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# IS HARE'S PRESCRIPTIVISM MORALLY NEUTRAL? \*

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Many philosophers have pointed out that one of the unacceptable consequences of prescriptivism in ethics is the impossibility of adducing good reasons for moral principles and judgments in ethics and the consequent feeling that prescriptivism thereby makes ethics irrational.<sup>1</sup> I would like to argue that prescriptivism only has this consequence in a Harean version of it and then only if Hare can be interpreted in a crucial passage as going beyond his original 'brief' of putting forward a morally neutral logical thesis.

On the first page of the preface to *The Language of Morals*, Hare sets out his 'brief': "Ethics, as I conceive it, is the logical study of the language of morals."<sup>2</sup> Later, in *Freedom and Reason*, Hare sets out his undertaking in fuller form: "Ethical theory, which determines the meanings and functions of the moral words, and thus the 'rules' of the moral 'game', provides only a clarification of the conceptual framework within which moral reasoning takes place; it is therefore, in the required sense, neutral as between different moral opinions."<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, by the end of Part I of *The Language of Morals*, one could be led into thinking that Hare has already begun to forget about his original intent when one finds him writing: "To become morally adult is to reconcile these two apparently conflicting positions by learning to make decisions of principle; it is to learn to use 'ought'—sentences in the realization that they can only be verified by reference to a standard or set of principles which we have by our own decision accepted and made our own."<sup>4</sup> This statement is at least in danger of being interpreted as a nonlogical comment

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1. For example, P. J. McGrath, "R. M. Hare: A Prescriptive Theory of Ethics," *Philosophical Studies* 14 (1965): 47 ff.; G. J. Warnock, *Contemporary Moral Philosophy* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1967), pp. 42 ff.; J. C. Mackenzie, "Prescriptivism and Rational Behaviour," *Philosophical Quarterly* 18 (October 1968): 310 ff.; and H. Veatch, "Good Reasons and Prescriptivism in Ethics: A Metaethical Incompatibility?" *Ethics* 80 (January 1970): 102.

2. R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952).

3. *Freedom and Reason* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 89.

4. *The Language of Morals*, pp. 77-78.

to the effect that moral principles are derived as a result of a free personal choice, meaning that one's moral principles are to be derived by thinking them up in one's head. If one refers to what Hare wrote later in the introduction to *Freedom and Reason*, this interpretation is given some more fuel:

But for the moment let us assume that there can be no logical deduction of moral judgments from statements of fact. If this be once granted, it follows that we are free to form our own moral opinions in a much stronger sense than we are free to form our own opinions as to what the facts are.

Against this conviction, which every adult has, that he is free to form his own opinions about moral questions, we have to set another characteristic of these questions which seems to contradict it. This is, that the answering of moral questions is, or ought to be, a rational activity.<sup>5</sup>

This last quotation is the crucial point at which Hare's allegedly logically pure analysis can be interpreted as being corrupted. I fear that what Hare says follows can be interpreted as not following, so that he can be thought to have made a small logical error with the large result that his theory is no longer a purely logical one and so is no longer morally neutral. Hare can be interpreted as purporting to deduce 'we are free to form our own moral opinions,' meaning 'we are free to originate our own moral opinions,' from 'you cannot deduce moral judgments from statements of fact.' All that should logically follow about the derivation of moral judgments, principles, or opinions from the statement 'you cannot deduce moral judgments from statements of fact' is that, given that moral judgments are logically connected with moral principles and opinions (as they are in Harean prescriptivism), then moral principles and opinions cannot be deduced (or derived) from statements of fact. That it is a logical fallacy to hold that 'you cannot deduce moral judgments (principles or opinions) from statements of fact' implies 'we are free to form our own moral views,' will be clearly seen if one reflects that it is logically possible both that we are not free to form our own moral views and yet that they are not derived from statements of fact. It could be that moral views are derived as a result of some divine revelation, or that they are 'heard' through some inner *facultas* which infallibly dictates to each person the same categorical moral imperatives, or that they are derived in some other such not purely subjective (and in that sense 'objective') yet nonfactual manner.

Now, the following model should serve to show that, if Hare is making this logical error (which I think he is not), then Harean prescriptivism is quite likely to revise people's moral principles and consequent judgments on the basis of them. If O'Reilly, a staunch Roman Catholic from Dublin, believes that the Church, interpreting infallibly the teachings of Christ, is the guardian of faith and morals, then his moral views will be those of the Vatican or at least his Dublin parish priest's interpretation of the official

5. *Freedom and Reason*, p. 2. In his critical notice of *Freedom and Reason in Mind* (April 1965), C. C. W. Taylor has pointed out that, if this is meant as a sociological comment, then it is not a correct one to say that feeling free to form one's own moral opinions is a "conviction which every adult has"; the opposite is closer to the truth.

Vatican view. Now, if O'Reilly reads in *Freedom and Reason* that "we are free to form our own moral opinions" and interprets this as meaning "we are free to originate our own moral opinions," then the odds in the betting are at least 'evens' that O'Reilly, if he becomes a follower of Hare's prescriptivism, will change his moral views. Previously O'Reilly, with much chagrin and against his personal opinions, had accepted the Vatican ruling that contraception is morally unacceptable and had fathered eight children; now, being a Harean prescriptivist, he is quite likely to feel free to give full weight to his personal opinions in moral matters and decide that now contraception is morally right. He has changed from seeking his moral opinions from the Vatican to deriving them for himself.

So, if Hare is telling us how to derive our moral opinions, he is not talking logic, and his statement is not entailed by any part of the logic of the pure prescriptivist view of moral language. It is this doctrine of Hare's about the derivation of our moral judgments, principles, and opinions which, under the interpretation I have outlined, has given rise to the accusations that the Harean version of prescriptivism is irrational; for, so the argument goes, if ultimate moral principles are a matter of choice by the individual, and if these individual choices are ultimately not sustainable by an appeal to facts or principles (which Hare admits) or necessarily affected by a consideration of possible consequences or by a requirement of universalizability (which his critics point out), then one cannot adduce good reasons in favor of one's moral principles.<sup>6</sup> This argument, and the accusation of irrationality based on it, loses its force if the statement "moral principles are a matter of choice by the individual" is not interpreted as meaning that "moral principles can only be derived, no matter how sophisticated the thinking, by thinking them up in one's head" but as "moral principles are not derivable from statements of fact but must be derived from somewhere else by a deliberate choice on the part of the individual." Now, on this latter interpretation, Harean prescriptivism, excepting that moral principles are not derivable from statements of fact, leaves open the matter of where they are to come from and so leaves open the question whether moral principles are basically irrational. If moral principles are basically irrational, it will be because all the possible sets of moral principles which people use, the utilitarian ones, the hedonist ones, the Christian ones, and so on, have been shown to be basically irrational.

A pure prescriptivist view of ethics should have nothing to say about the derivation of our moral principles and opinions except that they cannot be derived from statements of fact. This is all that follows from the is-ought dichotomy in regard to moral opinions. It may be the case that Hare wishes to say no more than this; it is certainly the case that he need say no more. However, I think it is fair to say that what Hare has written in *The Language of Morals* and *Freedom and Reason* is open to an interpretation that makes his prescriptivism open both to the charge of irrationality and to the charge of not being morally neutral, and that it has been so interpreted in good faith.

6. For a full analysis of the charge of irrationality made against Harean prescriptivism, I refer the reader to the works cited in n. 1 above.