certainly not the only or correct way of determining a thing's end. For, first, we can judge that a person chooses a thing for the wrong end; for example, he might choose a pistol butt for hammering nails. Second, the user himself has the problem of determining what he *ought* to choose; hence his own choice cannot serve as his way of determining the end. The way to determine a thing's end is to see that effect which the thing causes most “efficiently”, or in Hare's terms, that to which the thing is most “conducive”. And efficiency and conduciveness are statable in terms of certain *general* criteria, as: (a) maximum participation of the thing's properties (or minimum waste of them)—for example, the use of a pistol for hammering employs but few of the pistol's properties; (b) maximum preservation of the thing for similar future use—for example, the use of a book as a door stop soon destroys the thing for similar future use; (c) maximum concentration of effect, or elimination of contrary effects—for example, in hiking, tennis shoes give a firm grip on rocks but allow bruising. Now this “efficient promotion of an end” is complex, but it is something common to all good instruments. And it is, surely, something that all users of instruments are familiar with; such that one who is perfectly unfamiliar with an instrument usually can, by observing and experimenting with it, determine its end. Thus if a ‘good’ instrument is the ‘efficient’ one, we can discover a thing's instrumental good in the same way that we discover its other properties, as its colour, odour, sound, flavour, temperature.

Hare considers the possible objection that on his view good is after all a property, namely, a property “associated with certain inner experiences . . . called purposive or preferential” such as might be thought to be what Hare refers to as “choosing”. Hare says that “The effect of this objection would be to undo all my argument. . . . For it might be that it was possible to explain the meaning of ‘good’ to my foreigner by getting him to have those experiences . . .” (p. 106). He seeks “to destroy the hypothesis” by saying that to know the instrument X would choose may be to



know what X *thinks* is the best instrument, but it may be that X is mistaken (p. 107). According to Hare, X has learned, by the instruction about *shmakums*, the *meaning* only of the word 'good'; he has not learned anything about the *criteria* for applying the word. That is, he has not learned what particular properties make any particular thing a good member of its class. My point is that one in knowing the meaning of 'good instrument' does know certain other *criteria*, namely the *general criteria* of being conducive to an end, or efficient. I do not wish to say that this exhausts the meaning of 'good instrument', for this meaning must include the general nature of good which good instruments share with other things. But I do urge that these general criteria are nearer to the meaning of 'good instrument' than is the "thought of choosing".<sup>1</sup>

The oddest consequences of Hare's emphasis on choice perhaps appear in his account of moral goodness. He explains as follows people's supposing "that somehow 'moral goodness' is more august, more important . . ." (p. 140): "We get stirred up about the goodness of men because we are men. This means that the acceptance of a judgement, that such and such a man's act is good in circumstances of a certain sort, involves the acceptance of the judgement that it would be good, were we ourselves placed in similar circumstances, to do likewise. And since we might be placed in similar circumstances, we feel deeply about the question. We feel less deeply, it must be admitted, about the question, whether it was a bad act of Agamemnon to sacrifice Iphigenia, than about the question, whether it was a bad act of Mrs. Smith to travel on the railway without paying her fare; for we are not likely to be in Agamemnon's position, but most of us travel on railways. Acceptance of a moral judgement about Mrs. Smith's act is likely to have a closer bearing upon our future conduct than acceptance of one about Agamemnon's" (p. 141). Thus Hare is accounting for people's view of moral goodness on the principle that goodness is in direct ratio to practical bearing: we regard moral goodness as more important than say the goodness of chronometers because we have to choose to be men of a certain kind, whereas we cannot choose to be chronometers; and we take more seriously the act of Mrs. Smith because we are more likely to face practically her problem than that of Agamemnon. The objectivist, on the other hand, would account for people's view of the greater importance of moral goodness just by the fact that moral acts and agents are good in a degree or way in which other things, such as chronometers, are not good. Hare's example does offer a crucial test of the right interpretation, and it

<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, Mr. Hare's answer to the objection is very unsatisfactory. He does give a conclusive reason for thinking that good in the case of an instrument cannot be a property of an inner experience. But he says nothing to explain either how we are to understand "choosing" except as an experience, or how, if choosing does tell us the meaning of good, it does so except by making us acquainted with a choosing experience.

seems to me this case goes against his principle. He says that we *feel* less deeply about Agamemnon's act than about Mrs. Smith's act. But surely here what would make us *feel* more deeply about Mrs. Smith's situation is *only* its immediacy and practicality, not its degree of value. Surely we *believe* that Agamemnon's act was an act either much better or much worse than the act of Mrs. Smith. Mrs. Smith's act is one that is more available to our choice, but it is not one that we believe to possess the degree of value of an act totally unavailable to us—which is of course contrary to Hare's principle. I think, finally, that Hare's judgment of the two acts even as sources of feeling is very suspect. Has not Hare known railway commuters who felt more deeply about Agamemnon than about Mrs. Smith?

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