

Hare and Fanaticism

Alan Gettner

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Alan Gettner

State University of New York, College at Purchase

I

In his books *The Language of Morals* and *Freedom and Reason (FR)*, R. M. Hare presents an account of the nature of moral concepts and the logic of practical reasoning. Hare's theory sets up certain fairly stringent requirements as to what it is to hold a moral view, and certain types of moral posturing are shown to fall short of these standards (*FR*, pp. 95 ff.). But while this "clarification of the conceptual framework within which moral reasoning takes place" is used to exclude certain kinds of argument that might be put forward in support of a moral opinion, it is claimed to be "neutral as between different moral opinions" themselves (*FR*, p. 89).

The claimed neutrality of Hare's account breaks down, I believe, in his treatment of what he calls fanaticism. According to Hare, within the conceptual framework of legitimate moral discourse, characterized by the theory of universal prescriptivism, two distinctly different kinds of argument occur. One is essentially utilitarian: it involves the consideration of "interests." To have an interest is "for there to be something which one wants, or is likely in the future to want or which is (or is likely to be) a means necessary or sufficient for the attainment of something which one wants (or is likely to want)" (*FR*, p. 122; cf. p. 157). Moral arguments involving the universalization of interests are characterized as "golden rule" arguments. A very different kind of moral argument involves appeal to an "ideal" of excellence, usually either of man or society. To have an ideal "is to think of some kind of thing as pre-eminently good within some larger class" (*FR*, p. 159). Adherence to an ideal is not based on utilitarian considerations but is somewhat like an aesthetic preference (*FR*, pp. 146 ff.). Appeals to interest and ideals form the two chief types of grounds for moral opinions (Hare admits there may be others, but he does not discuss them).

Appeals to ideals are particularly appropriate, Hare believes, in the shaping of one's own life, for instance, in choosing a career or a life-style. In decisions involving other persons, ideals and interests may clash. To pursue an ideal in disregard of the interests of others, while morally coherent, is to be what Hare calls a "fanatic." The "liberal" does not do this. People become "really dangerous" when they propagate "perverted ideals" without care or regard for the interests

they trample on (*FR*, p. 114). Neither conflicts of ideals nor the conflict of an ideal with interests is capable of rational resolution if the idealist is willing to accept the consequences of his belief. For instance, a Nazi who is willing to accept his own extermination if it should be discovered that he is Jewish and who is in full possession of relevant facts and unmoved by contemplating the suffering his doctrine causes can not be further argued against.

Fortunately, few people are willing to adhere to moral beliefs having such extreme consequences. Clarity as to the consequences of holding a moral view and a close guard against factual distortion and spurious reasoning will, Hare believes, reduce the ranks of fanatics to a very small number. Given these conditions, widespread moral agreement on matters affecting other persons' interests (though not on personal ideals of life) can be expected (*FR*, pp. 130 ff.).

ii

This brief account should suffice to indicate in broad outline Hare's treatment of the fanatic. The very term 'fanatic' shows us how far Hare has departed from his claim to moral neutrality, for clearly, to most of Hare's readers, 'fanatic' (like 'coward') is a "Janus term" with not merely factual but negative prescriptive meaning.

If my criticism of Hare were merely that his understandable distaste for Nazis, racists, and other fanatics led him away from his claimed moral neutrality, it would be fairly trivial. Much more significant is my claim that his treatment of fanaticism leads him seriously to underestimate the important role played by ideals in moral thinking. If this is true, his account of moral reasoning is oversimplistic. Its basic failing, I will try to show, is that it makes it appear that the resolution of disagreement on moral issues is far easier than in reality it is.

It is important to realize the degree to which Hare's understanding of the role of ideals in moral thought as well as his attitude toward what he calls "fanaticism" are shaped by the extreme and, for most of us, morally abhorrent ideals he largely focuses upon in his characterization of fanaticism: racism (*FR*, chap. 11), fascism (a central theme throughout *FR*), and the ideals of the Emperor Heliogabalus, who "had people slaughtered because he thought that red blood on green grass looked beautiful" (*FR*, p. 161). Hare himself considers the charge that he has rigged the argument against the idealist by dwelling on such extreme examples and briefly considers some less extreme cases: the fanatical trumpeter who wills the playing of trumpets regardless of listener preference and, less farfetched, common attitudes toward homosexuality and drug addiction. One may have an ideal for one's own life concerning the music one wants to hear, sexual conduct, or the use of psychoactive substances. These ideals become fanatical when they are allowed to override conflicting interests. Doubtless, Hare admits, some "quite estimable people" are fanatics on such matters as sexual conduct (*FR*, pp. 175-76).

What I am claiming is that, because fascism remains for Hare the paradigm case of a willingness to allow ideals to override interests (and this despite his admission that there are milder sorts of "fanatics"), he seriously underestimates the prevalence and importance of ideals in moral thinking. In taking fascism as his paradigm of fanaticism, Hare is able to show how unlikely it is that a person who

reasons correctly (by universally prescribing his ideal) will remain a fascist. This leads him to conclude that, while the consistent fanatic can withstand any argument made against him, consistent fanaticism and hence irreconcilable moral disagreement between fanatic and liberal, while possible, are fairly unlikely. If, on the other hand, I am correct in claiming that ideals play a far greater role in moral thought than Hare has seen and the clash of ideals and interests is far more common than he thinks, then Hare has greatly underestimated the prevalence of serious moral disagreement or, rather, has been all too ready to blame such disagreements on fuzzy moral thinking which is curable by resort to reasoning, facts, and imagination (*FR*, pp. 97–98).

The core of the matter is, as I have said, Hare's focusing on such extreme sorts of ideals as fascism and racism, while not taking seriously enough the milder ideals that he mentions in passing. Unlike fascism and racism, these milder ideals encompass a wide range of responsible moral thought; and it is not a rare few who can consistently adhere to them. Take, for example, those like James Stephen and Lord Devlin, who believe that a good society requires the enforcement of a strict code of sexual morality; or those who believe that widespread use of the so-called drugs of abuse will damage their ideal of society and hence must be suppressed; or those like John Rawls who advocate a nonutilitarian standard of justice; or those who are willing to control how one disposes of one's income for the sake of social ideals. All these ideals are thought by their advocates to override conflicting interests. If we can assume ordinary good faith—for these are decent folk—we can expect that the advocates of these ideals will be quite willing to prescribe their universal application even to themselves (“We would not ask more of others than we would demand of ourselves”). It seems unlikely that the requirement of universalization or greater knowledge of facts or imaginative appeals will lessen their ranks, in contrast to the case of fascists and racists (*FR*, chap. 11). Making fascism the paradigm for ideals pursued at the expense of interests disguises the fact that this can be and is consistently done and not merely by those few whom we would commonly call “fanatics” but by many morally decent persons.

One difference between the examples of ideals I have been examining and Hare's paradigms of racism and fascism is that the former, unlike the latter, do not strike most of us as “morally perverted” (Hare's own phrase, *FR*, p. 114). The fault of Hare's account goes further, however, than his one-sided choice of examples. Hare makes a sharp bifurcation between the liberal, who, when deciding on actions which affect others, considers only the interests involved, and the fanatic, who pursues an ideal regardless of the interests of those affected. The dichotomy is, however, a false one, failing to take account of an important intermediate position which is probably much more common than fanaticism as characterized by Hare (most adherents to the views cited in the last paragraph, I suspect, fall into this class). This intermediate position is that of those who are willing to pursue ideals at the expense of *some* but certainly *not all* interests. An idealist of this type is willing to sacrifice some interests to his ideal, but he need not be willing to sacrifice many or most interests. There is nothing incoherent in the position that an ideal is of sufficient value to outweigh some but not all interests, and there is, I believe, good reason to believe that such a moral stance is not uncommon.

These moderate idealists may well give up pursuit of their ideals when shown that the sacrifice of human interests involved is greater than they suspected. Increasing knowledge of human sexuality and awareness of the immensity of suffering caused by sexual repression has, for example, certainly led some to recognize that the cost of imposing ideals of sexual conduct is too great to be justifiable.

It is not merely the Nazi ideal that shocks us; it is the *extent* to which Nazis were willing to sacrifice human interests that is so horrifying. Those sharing an ideal may well disagree on just this point. For example, one major split in socialist theory concerns the degree of sacrifice of interests deemed acceptable in pursuit of the socialist ideal. In short, it is not, as Hare appears to think, a question of being *either* a fanatical idealist or a liberal utilitarian; it is perfectly coherent to believe that *both* ideals and interests must be weighed in practical reasoning.

If, as I have suggested, the intermediate moral stance of "moderate idealism" is both possible and common, then moral disagreement that is irreducibly moral may be expected to be more frequent and complex than Hare supposes. When I say "irreducibly moral," I mean disagreement on moral matters that is not due to mistaken reasoning, lack of adequate facts, or a failure of imagination in envisaging the consequences of an action but stems from a genuine "difference in values." It is a curious fact about not only Hare's theory but most "liberal" moral thought that they either do not recognize such differences or else display little tolerance for them. Utilitarianism, for instance, reduces legitimate moral disagreement to factual disagreement as to the utility of alternative courses of action. Any other disagreement on moral issues is a sign of prejudice or fuzzy thinking. While sharing the utilitarian outlook to a large degree, Hare at least admits that there is a genuinely moral disagreement between the liberal and the consistent fanatic. The concession is, however, a very limited one, for Hare defines fanaticism in such a way that it becomes doubtful if there are more than occasional genuine fanatics, hence preserving the liberal faith that clear thought, a strong imagination, and sufficient facts can nearly always bring harmony of moral belief (*FR*, pp. 77 ff.).

If, on the other hand, the intermediate position between liberal utilitarianism and fanatic idealism that I have discussed is possible and common—if, that is, utility is just one ideal among many which, although most would recognize its strong claim, must compete and be balanced against the claims of other ideals, then morals is indeed a subject about which rational men can and are likely to disagree. It is overly simplistic to reduce all legitimate moral disagreement to that between "nice" liberals and "nasty" fanatics. Moral disputes are deeper and more subtle than that, for moral positions often have mixed grounds and do not fit Hare's neat separation. They involve not only the factors Hare discusses but a balancing of values as well. On Hare's theory, values themselves cannot be argued; hence the standoff of liberal and fanatic. The notion of balancing conflicting goods brings in an entirely new element, familiar enough in the deliberations of judges, that Hare leaves unaccounted for. I am not sure that I understand just how this balancing takes place. What I am convinced of, however, is that the richness and complexity of moral argument is such that the resolvability of moral conflict is not, by and large, to be judged a priori. Since moral disagreements are resolved through concrete argument, not, in general, by moral theories, and such arguments

have no clearly defined limit, all we can say when disagreement remains is that the question is unresolved, not unresolvable. Disputes on really difficult moral questions (e.g., abortion, euthanasia) have an irreducible messiness that Hare's account completely misses.

iii

In summary, my conclusion is that, in portraying the role of ideals as he does, Hare seriously oversimplifies the nature of moral disputes. That this is so does not detract from his theory of moral language, universal prescriptivism.

The immediate source of Hare's problems is the one-sided examples of the pursuit of ideals he dwells on. One may speculate that a deeper source is the curious view, which seems to me to be implicit in Hare's theory and is perhaps shared by others, that a value-neutral moral theory can make a major contribution to solving moral issues. This, of course, implies the curious result that a theory claimed to be neutral yet leads to the establishment of certain concrete values. My view, on the contrary, is that a morally neutral theory is of primarily theoretical interest and that moral issues are decided only by concrete argument.¹

1. For a generalization of this argument, see my "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?" *Journal of Value Inquiry*, vol. 10 (Winter 1976), in press.