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HARE'S ARGUMENT AGAINST ETHICAL NATURALISM¹

ONE of the lessons we learn from the history of philosophy is to be at least doubtful about all attempts by opponents to demonstrate the *logical* impossibility of a common philosophical position. If not for other reasons, then because the actual results of such attempts have generally been far from those that have been claimed: for throughout the history of philosophy we meet again and again all the main trends and schools which are, of course, constantly being adapted to meet the new criticism. When considering such claims it is common to find oneself in the position, either of having to assume that almost all philosophers have been stubbornly sticking to their views although they have been shown to be false, or of having to try to find some weakness in the supposedly conclusive counter-arguments.

As is very well known the attitude towards Moore's refutation of ethical naturalism has been no exception to this pattern. Since the many weak points had been exposed, some philosophers have been making great efforts to improve his argument or else to produce new ones, which are again intended to be definitive. It seems to me that of these the most successful attempt has been Hare's. If it did justice to Hare, I should like to have said that it is the most that could have been made of Moore's argument; but finding so many new things in it, I prefer to call it "Hare's argument" instead of simply "Hare's improvement on Moore". For this reason I consider it strange that it has not attracted greater attention. However, I am not going to argue this point here. My task is to raise the question whether his argument is in fact conclusive. I shall be trying to show that even his argument, although very effective in the case of *some* sorts of naturalism, does not refute subtler forms of it.

Hare's argument, like Moore's, is intended to work against all sorts of naturalism: past, present and future. He thinks it can be shown that naturalism is *in principle* fallacious and untenable. The fallacy involved is not allegedly due to the selection of wrong defining characteristics: whatever one chooses one is bound to make the same mistake of logic (p. 85).² Since, like attempts to "justify induction" or "square the circle", naturalism will constantly recur so long as there are philosophers and ordinary people who have not recognized the fallacy, he is giving a "simple procedure" for exposing and overcoming any eventual future variety of it (p. 92). Moreover, his claims are greater than Moore's: the target is not only ethical but also axiological naturalism.

¹ The thanks of the author are due to Mrs. P. Foot who has read the original form of this paper and made useful objections, and to Mr. R. Hare himself, with whom I have discussed it. I am also grateful to Mr. T. Moore who has tried to translate my English as far as possible into acceptable English.

² All pages referred to in this way are from the book by R. N. Hare, *The Language of Morals*, Oxford, 1952.

The argument proceeds as follows (I am paraphrasing as far as possible in his own terminology). If "a good A" meant the same as "an A which is C",¹ then it would be impossible to use—as we in fact do—the sentences

(I) "An A which is C is good" (p. 91)

and

(II) "An A is good because it is C" (p. 85)

in order to commend A's which are C, for they would be analytic and equivalent to the sentences "An A which is C is C" and "An A is C because it is C". Ergo, "a good A" does not mean "an A which is C".

Perhaps a naturalist might object that (II) as a whole is used merely for giving reasons for or justifying its own first part or even only for explaining and defining its meaning, but not for commendation of A's. Having no desire to get involved in such a discussion here, all I would say about it is that this objection, even if valid, could not do any harm to Hare since he has got (I) in reserve. Although, I imagine, our naturalist might again insist on the parallel between (I) and any typical definition, because (I), like such a definition, is surely also used for the purpose of explaining and defining the meaning (of "a good A"), in my opinion he could not convincingly deny that, unlike the latter, we also use the former to commend A's. That is why from now on I shall deal exclusively with (I).

May I be excused for a slight digression. From what I have said about (I) I hope it is not difficult to conclude why the famous and justified objection to Moore's argument, pointing out that had Moore's refutation of the naturalistic definition of ethical terms been valid, it would have invalidated any definition whatsoever, nevertheless does not hold in Hare's case. For, firstly, unlike Moore, Hare does not argue at all in terms of "meaningfulness", or also "senselessness" of the question "Is an A which is C good?" and, secondly, as we have seen, he in advance makes the complete parallel between (I) and a typical definition impossible by showing that the former is also used for recommendation.

It is obvious that the fate of naturalism faced with Hare's refutation depends on its being consistent with the "commendatory" or, to apply another of Hare's more generic terms, "prescriptive" use (or function) of value and ethical judgments. No doubt there have been and there are now many naturalists for whom this is impossible without a complete revision of their own versions of naturalism. I have in mind those who, by excluding all reference to human interests, ends, attitudes and the like from their definitions, make the admission of such a function impossible; or in view of

¹ "C" standing for either a single characteristic or a conjunction of characteristics or a disjunction of alternative characteristics.

such a definition of the *meaning* prevent themselves from undertaking any sound explanation of the source of that function.

To proceed further a closer look at Hare's argument is necessary. Perhaps a quotation will lend weight to my paraphrase. "Now our attack upon naturalistic definitions of 'good' was based upon the fact that if it were true that 'a good A' meant the same as 'an A which is C' then it would be impossible to use the sentence 'An A which is C is good' in order to commend A's which are C; for this sentence would be analytic and equivalent to 'An A which is C is C'" (pp. 90-91; my italics S.S.). A glance is enough to see that here Hare takes for granted the commendatory use of value and ethical language as being part of its meaning. At all events, everybody who has read it will have noticed this throughout his book.

Now let us try to imagine a naturalist who behaves in quite the opposite way: he will admit such use or function but reject its being an element of the meaning. Having stipulated this, is it not clear that our naturalist would not need to deny that we really use the sentence "An A which is C is good" for recommendation of A's in order to be able at the same time to assert that "a good A" means "An A which is C"? Nor would the acceptance of this sentence as analytical and equivalent (as to its *meaning*) to the sentence "An A which is C" be fatal to him.

But some naturalists have actually been doing, even before Hare's book, precisely what our imaginary naturalist is doing. John Dewey¹ is a very good example. According to their "meaning" or "content", as he also likes to call it, value and ethical judgments are propositions about the means-end relation. As such, however, their meaning does not prevent them from having or exercising a practical or normative "office", "function", "use", "force", from "pleading", "giving advice", "recommending", "speaking to the conative-affective nature", "influencing" and "directing" conduct and behaviour, etc., according to Dewey. Moreover, "Of ethical sentences as ordinarily used, it may be said, I believe, that the *entire* use and function of ethical sentences is directive or 'practical'." He steadily emphasizes that this use does not require recognition of an extracognitive element or constituent of the meaning or content of these judgments. It originates in a practical context or a practical contextual reference: a problematic situation, being characterised by selection and decision of ends and corresponding means, determines normativeness of value and ethical judgments. Having included human ends in his definition of their meaning, he did not, like many other naturalists, make the explanation of the origin of their practical function impossible. A further, separate, question is, naturally, how successful it was. To avoid misunder-

¹ See, for example, his *Theory of Valuation*, Chicago, 1939, "Ethical Subject-Matter and Language", *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. xlii, 1945 (from which the next quotation is taken, p. 709) and "The Field of Value" in ed. Ray Lepley *Value: A Co-operative Inquiry*, New York, 1949.

standing, I want to make it clear that I am not arguing about the merits or defects of Dewey's theory. What I have been trying to show is merely that he is a true example of a naturalist who is able to meet Hare's refutation.

To sum up: Hare's refutation, I think, would be conclusive had he or anybody else conclusively shown that commendatory use of value and moral judgments is part of their meaning (he himself took it for granted). But surely and (being myself a non-naturalist I must add) unfortunately contemporary meta-ethics and meta-axiology is far from this.

This disagreement entails many other disagreements not less important,—for example, whether value and ethical judgments are empirically verifiable or else falsifiable and in connection with this whether "truth" or else "falseness" in the strict sense is applicable to them. Today the so-called "deadlock" or "impasse" in ethics and axiology is very often discussed. I should like to suggest that one of the most important causes of the impasse should be looked for in this disagreement. Now on the scene there are mainly, to use my own terminology, moderate forms of empirical cognitivism ("naturalism" not open to Hare's criticism) and moderate sorts of anti-cognitivism (among them Hare's prescriptivism), because anti-empirical cognitivism (Moore, etc.), extremist empirical cognitivism ("naturalism" open to Hare's criticism) and extremist anti-cognitivism (early emotivism, imperativism, etc.) have displayed too many failings. The way out of this impasse will not, I believe, be found until the main participants have recognised this disagreement as the starting point of their fundamental disputes, and decide to give it their full attention.

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