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The Philosophical Review, Vol. 91, No. 1 (Jan., 1982), 73-86.

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IS HARE A NATURALIST?

H. M. Robinson

I

It is generally assumed that whatever R. M. Hare might be he is not a naturalist or a descriptivist. This means, among other things, that he believes that action-guiding statements ("ought" statements) cannot be derived from factual statements ("is" statements) and that moral predicates, such as "is good" cannot be defined in terms of any nonmoral predicates. Much of Hare's writing on metaethics is an explicit defense of nondescriptivism. Some of his recent work, therefore, comes as a surprise, for it appears to be naturalistic.

Hare's central concern has been to develop a theory which is a form of rational nondescriptivism.¹ The system which is supposed to meet this objective is universal prescriptivism. Roughly, the universalizability provides the rationality and prescriptivism excludes descriptivism. It is one thesis of this paper that these two aspects of Hare's program have become inconsistent as a result of later developments. Hare's determination to use the principle of universalizability to generate utilitarianism has led to the destruction of the antidescriptivist and antinaturalist element in prescriptivism. In Section VI, I shall argue that Hare's concept of practical reasoning also leads to naturalism.

II

In substantive moral matters, Hare claims to be a utilitarian of some sort. Exactly what form his utilitarianism takes is of no importance here, so we shall refer to it as Harean utilitarianism: the expression "Harean utilitarianism" is to be taken in what follows as shorthand for an account of whatever form of utilitarianism Hare intends, and thus the proper name "Hare" is not

¹ E.g., "What Makes Choice Rational?" (*WMCR*), *Review of Metaphysics*, 32 (1979), 623-37; this ref. p. 625.

an ineliminable indexical. The problem which Hare appears to have got himself into concerns the proposition:

(P) Everyone ought to be a Harean utilitarian.

This proposition clearly expresses a substantive moral judgment. According to the fundamentals of prescriptivism it ought, therefore, to express neither a definitional or necessary truth, nor a "matter of fact" in the ordinary sense. It ought to be a synthetic proposition, neither true nor false, but prescribed by someone who chooses to endorse it. This would indeed have been its status on Hare's system until and beyond *Freedom and Reason*.² However, it now, particularly after "Ethical Theory and Utilitarianism,"³ seems to have become a necessary truth, provable by analyzing ethical terms, especially their property of universalizability.

According to Hare, prescribing universally involves putting oneself in the place of all the people affected by an action under consideration, giving the desires and ideals of each person weight according to their strength, and privileging no person's desires or ideals over any other person's. We must imagine ourselves in each position, complete with the desires and ideals that go with the person in that position, not simply imagining our present selves so located. The requirement that one universalize in this way is a purely formal one; that is, it follows from a proper grasp of moral concepts: no further premises are required.⁴ However, as we shall see, Hare appears to believe that universalizing in this way leads directly to utilitarianism: one cannot universalize properly without becoming a Harean utilitarian. He says:

We have, therefore, by *consideration of the logic of moral concepts alone* put ourselves in as strong a position as Rawls hopes to put himself by his more . . . elaborate . . . apparatus. Rawls himself thinks that an ideal observer theory leads to utilitarianism; and the same ought to be true of the formal apparatus I have just sketched. [ETU, p. 116; my italics]

² E.g., *Freedom and Reason (FR)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 123.

³ "Ethical Theory and Utilitarianism" (ETU), in *Contemporary British Philosophy*, ed. H. D. Lewis (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976).

⁴ E.g., ETU, p. 120 and p. 116.

If this is so, then proposition (P) becomes a purely formal truth derivable from an analysis of moral concepts alone.

In *Freedom and Reason* Hare was saved from this conclusion by the fanatic. The fanatic is a man who has ideals the satisfaction of which he puts before the meeting of the interests and desires of others even after countenancing the possibility that he might be in their position. Thus the fanatic will not reach utilitarian conclusions when he universalizes, for his insistence on his own ideals leads him to flout the interests of others in such a way that he will not maximize the satisfaction of desires and interests in the moral community as a whole. Hare seemed to acknowledge in *Freedom and Reason* that the theoretical legitimacy of fanaticism was what prevented him from falling into naturalism.

To say that moral and other value-judgements are prescriptive and universalizable is not, by that alone, to commit oneself to any particular moral opinion. By allowing 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, I am at least guarded against *this* allegation. [*FR*, p. 192]

Hare now thinks that a fanatic who universalized in this way would be doing so defectively, because

... in order to prescribe universally, I shall have to strip away (*qua* author of the moral decision) all my present desires, etc., I shall have to strip away, among them, all the ideals that I have; for an ideal is a kind of desire or liking . . . This means that for the purpose of the moral decision it makes no difference *who has* the ideal. It means that we have to give impartial consideration to the ideals of ourselves and others. [*ETU*, p. 121]

He says that this enables him "to deal in an agreeable way with the problem of the fanatic . . ." (*ETU*, p. 121). Therefore, whereas, in *Freedom and Reason*, utilitarianism followed from universalization *contingently*, given that, as a matter of (supposed) fact people were not in general fanatics, now it follows *necessarily*, from universalization by itself.

III

It may be argued that I have misinterpreted Hare. He is not now saying that universalization alone entails utilitarianism, but

that universalization plus rationality or prudence (which, in this context, are said to be the same thing) entails utilitarianism. Thus Hare says,

When I do the judging referred to (above), I have to do it as rationally as possible. This, if I am making a moral judgement, involves prescribing universally; but in prescribing (albeit rationally) I cannot, *if rational*, ignore prudence altogether, but have to universalize this prudence. [ETU, p. 119; my italics]

It is clear that Hare thinks that prudence is essential for the generation of utilitarianism: what is not so clear is whether prudence (or rationality) is required in addition to universalization, or whether it is entailed by it. If it is the latter, then my original argument stands, for nothing other than universalization is needed as a starting point: if the former, then one could be a consistent universal prescriptivist, albeit an imprudent one, without being a utilitarian.

I think we must say that Hare intends universalization to entail prudence. There are two reasons for holding this. The first is what Hare himself says. When discussing Rawls's "veil of ignorance," Hare argues that his own principle of universalizability, giving "equal weight to the equal interests of the occupants in all the roles of the situation" (ETU, p. 116), achieves the same object.

Thus the impartiality which is the purpose of Rawls's "veil of ignorance" is achieved by purely formal means; and so is the purpose of his insistence that his contractors be rational, i.e. prudent. [ETU, p. 116]

Here Hare clearly believes that rationality (prudence) is achieved by universalization alone; otherwise it would not be achieved "by purely formal means."

The second reason is that it would make no sense to adopt the other picture, according to which rationality (prudence) was an autonomous factor generalized, if present, by universalization. This interpretation might be seen as suggested by "[I] have to universalize this prudence," quoted above. But suppose that an agent adopted a policy of prudence. If we do not count this policy as a desire (because it is policy with regard to one's desires) it will then be an ideal, for it will concern the sort of person the agent wishes to be, namely a prudent one. It will be on all fours with, for

example, the adoption of chastity or honesty as an ideal. In this case it will not be legitimate when universalizing to impute that ideal to others irrespective of whether they possess it, for that would be on a par with foisting the ideals of chastity and honesty onto others irrespective of whether they possess them, and Hare forbids this. Thus if one is to consider the interests of others as they would themselves regard them if they were prudent, that cannot be because one is prudent oneself: it must be because considering others qua rational (prudent) is part of universalizing. The viewpoint of rationality-prudence with regard to one's own and others' desires is forced upon one by purely formal requirements, if one wishes to take the moral viewpoint.

This reinforces our conclusion that (P) is now a necessary truth. For it is said to be a "logical" feature of moral concepts that they commit one to universalizing prudence impartially, and that is just another way of saying that they entail maximizing the satisfaction of desires, which is utilitarianism.

IV

The consequences of making (P) into a necessary truth are as disastrous for prescriptivism as any other form of naturalism or descriptivism would be. The fundamental noncognitivist objection to those theories is that they do not do credit to the action-guiding force of moral principles: they allow one to have a "take it or leave it" attitude toward moral principles. Hare does not think that this is possible for a prescriptivist. Thus if someone were to say, "That is good (right) but I don't commend (prescribe) it," he would, according to Hare, be using "good" and "right" in an "inverted commas" sense; that is, to report the judgment of others or the received opinion, without himself adopting or endorsing those standards.⁵ But with the new-model Hare such indifference will be possible, for, surely, someone could recognize a correct analysis of moral concepts without making any choices or value judgments himself. Recognition of the truth of a piece of conceptual analysis cannot be dependent upon particular moral

⁵ *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 124.

choice, nor even upon a general choice to join in the moral "game." Therefore, even someone who has no interest in morality should be able to recognize the correctness of Hare's analysis of the relevant terms in the English language. Hare still insists that overridingness is a criterion of a moral principle.⁶ It is difficult to see how this can be combined with his modified theory, for someone could recognize the (supposed) fact that Harean utilitarianism is entailed by our moral concepts and in that sense endorse the truth of that substantive theory without having any concern to adopt the moral point of view for himself or to let it override other values that he possesses. Whereas the recognition of a particular moral principle was supposed to depend upon *choosing* that principle, no such choice is involved in recognizing the correctness of a piece of conceptual analysis.

The "Open Question Argument" is also a victim. The question, "Ought I to be (is it right or good to be) a Harean utilitarian?" will no longer be a matter for substantive ethical choice, but merely a request for logical elucidation. The "openness" will be no more than that attaching to, for example, a difficult mathematical question, the answer to which is far from obvious, though in fact necessary and fixed.

Furthermore, one could provide a naturalistic definition of "is morally good," for that would mean "is a part of Harean utility."

V

Why should Hare have abandoned the genuinely prescriptivist position of *Freedom and Reason* and lapsed into naturalism? The quotation from *ETU* suggests that it must be in response to problems connected with fanaticism. One can only suppose that Hare has been convinced that his original view that the fanatic would be a rare bird is false and that too many people would be prepared to universalize their ideals and take the consequences imagined for themselves when substituted in the place of others affected. Otherwise he could preserve his nonnaturalism by allowing that a fanatic who imposed his ideals on others, thereby not being a utilitarian, would be adopting a consistent *moral* viewpoint: and

⁶ *WMCR*, p. 636.

preserve his substantive utilitarian conclusion because the overwhelming majority of people, not being fanatics, would in fact be utilitarians as a result of applying his formal procedures. Only if he had been persuaded that a significant number of apparently normal people would come out as fanatics would this compromise be inadequate to the objective of using metaethics to solve substantive problems.

The problem of the fanatic brings to the forefront certain crucial obscurities in Hare's treatment of the relation between ideals, facts, and universalizability. As far as I know, these important difficulties have not been discussed. The objection most generally made to Hare's use of universalizability in *FR* is to deny that we are committed by the adoption of the moral point of view to imaginatively adopting in an impartial way the ideals of others. This criticism Hare rejects. Indeed in *ETU* he strengthens his position on this form of universalization by denying the fanatic the right to stick to his ideals even if he is prepared to accept the hypothetical consequences for himself of so doing. I want to concentrate on a different problem, because I believe that my solution to this second problem provides a basis for answering the first.

Hare says that universalization involves neutrality between one's own and other people's desires and ideals. He also thinks that universalizing is a rational activity, which, for its proper execution, involves knowledge of all information relevant to the nature of the choice being made and its consequences.⁷ He goes so far as to compare the results of thinking in his fashion with those delivered by the ideal observer theory.⁸ This suggests that the ideal Harean moralist is omniscient, like the ideal observer. These two principles, namely neutrality between competing desires and rationality based on perfect information, though not formally inconsistent, tend to operate against each other in a manner and to an extent which Hare does not appear to notice. This tension arises because Hare seems insufficiently aware of the extent to which what desires or ideals a man has depends on what factual beliefs he happens to hold. Thus for many people

⁷ *WMCR*, p. 635.

⁸ "Rawls' Theory of Justice," *Philosophical Quarterly*, 23 (1973), 144-55 and 241-52; this ref. pp. 150-51.

their desires and ideals are ones which they would abandon if they knew the complete truth. When Hare says that the agent should put himself in the place of others, complete with their preferences, and then choose *in a way which would be rational and prudent for them*, perhaps he means to allow for this.⁹ But he shows no sign of acknowledging the extent to which this modifies one's obligation to be impartial. Hare generally speaks as if the conscientious Nazi's racial ideals should be weighed equally with others' preferences according to strength,¹⁰ but suppose that he holds those views in conjunction with certain historical and scientific views without the truth of which he would acknowledge his racialism would be mistaken. This is normally the situation. The conscientious Nazi believes in a world-wide Jewish plot, the authenticity of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and some bizarre pseudo-scientific biology. Most of us hold these beliefs to be false and therefore hold that an ideal observer or rational agent would believe them to be false and consequently would not hold those desires and ideals based upon them. We can acknowledge that people's preferences depend intimately upon their factual beliefs without falling into any naturalistic theory about one entailing the other. It cannot be rational for someone to be neutral about what he believes to be the factual mistakes of others; therefore how can he be so about ideals and desires that would not be held in the absence of those beliefs?

To see how the more traditional objection to Hare and mine are related, imagine three agents. *A* is an orthodox Christian with an ideal of monastic scholarship; *B* is an orthodox Christian with an ideal of Christian marriage; *C* is an atheist with an ideal of aggressive hedonism. Suppose that *A* is about to make a choice which will affect all three. Hare has normally been supposed to hold that *A* must imagine himself in all three positions, adopting the ideals of each, and giving them equal weight, in proportion to the strength with which they are held. This view is much criticized, because it seems unreasonable to ask *A* to give equal weight to an ideal, such as *C*'s, which he regards as wicked. Hare never suggests that *A* should adopt other people's beliefs about matters

⁹ E.g., *ETU*, p. 119.

¹⁰ E.g., *ETU*, p. 121.

of fact, and indeed to do so would not be rational insofar as one believes these beliefs to be false, for one is trying to do what the ideal perfectly informed observer would do.

A believes in the Christian god and, therefore, believes that a perfectly informed observer would also believe in such a god; therefore, he does not think that a properly prudent *C* would adopt the ideal of egoistic hedonism. Therefore *A* will not be neutral about *C*'s ideal. *C* will return the compliment about *A*'s ideal. Hare's statement "if I were in their situation I should have their desires etc." (*ETU*, p. 120) will very often be false if I am not to be impartial about factual beliefs also; and to be neutral about factual beliefs would be irrational when I am convinced that those beliefs are false.

This does not mean that with perfect rationality everyone would have the same ideals. It means that they would hold only ideals which were not rationalized by false beliefs. *A* and *B* can allow each other their ideals because, though they are practically incompatible, insofar as it is impossible to live according to both at once, they are both in harmony with the same beliefs about the actual nature of the world. In this situation, where two people hold different ideals compatible with the same facts holding about the world, it is very plausible to insist that the moral viewpoint commits one to weighing the other man's ideal equally to one's own, because one has no ground for regarding it as a *false* ideal, as opposed to merely different. Thus a proper understanding of the relation between facts, preferences, and universalization gives Hare an answer to the objection that we are not morally obliged to be impartial about ideals by showing that one is only obliged to be neutral about ideals not based on factual beliefs one holds to be false. I doubt whether Hare will be grateful for this assistance, for it will make moral agreement between agents very difficult. Thus, before they could come to the same conclusions about action, *A* and *C* will not merely have to be in agreement about what one might call the practical consequences of different actions, they will also have to be in philosophical and religious agreement on many points. As ideals are often reflections of such religious and philosophical views, little impartiality between ideals has been achieved. Each will discount the other's ideal because each believes that if the other really knew the facts, as a

rational man he would abandon his present ideal. The only way to avoid this would be to stipulate that universalization involves adopting the *beliefs* of others. As has already been said, this cannot be rational if one is convinced they are false. Perhaps one could argue that one should adopt those beliefs which one cannot demonstrate to be false. This would be a relevant stipulation, for ideals usually depend upon beliefs in controversial areas where a detached observer might say that the question was genuinely open. However, a rigorous criterion for demarcating beliefs which should be adopted from those which should not would be difficult to give, to put it mildly, for it would require an adequate account of what counted as rational or justified belief at a given stage of human knowledge. Hare shows no sign of looking in this direction.

In case anyone thinks that Hare would accept the argument of this section without a blush, consider the following quotation on racialism. Hare's tendency to ignore the role of facts in determining values and to treat the latter as products of pure thought and autonomous choice is here well illustrated. He believes that the reason why modern liberal man has come to reject racialism is that he has come to a better understanding of the logical form of moral judgments.

So why do we not treat skin colour as morally relevant? For great periods of history people did. The reason is that we have been through a process of moral reasoning (briefly described in my book *Freedom and Reason* pp. 108 ff.) which, though indeed based on universalizability, is more complex than the simple move [of imagining ourselves in the predicament of a black]. And the move involves more than universalizability alone; it involves prescriptivity; i.e. it involves asking whether we are prepared to *prescribe* universally that e.g., black people should be at a legal disadvantage compared with white people . . . The reason why we are not is that, since black skin is a universal property, it is logically possible that we might ourselves have it . . . And we are unlikely to prescribe that in that situation we should be disadvantaged in the way proposed.¹¹

No mention is made of the fact that in the past Europeans believed that blacks were intellectually and morally inferior in

¹¹ "Relevance," in *Values and Morals*, ed. A. I. Goldman and J. Kim (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1978), pp. 73-89; this ref. pp. 77-78.

their capacities and thus were only suitable for menial tasks, whereas now Europeans do not believe this. Similarly, the conscientious Nazi believed in certain bizarre historical and scientific theories. Whether these beliefs constituted the motivation for their principles is irrelevant: they were rightly felt to be necessary to justify the principles. The idea that a cultivated "racist" like David Hume held his opinions about blacks principally because he failed to perceive the logic of morals, rather than because he was mistaken about the capacities of Africans, is little less than absurd. It was almost a commonplace of emotivism that moral progress followed principally upon factual agreement and discovery: Hare appears to have lost this insight and to think that moral development depends largely on developments in meta-ethics.

VI

The tendencies to naturalism which we have so far claimed to find in Hare's recent writings are founded in his formal analysis of ethical concepts, particularly universalizability. There is, however, another and largely independent train of thought which appears to lead to naturalism, namely Hare's concept of practical rationality. There seems to be an unresolved tension between, on the one hand, an antinaturalist determination to fix a logically unbridgeable gap between facts about desire and practical conclusions; and, on the other, the conviction that there are necessary connections between such facts and the practical dictates of prudence. It is my purpose in the remainder of this paper to show how the second tendency must be the stronger and must lead to naturalism.

The firmly antinaturalist conviction is expounded in "Wanting: Some Pitfalls."¹² Hare insists that the possession of desire never of itself licenses a practical conclusion. He argues that an argument of the following form is not valid:

- (1) *X* most fundamentally desires that *p*.

¹² "Wanting: Some Pitfalls" (*WSP*), in *Agent, Action, and Reason*, ed. R. Binkley, R. Bronaugh, and A. Marras (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1971), pp. 81-97.

(2) Only by Φ ing can X bring it about that p .

\therefore (3) X should be Φ .

He considers an instance of such an argument in which a heartless rogue called James has as his most basic desire that he acquire his Uncle John's fortune. This he can achieve only by murdering his uncle. The question is whether anyone—including Uncle John—who accepts the premises concerning what James desires and what means are available is also obliged to conclude that James should (in some appropriate action-guiding but not necessarily moral sense) murder his uncle. Hare thinks that one is not obliged to draw this conclusion. Hare claims that "before we can *ourselves* affirm absolutely" something of the form of (3), "we have to be, like X , saying in our hearts 'let it be the case' that p ; that is, endorsing or appropriating X 's desire (*WSP*, p. 86). Thus Uncle John is not obliged to conclude that James should murder him, unless he chooses to adopt James's desire. Thus the practical conclusion does not follow from the form of the argument alone, but only given assent to the action-guiding content of the first premise. Hare makes it clear that his objection to the argument in no way rests either upon the morally objectionable nature of the conclusion (the question is not whether "should" means "morally should") or upon the assumption that, somehow, James must have higher desires did he but recognize them.¹³ Hare's purpose is to argue that from a factual statement about desires no practical conclusion follows. If it did there would be a breach of the fact-value dichotomy, because, for present purposes, all practical or action-guiding conclusions are construed as value judgments. There is, however, one conclusion which certainly does follow from substitutions into (1) and (2), namely:

(4) It is rational and prudent for James to kill Uncle John.

This follows because (a) Hare equates rationality and prudence, as we saw above; and (b) he defines prudence in terms of desire, thus: "... if those others were perfectly prudent—i.e. desired what they would desire if they were fully informed and unconfused" (*ETU*, p. 119). There is no suggestion that James is influenced by imperfect information; indeed, this seems to be the sort of easy

¹³ *WSP*, p. 82.

answer Hare wishes to rule out. Therefore James's desire is rational and prudent by Hare's standards.

It is natural to take (4) as an action-guiding or practical proposition, for the conclusion that something is the rational and prudent thing to do appears to have prescriptive force. But the Harean can reply that this would be so only if one chose that James be rational and prudent, which Uncle John may well not do. However, it is not necessary that Uncle John make such a choice directly for us to conclude that (4) entails a "should." It is sufficient that John, adopting James's situation, choose to perform the act. This process of imaginatively assuming the position and psychology of others and then choosing prudentially in their stead is how the process of moral universalization is empirically realized. Hare says, contrasting his theory with Rawls's more abstract "rational contractor" theory:

I do not speculate about what some fictitious rational contractors *would* judge if they were put in a certain position subject to certain restrictions; rather, I subject myself to certain (formally analogous) restrictions and put myself (imaginatively) in this position, as Rawls in effect does, and *do* some choosing. [*ETU*, p. 166; Hare's italics]

Thus anyone thinking morally about the situation will assent to:

(5) If I were James I would choose to kill my uncle.

Put in Hare's more dramatic nonconditional form this is:

(6) Imagining myself in James's situation I *do* choose to kill my uncle.¹⁴

If I am carrying through a proper piece of moral reasoning, I have to do more than adopt James's position; I adopt all relevant positions and then make a utilitarian calculation on what will maximize satisfaction all around. However I, and Uncle John, must concede (5) and (6) in the course of universalizing. The imaginative adoption of all viewpoints and the making of choices from them is, therefore, on Harean principles, more primitive

¹⁴ For a discussion of the peculiarities of Hare's transition from conditional to indicative choice, see the author's "Imagination, Desire and Prescription," *Analysis*, 41 (1981), 55-59.

than universalized moral choice, for it is from the former prudential choices that the moral choice is constructed.

On this foundation it is easy to define a prudential sense of "should," namely: X should Φ if anyone adopting X 's situation is bound to choose to Φ , if prudent and sincere.¹⁵ On this sense of "should" we certainly derive from (4) and (6):

(7) James should kill Uncle John.

Hare cannot deny that the prudential "should" expresses a genuine practical conclusion, in view of its relation to moral prescription. Moral choice is universalized prudence and derives its practical force from the fact that it is the universalization of the prudential choices of all interested parties. What one should do to be moral is, therefore, derived from what individuals should do to be prudent. Furthermore, this use of "should" to prescribe prudentially rather than morally is perfectly natural English. Also, it is objective, in the sense that no one who appreciated James's position could sincerely deny it.

It seems, then, that facts about desire do, on Harean principles of practical reasoning, entail conclusions about what one should do.¹⁶

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¹⁵ The role of sincerity is brought out in "Relevance," e.g., p. 88.

¹⁶ I am particularly grateful for the help of Julia Annas, Raymond Frey, John Foster, Ralph Walker, and the reader for the *Philosophical Review*.