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## A NOTE ON HARE ON IMAGINING ONESELF IN THE PLACE OF OTHERS

A CENTRAL feature in the account of moral argument given by Hare in *Freedom and Reason* is the idea that, in deciding whether a proposed action is morally right, one must imaginatively play the role of, or imagine oneself in the place of, all the other people who would be affected by the action. If A is considering doing X which affects B in a certain way, A must imagine a hypothetical case which is exactly similar to the actual case except that he, A, plays the role of B; then A can conclude that it is morally right for him to do X only if he sincerely assents to X's being performed in the hypothetical case, a case in which the doing of X would affect him in just the way it affects B in the actual case. A difficulty with this idea has been noticed and discussed by others, most extensively by C. C. W. Taylor in his critical notice on *Freedom and Reason* (*Mind*, lxxiv (1965), 280-298), the difficulty, namely, that where those affected by a proposed action are very different from the agent, or different in certain ways, the agent cannot intelligibly imagine himself in their place, for he cannot intelligibly imagine himself to have their characteristics. A different sort of difficulty, concerned only with a special sort of case, does not, however, seem to have been noticed and is the subject of this note.

The sort of case in question is that in which the agent knows or believes something which is not known or believed by those affected by his proposed action and in which this fact itself is regarded by the agent as being relevant to his decision. One such case is the "deathbed promise" case, a case which is usually discussed as a possible counter-example to utilitarianism and is discussed by Hare himself (*Freedom and Reason*, pp. 132-135) in this context. This case is one in which the agent makes a promise to a dying man which he knows he will not keep, the purpose of making the promise being to make the last moments of the dying man "happy". The promise would not be made if the promiser felt that the dying man knew, or would learn before he died, that the promise was deceptive, for the promise would then fail in its purpose; thus this case satisfies the above description. Now Hare routinely applies his imaginative role-shift technique to this case:

Is he [the promiser] prepared to prescribe universally that in situations precisely like this the promise should be broken, even supposing that he himself is the person to whom it was made? Now it seems to me that he has very good reason to refuse to accept this universal prescription. The reason can be brought out by asking him to imagine himself on his deathbed, in the same situation as that described. Is he prepared to accept the *singular* prescription (which follows from the universal one just stated) that, in such a situation, the man at his bedside should, just to keep him 'happy', make a promise which he is not going to fulfil? Most of us would be ex-

tremely averse to being deceived in this way; and we should therefore be very far from accepting the universal prescription which requires it. (*Freedom and Reason*, p. 134.)

However, the application of this technique to such a case is logically incoherent. For what is the promiser supposed to imagine? He cannot imagine himself, in his hypothetical role as dying man, knowing or learning that the promise made to him is deceptive, for this falsifies a crucial feature of the actual case. Yet neither can he imagine himself not knowing or learning that the promise is deceptive, for then a crucial feature of the case would be left out; from his hypothetical point of view as a dying man the case would so far contain only a promise, not a deceptive promise, and hence, the conditions obviously required for the relevant imaginative consideration of "what I would feel if" would not be satisfied. In short, such cases are what we might call "morally Gödelian"; it is impossible in such cases to construct a hypothetical case which is not, with respect to the actual case, either false or incomplete.

A supporter of Hare might try to defend him on the basis of the point emphasized in the following passage:

... when we are asking [the agent] to imagine himself in the position of his victim, we [should] phrase our question, never in the form 'What *would* you say, or feel, or think, or how *would* you like it, if you were he?', but always in the form 'What *do* you say (*in propria persona*) about a hypothetical case in which you are in your victim's position?' (*Freedom and Reason*, p. 108.)

Thus, it might be claimed, my argument applies only to the question "What would the agent think or feel if . . .", not to the question "What does the agent think or feel about a hypothetical case in which . . .", and hence leaves Hare unscathed. But if there is any point to the imaginative role-shift at all, then surely the agent's judgement *in propria persona* about what he does think or feel is at least supposed to be based upon a consideration of what he would think or feel in the hypothetical case; hence, as my argument, if correct, shows such a consideration to be logically impossible for the sort of case in question, such a defence of Hare fails.

The idea of imagining oneself in the place of others seems to be intended by Hare at least to provide a technique for applying, and possibly also to provide an explication of, that version, or aspect, of the principle of universality which Kant tried to express by his "treat everyone as an end" formulation of the categorical imperative. Now the imaginative role-shift idea presupposes that this "treat everyone as an end" principle can be adequately interpreted in terms of the thoughts and feelings of those affected by a proposed action, *i.e.* that to "treat everyone as an end" is, roughly, to take the thoughts and feelings of others into account equally with one's own in deciding what to do. With respect to the sort of case I have been discussing, however, this account of the "treat everyone

as an end " principle will not do; and this is the source of the trouble with the application of the role-shift technique to such cases. The thoughts and feelings of the dying man in our example are, so far as the deceptive promise is concerned, enviable; he does indeed die " happy ". Hence, if we nonetheless want to say that to make such a deceptive promise is to violate the " treat everyone as an end " principle, some other account of this principle must be given. And though Kant's account of this principle has been criticized, justly in my opinion, as being either morally unacceptable or hopelessly unclear, I am not aware that anyone since has done better.

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