

R. M. Hare: A Memorial Address

Delivered by John Hare at the University Church
of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford, 25 May 2002

My assigned task is to lay out the shape of my father's life and faith. This is daunting, but it is also a privilege because I loved him and admired him, and his life has been central in shaping my own. I am speaking also on behalf of my mother, my three sisters, Bridget, Louise and Ellie, and our children, Catherine and Andrew, Sam and Anisa, Hannah and Matty.

My father was born in 1919 to a father who was a manufacturer of paint and floor-cloth. His father died in the great depression when my father was ten, and his mother took over the firm, dying herself when my father was fifteen. He described the years between his mother's death and his marriage to my mother as a night of bad dreams between two extremely happy days. He was educated at Rugby School, where he was head boy, and went up to Balliol in 1937. After considering hard the merits of pacifism, he joined the Officer Training Corps at the time of the Munich crisis in 1938, and was sent eventually to Singapore to join the 22nd Mountain Regiment of the Indian Artillery. When Singapore fell to the Japanese, he was taken prisoner and worked on the Burma-Thailand railroad. One of his contemporaries there, who wrote to us three months ago, describes my father as unflappable, and as a tower of strength. My father did not talk much about the war, but it is worth saying that I never heard a single remark from him of hatred or contempt for the Japanese.

During the war he wrote a book which he decided, after studying more philosophy on his return, not to publish. It was Whiteheadian in inspiration, and was called *An Essay in Monism*. When back at Balliol he managed, despite recurrent bouts of malaria, to obtain a first in Greats and to write the winning essay for the T. H. Green Moral Philosophy prize. The first half of this essay was an attack on emotivism, and this formed the basis for Part One of *The Language of Morals*. After his undergraduate degree he was appointed fellow of Balliol, where he stayed for nineteen years until moving to Corpus as White's Professor of Moral Philosophy. He served at Balliol, amongst other capacities, as superintendent of the college buildings, and was able to preserve from those who wanted to destroy it the wisteria which is now one of the glories of the front quad. After eleven years at Corpus he resigned the Professorship to go to the University of Florida, as Graduate Research Professor, and he and my mother made an annual trek back and forth across the Atlantic for another eleven

years, spending the winter in Florida and the summer back in Ewelme. After a series of strokes, he became increasingly dependent on my mother, who nursed him faithfully and lovingly to the end.

I am going to leave a discussion of his moral philosophy to Peter Singer. But I want to say a word about his philosophy of religion. My father described himself as a Christian. For example, in his autobiography he says, 'I had always, as a Christian, had an interest in the philosophy of religion, and was elected as Wilde Lecturer in Natural Religion. In the first term I brought up to date my notorious "blik" article of 1950, which I had written in the space of twenty-four hours because I liked the face of the young man who wanted a piece for his new magazine.' My father was a faithful member of the congregation at St Giles when we lived in Oxford, and then at the church of St Mary the Virgin in Ewelme, where he sang with my mother in the choir. He loved the traditional liturgy of the Church of England, much of which he knew by heart, and loved especially singing the psalms. He had definite views on how they should be sung. When speaking the liturgy he would always stay a little ahead of the rest of the congregation – waiting periodically for them to catch up. This was the same way he would take walks in the country with my mother. With the liturgy he was, I think, giving expression to his discomfort with what he called the 'simple believer'. He admired many simple believers he knew, but he could not read the creed the same way they did. When asked to explain what view he did take, he invented the work 'blik', which I have just mentioned. A blik is not an assertion, but something more like an attitude with which one acts in the world. In the article I referred to, he describes his own blik, 'which makes me put my confidence in the general non-homicidal tendencies of dons; in my own continued well-being (in some sense of that word that I may not now fully understand) if I continue to do what is right according to my lights; in the general likelihood of people like Hitler coming to a bad end. But perhaps a formulation less inadequate than most is to be found in Psalm 75 (where God says): "The earth is weak and all the inhabitants thereof: I bear up the pillars of it".'

My father's difficulty in finding words in this context was in part due to a philosophical doctrine about meaning which he inherited from Carnap and the logical positivists. He thought he could not make meaningful assertions about subjects, like God, which lay beyond the limits of possible sense experience. If he had been freed from this constraint, I think he would have said, like Kant, that his was a moral faith in the existence of God which was required for a coherent moral life. For both philosophers, the essential relation to God was one of humility. Both philosophers were reluctant to speak with any confidence about what they did not think they understood.

You may think, if you knew my father, that humility is not quite the right word. This is because he did not suffer fools gladly. The one request he made for his funeral service was the madrigal which Schola Cantorum is going to sing in a moment. My father was a trustee of Schola, and two of his children sang in the group when they were undergraduates. The last line of the madrigal imagines the swan singing her final song, 'Farewell all joys. Oh death come close my eyes. More geese than swans now live, more fools than wise.' It is true that my father was given to anger, even flashes of rage. But he could also be gentle and patient, especially if he thought you were genuinely trying to be clear and were not pretending to understand things which you didn't. I know that for the rest of my life I am going to hear his voice in my ear, asking me quizzically whether I really understand what I am talking about. But there is another side to his humility. I think he would tell us not to assume that just because we do not yet understand God, there is nothing there to be understood. It was his moral faith that allowed him to end his autobiography with the hope that there is a way to answer moral questions rationally, even though he had not yet found it himself. He told us that as prisoners of war they often used to say Psalm 57, which ends like this, 'They have laid a net for my feet, and pressed down my soul: they have digged a pit before me, and are fallen into the midst of it themselves. My heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed: I will sing, and give praise. Awake up, my glory; awake, lute and harp: I myself will awake right early. I will give thanks unto thee, O Lord, among the people: and I will sing unto thee among the nations. For the greatness of thy mercy reacheth unto the heavens: and thy truth unto the clouds. Set up thyself, O God, above the heavens: and thy glory above all the earth.'

