



## What Kant Might Say to Hare

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*Mind*, New Series, Vol. 80, No. 318 (Apr., 1971), 295-297.

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*Mind* is currently published by Oxford University Press.

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## WHAT KANT MIGHT SAY TO HARE

DESPITE the fact that Professor Hare acknowledges "a very great debt to Kant", at no point does he actually claim to be a Kantian. Nonetheless, it is certainly the case that Hare uses many Kantian terms and that it would be rather easy for him to be taken for a Kantian. But this would be a mistake. What I would like to do in this essay is to examine an example which Hare uses in his book *Freedom and Reason* in order to show that if Hare *did* embrace the Kantian position fully he would not find himself at the impasse to which his position leads him when he admits that "a sufficiently fanatical Nazi, who was really prepared to immolate himself in the service of his ideal, could not be touched by my arguments . . .".<sup>1</sup>

A remark should be made about the impasse to which we are referring before we progress. If by the phrase "not touched by my arguments" Hare means that *in fact* any given fanatical Nazi would be untouched, then I would certainly have to admit that this sort of individual would be untouched by Kant's arguments as well. That is, if the difficulty lies in the obduracy of the fanatic then arguments *per se* would, in all likelihood, be useless. But I do not think that Hare means simply that *because* of his fanaticism the Nazi would be untouched by arguments. Hare also means to say that there is a point at which his method of argument would no longer be of any use because he has said all he can say on the subject.

Our problem is twofold. To begin with, we must see what Hare would say to the Nazi, and in doing so we shall have to try to understand what he means by the phrase "willing a universal law," since this is clearly a key phrase. Secondly, we shall have to examine what Kant would mean by this same phrase, and what he might say after Hare had left off arguing with the Nazi.

### I

As Hare sees it, a moral argument consists of three distinct stages, only one of which is, strictly speaking the domain of the moral philosopher. Since moral philosophy, as Hare views it, is the study of the language of morals, the moral philosopher must attempt to help us be clear about the logical properties of moral words. This is the first stage, and we shall discuss this in a moment. The second stage is that of the gathering of facts which is the task of the journalists, historians and scientists. The final stage is that of the exercise of the imagination, which is best brought about by artists and novelists. Hare is convinced that a man must be informed, imaginative and logical if he is to enter the arena of moral argumentation with any degree of success.

Hare claims that moral language has two primary functions: prescription and universalization. "When we are trying to decide

<sup>1</sup> R. M. Hare, *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford, 1963), p. 192.

what to do," he tells us, "what we are looking for . . . is an action to which we can commit ourselves (prescriptively) but which we are at the same time prepared to accept as exemplifying a principle of action to be prescribed for others in like circumstances (universalizability)" (pp. 89-90).

The Kantian phrase "willing a universal law," which Hare employs late in his discussion, involves both prescription and universalization. In fact, of the two, prescription is regarded as the more important. It is not enough to say of a certain action "were he to commit it another man, Jones, ought to be put into prison"—which would involve universalization only. One must take a further step and say, "let Jones put me into prison if I should do the deed." That is, the process must include prescription as well. It is in making individuals aware of what this reversal of roles involves that imagination plays such an important part.

The ideal which Hare seems to be placing before us is that of a thoroughly consistent individual—one who is so consistent in his actions that he would advocate a second man's doing to him precisely what he is willing to do to a third man. It is here that we encounter the difficulty mentioned above:

If there are people so wedded to some fanatical ideal that they are unable to imagine, in their full vividness, the sufferings of the persecuted, and who still prescribe universally that this persecution should go on in the service of their ideal, even if they themselves should suffer thus, then they will remain unshaken by any argument that I have been able to discover (p. 184).

In the interest of finding such an argument, let us turn to Immanuel Kant.

## II

As an ethical problem, the duty of the fanatical Nazi is clear: according to Kant the paramount duty of any man to another man is the promotion of that man's happiness. Now, since in any except a bizarre case no man's happiness would be furthered by being persecuted, the Nazi would be obliged to desist in his persecutions and change his attitude to one of beneficence.<sup>1</sup>

The question of the willing of a universal law—if we remain for a moment on the level of concrete examples—is also quite clear. There could be no universal law advocating the persecution of *any* man by another man, since such a universal prescription would be self-defeating. This can be seen more clearly if we shift the discussion to the formal, or *a priori*, level.

In the *Grundlegung*, Kant provides us with three different Imperatives which constitute the framework of his formal discussion of moral philosophy. The two formulations in this work that are

<sup>1</sup> Kant, *The Elements of Ethics*. Included in *The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue*, Tr., James Ellington (Bobbs Merrill, Indianapolis, 1964), p. 117.

of interest to us here are the first and the third: the Categorical and the Practical Imperatives.

It seems clear that the third, or Practical, Imperative provides the grounds whereby the ideal of the fanatical Nazi can be seen to conflict with duty. To persecute a man in the interest of an ideal (any ideal) is to treat him as a means and not as an end. As Kant would put it, it involves treating a person as a thing. He defines person in the following manner:

Rational beings are called *persons*, because their very nature points them out as ends in themselves, that is, as something which must not be used merely as a means, and in so far as they are such therefore restricts freedom of action (and is an object of respect).<sup>1</sup>

This definition is the key whereby the Practical Imperative can be seen to provide the grounds for the Categorical Imperative. All rational creatures are "ends in themselves", according to Kant, because *qua* rational they are the source of willful, moral decisions. They are, as Kant puts it, autonomous: lawmakers unto themselves. This applies equally to the individual himself and all other creatures who share this rational nature. From this it follows that each of us, in so far as we are rational beings, should "act as to treat humanity . . . in every case as an end withal, never as a means only".

It seems that Kant's analysis of willing a universal law includes more than simply being consistent, although it certainly includes this principle as well. Kant provides us with the grounds for this consistency by means of his "metaphysics of morals". A man ought to be consistent; that is, he ought to will universal laws, because this is the primary condition of his being a man. As Kant puts it:

First, it is one's duty to raise himself out of the crudity of his nature, out of his animality (*quod actum*) more and more to humanity, by which alone he is capable of setting himself ends.<sup>2</sup>

The fanatical Nazi, then, has a paramount duty to treat all men as ends in themselves, which excludes persecution of other men for the sake of an ideal. This persecution involves a violation of his duty in two ways. First, it means that the individual who persecutes treats *himself* as a means to an end (as an instrument to be employed for the sake of an ideal). Secondly, it means that the individual(s) who is persecuted is also treated as a means.

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<sup>1</sup> Kant, *Grundlegung*, Tr., T. K. Abbot (Longmans, Green and Co. Inc., New York, 1954), p. 46.

<sup>2</sup> Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Included in *The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue*, *op. cit.* p. 44.