



Hare's Account of Moral Reasoning

David S. Scarrow

Ethics, Vol. 76, No. 2 (Jan., 1966), 137-141.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0014-1704%28196601%2976%3A2%3C137%3AHAOMR%3E2.0.CO%3B2-N>

Ethics is currently published by The University of Chicago 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/ucpress.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.

HARE'S ACCOUNT OF MORAL REASONING

DAVID S. SCARROW

IN BOTH of his books¹ R. M. Hare raises the question: What is it to accept a moral proposition—either a general moral principle or a moral verdict about a particular situation? Hare's answer is that to accept a moral proposition entails acting, or at least attempting to act, upon it. As he puts it, to accept such a proposition is to prescribe something to oneself and to others, and prescribing to oneself logically involves acting or trying to act. But there is an alternative answer to the question which Hare does not consider. One might propose that to accept a moral proposition entails not acting upon it but reasoning with it. In the case of a general principle this would mean that one will heed it in arriving at a moral verdict or, if it has slipped from one's mind or has been repressed, that one will acknowledge its relevance when reminded of it. In the case of a moral verdict on a particular situation this will mean that one will draw the moral consequences of his judgment in terms of praise and blame and whatever else might be required. One virtue of this latter view is that it can frankly face the fact that we do not necessarily do what we believe is the morally required thing to do. But Hare, though clearly disturbed by this fact,² is not dissuaded by it. Rather than explain acceptance in terms of moral reasoning, he has attempted to explain moral reasoning in terms of his prescriptive theory of acceptance. I want to argue that in this attempt he fails.

I

Hare builds his account of moral reasoning upon two features which he finds in every moral judgment.³ One feature is universality. In some cases universality is explicit, for example, in the case of the judgment that "creditors ought to jail

their debtors." But it is also present, albeit implicitly, in particular judgments such as "I ought to put J. B. in jail." For to Hare an essential feature of "moral judgments about particular things"—distinguishing them, for example, from commands⁴—is that they "are made for reasons."⁵ But to give a reason for such a judgment requires that one identify the features of the particular situation in virtue of which the thing to be done ought to be done.⁶ This requires formulating a rule which, because of its essential generality, provides backing for similar particular judgments in other similar situations.

The second important feature of moral judgments is their prescriptivity. In *The Language of Morals* Hare defended at length the thesis that evaluative judgments are essentially prescriptive. His fundamental point was that accepting a moral judgment is necessarily connected with doing or at least attempting to do what the moral judgment enjoins. In connection with first-person moral judgments Hare said in *The Language of Morals* that one can accept the moral judgment "I ought to do X" only if he assents to the "command" "Let me do X."⁷ And since he had already stated that we cannot assent to a "command addressed to ourselves and at the same time not perform it, if now is the occasion for performing it and it is in our (physical and psychological) power to do so,"⁸ it is clear that Hare regarded assent to the moral judgment as necessarily connected with action. In *Freedom and Reason* Hare expresses the same point by speaking of the prescriptivity of moral judgments in terms of commitment⁹ and of the difference which acceptance or rejection of a moral judgment makes to how a person lives.¹⁰ Moreover, he asserts,

there is also a prescriptive element in generalized moral judgments of the form "In situation S one ought to do X." To accept such a judgment is to prescribe both to myself and to others. To prescribe to myself in this case is to resolve to do X whenever I find myself in situation S. To prescribe to others involves (if it does not consist in) resolving to allow and perhaps even to urge or advise others to do X when they are in S.¹¹

From these features of universality and prescriptivity in moral judgment Hare develops his account of moral reasoning. Such reasoning is depicted as a process of deciding whether to accept a proposed moral judgment. If the proposed judgment is a particular one, part of the reasoning will consist in identifying the general principle which the particular judgment implies. The other part of moral reasoning consists in determining whether one can accept the general principle which is explicit or implicit in the proposed judgment. In his discussion Hare emphasizes the question of whether we are willing to prescribe that others act according to this principle. But also involved, although Hare does not emphasize it, is the question of whether we are willing that our own future conduct follow it as well. To accept the general moral prescription is to make both of these prescriptions.

II

Hare applies this account of moral reasoning to three kinds of examples. (1) His first example is that of the creditor who is wondering whether he ought to have his debtor jailed.¹² Moral reasoning in this case begins by considering the implications of the alternative answers. If I ought to jail my debtor, then everyone in a situation like mine ought to jail his debtor. If I ought not to jail my debtor, then no one in a situation like mine ought to jail his debtor. Once the implications of the alternatives are clear, I must decide which of these general principles I shall prescribe both to

myself and to others. I should make this decision by making myself realize as concretely as possible the commitment I will be making and by then determining my willingness to abide by it in any eventuality. In particular, I must consider whether I am willing to prescribe that someone jail me if I were to be his delinquent debtor. Whatever my decision is, when I have made it, I have established a moral principle for myself.

(2) In the second type of example, moral reasoning is directed toward upsetting a moral principle which someone already holds. Hare's examples of arguments with a Nazi or a Negro-hater illustrate reasoning of this type.¹³ The aim of such arguments is to make one's adversary realize that he is not willing to accept all to which his principle commits him. So implications which perhaps have been conveniently overlooked are pointed out, and the full nature of those commitments is made vivid. Thus the Nazi is made to realize that if it turned out that his grandmother had been a Jew he would be committed to annihilating his own children. And to reinforce the point one should produce pictures of the extermination centers so that the concrete details of the commitment will be fully and vividly realized. One who would not be dissuaded by such an argument, Hare says, is a fanatic.

(3) There is a type of case which falls between the other two, a type illustrated by the need to adapt the principle of truth-telling to unusual circumstances. This need may arise in two ways. Perhaps one has accepted the principle of truth-telling without sufficient reflection upon the exceptions required to avoid unwanted results. Afterward he is presented with an actual or hypothetical case where he would not be willing to prescribe that principle to himself or to others.¹⁴ In this case he must amend the principle by building in the required exception. A somewhat different problem is presented when one's principle of truth-telling conflicts with another of

one's moral principles.¹⁵ Then one of these principles must give way and be qualified so as to preserve the other intact. To such occasions for adapting our moral principles there is no end. "Our moral development," says Hare, "consists in the main in making our moral principles more and more specific by writing into them exceptions and qualifications to cover kinds of cases of which we have had experience."¹⁶

III

The defects in Hare's account of moral reasoning are most obvious in this talk about modifying moral principles. First is the defect of omission. Though Hare admits that one moral principle may clash with another, he never offers an explicit account of the reasoning required to resolve such a clash. This omission perhaps implies that when moral principles clash one must rethink the entire situation and fall back upon the principle of prescriptive universality. But this implication would mean that moral principles are irrelevant to moral reasoning. For prescriptive universality is, as Hare points out,¹⁷ a logical, not a moral, principle, while the moral principles established in accordance with it, though they may guide action, would, in situations of conflicting guidance, be irrelevant for resolving that conflict. Though moral reasoning ends in the acceptance of moral principles, moral principles themselves would play no part in moral reasoning.

In any case, Hare's talk of modifying moral principles introduces two serious anomalies into his view. On the one hand, Hare insists upon the practical role of moral principles as rules of conduct; on the other hand, he allows that in any situation they can be modified so as not to apply. But this puts one in the position of always having to inquire anew into the adequacy of his moral principles, thus destroying their status as rules. Again, on the one hand, Hare insists upon a prescriptive and behavioral analysis of what it is to accept a moral principle; on the

other hand, he allows that one could accept a moral principle and yet, in the face of a particular situation, modify the principle rather than act in accordance with it. But if my future behavior provides the test of whether I have really prescribed a rule to myself, that is, of whether I have accepted it, then if I accept a principle it is logically necessary that I act upon it—some modification of it will not suffice.

Hare is faced with a dilemma. If he explains acceptance in terms of prescription and commitment, then he cannot deal with those morally ambiguous cases in which only a fanatic would unhesitatingly follow his moral principles. But if, as he seems to do, he allows that each case requires us to determine whether our principles are adequate to it, then he has abandoned his prescriptive account of what it is to accept a moral principle. The alternative to this account is that to accept a moral principle is to heed it in moral reasoning. On this view, to accept the principle that I ought to tell the truth is not to commit myself to do anything. Rather, it is to be disposed to recognize that the fact that a proposed statement would be a lie is a relevant reason for not making it. But of course in a particular situation I may also recognize that there are relevant and overriding reasons for making it. And in this case, if I act on reason, I will tell the lie. But I will not have modified my principle. I will have recognized that the situation which requires me to lie is not altogether morally satisfactory. I will continue to regard truth-telling as something I ought to do, and I will continue to heed this principle when I reason what I ought to do in particular situations.

IV

Essentially the same difficulty arises in Hare's discussion of the other two cases. In both of them Hare describes moral reasoning without mentioning the moral principles which those engaged in that reasoning already accept. Thus he deals with the creditor example as though one

were starting with a moral *tabula rasa* and were engaged in establishing one's first moral principle. Now this is inconsistent in itself, and it is inconsistent with Hare's own theory. It is self-inconsistent because the question which the reasoning is designed to resolve—Ought I to jail my debtor?—assumes that I already accept some principles concerning what I ought to do. If I did not, how could the question ever arise? It is inconsistent with Hare's own view, because this question is presumably being asked by someone who has already engaged in moral reasoning and has already committed himself to some moral principles. And if he has done this, then more is involved in deciding the case than simply determining that one is willing to accept a general principle. If I am deciding whether I ought to jail my debtor, my past decisions on how debtors should be treated are relevant to my present deliberations. Moreover, my past decisions on other matters are relevant too. If I have already insisted that the letter of the law be carried out for a thief, this is relevant for my decision in the present case. If I have argued that children should not be separated from their parents, this too will be relevant if my debtor happens to be a parent. But this kind of reasoning in which accepted moral principles are applied to a present case is entirely ignored by Hare. Moral reasoning is much more a matter of applying and weighing moral principles and much less a matter of deciding whether I would be willing for something to be done to me than Hare's description of it suggests. Here again Hare faces a dilemma. His account of acceptance as prescription and commitment requires that he recognize the relevance of previous decisions to present deliberation. Yet to do this would show that in accepting a moral principle one has committed himself, not to acting in a certain way, but to regarding something as a relevant reason in moral deliberation.

V

Even in Hare's second case moral reasoning employs something more than the

dubiously effective technique of requiring one's opponent to imagine himself in a position he knows full well he shall never be in.¹⁸ Moral argument also, indeed primarily, involves the other principles which one's opponent holds. A Nazi might conceivably be shaken from his position by reminding him of his commitment to established law. And a racist might be (and some have been) argued out of his plan to defy the law by appealing to his principle that laws ought to be respected and obeyed. Arguments such as these play a predominant role in our attempts to dislodge our moral adversaries. But in Hare's account of moral reasoning they are completely ignored.

Still, Hare is right in supposing that other arguments may become exhausted and that we may come to the point where we can only ask: How would you like it if that were done to you? So in conclusion, let us consider the validity of this appeal.

The point of asking this question is to get a person to realize exactly what he is doing when he follows a particular principle. If the segregationist can be made to imagine his own reaction were he to be turned away from a job or a hotel or a voting booth, then he will, perhaps, know what kind of a world his principles commit him to. And when he has become aware of this, he may not be so confident of his principles. There is, for most of us, an insensitivity and blindness to the consequences of our actions which this question may help remove. And insofar as it does, it is germane to any moral argument. But, of course, the novel, the play, the poem, the cinema, the true story are also means of removing our blindness and making us realize more concretely the effects of our actions and of the social structures of which we are a part. The question "How would you like it if that were done to you?" has no overriding importance in making us come to realize these things.

But on Hare's view this question does have an overriding importance in making moral decisions. I must vividly imagine

what it would be like for a proposed principle to be applied to me, and I must be willing that it should be applied. The heart of the moral decision is the decision of whether I am so willing. But Hare is not very clear on how we are to make that decision. His discussion of the Nazi suggests that a rational person will be guided by his own reaction to the imagined situation. Thus the Nazi who, though horrified by the thought of his children at Belsen, persists in his principle that the Jews ought to be wiped out is a fanatic. Anyone who is not a fanatic would not persist in such a principle.¹⁹ No rational person could commit himself or his children to undergoing such a horrible experience. For a rational person, Hare seems to say, inclination—one's interests and desires—must determine the decision of what one is willing to accept.

But moral reasoning is not as easy as this. You ask me to consider how I would like to have my children destroyed or maimed by an atomic bomb. There is no difficulty in imagining this dreadful possibility and in knowing my reaction to it. Yet if I believe that bombing China is the only way to prevent a general nuclear war, this appeal to my imagination will not dissuade me. Even if my decision is determined simply by the principle of least suffering, it is still determined by a principle and not by my inclination. I cannot possibly imagine all the suffering that a nuclear war would bring; but I can

appraise it as much greater than the isolated instances of suffering I can imagine. This appraisal, not my sympathetic feelings, is the rational guide to my decision. Sometimes, to be sure, sanity seems to require us to inhibit our imaginations so that we will not fully realize what we are doing. Then we desperately need all those who can rekindle our sympathies for the situations of others. Yet even then rational moral decision is guided by principles rather than by the inclinations which, on Hare's analysis, are all that is left to resolve moral deliberation.

And perhaps in the end this is what Hare really wants to say—that we should come to each moral decision armed, not with moral principles which we proceed to apply judicially, but only with intelligence, imagination, and good will. As a description of moral reasoning as it actually is or of the language in which it is embodied, Hare's account is mistaken. For such reasoning involves mostly the weighing and application of moral principles rather than decisions on universal rules. But, as in all important works of moral philosophy, behind the analytic façade lies a depth of moral perspective which remains untouched by philosophical critique. From this perspective, one feels, Hare is deploring the judicial and heartless character of moral reasoning as it actually is.

KALAMAZOO COLLEGE

NOTES

1. *The Language of Morals* (hereinafter cited as "LM") (Oxford, 1952); *Freedom and Reason* (hereinafter cited as "FR") (Oxford, 1963).

2. See FR, chap. v.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

6. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 38: "We have to consider the particular case and make up our minds what are its morally relevant features, and what, taking these features into account, ought to be done in such a case. Nevertheless, when we do make up our minds, it is about a matter of principle which has a bearing outside the particular case."

7. LM, pp. 168-69.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

9. FR, p. 89.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 23, 47.

11. See Hare's claim that "C ought to put me in prison" implies "Let C put me into prison" (FR, p. 91).

12. FR, pp. 91-93.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 166-73; pp. 217-22.

14. See Hare's discussion of the principle that prisoners should not be tortured (FR, pp. 43-44).

15. FR, p. 168.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

18. See Richard Brandt's review of FR, *Journal of Philosophy*, LXI (1964), 146.

19. See FR, pp. 184-85.