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R. M. Hare 1919-2002

William Hare, Mount St. Vincent University

Philosophers everywhere were saddened to learn of the death of R. M. Hare on January 29, 2002. He was 82 years old and in recent years had suffered a number of strokes.

Richard Hare put forward a theory of ethics in his first book, The Language of Morals (1952) that immediately attracted enormous interest in philosophical circles, establishing at once his reputation as a moral philosopher of the first rank. In that book, Hare famously outlines two main properties of moral concepts. First, they are prescriptive, the feature in virtue of which moral principles have the function of guiding conduct. Second, they are (what soon came to be called) universalizable, the feature which requires that if we make the moral judgment that it is right for an individual to act in a certain way in a certain context, the same moral judgment applies to a similar action by a similar individual similarly situated. Hare hit upon the fundamental elements of his theory at the very outset of his career, and it is only a slight exaggeration to say that he devoted his philosophical energies over a period of 50 years to elaborating, refining, exploring, and applying the theory of universal prescriptivism. He was formidable in argument and indefatigable in defending his theory against criticism and misunderstanding.

His prescriptivist account of ethics rejects naturalism and intuitionism, two perennially popular varieties of descriptivism -- the view that the whole meaning of moral judgments is captured in purely factual terms. Descriptivism, Hare believes, encourages people to become "So what?" moralists, and it ultimately collapses into relativism as people are constrained to subscribe to prevailing moral opinions. Relativism has the fatal consequence that two conflicting moral opinions must both be right, and against this Hare advances a theory which attempts to show how reasoning towards a resolution of moral problems is possible. Hare's universal prescriptivism very quickly displaced the then leading ethical theory, namely emotivism, which had the virtue of rejecting descriptivism but failed to do justice to the possibility of rational argument in ethics. With characteristic generosity, however, Hare acknowledged that it was A. J. Ayer's account of emotivism which put him on the right track in ethics towards the development of a viable form of non-descriptivism. Emphasizing universalizability, where we prescribe only those principles which we can accept no matter where we ourselves stand in similar situations which the principles will cover, leads Hare to adopt a form of

utilitarianism where other people are treated on equal terms with ourselves. In this way, Kantian and utilitarian approaches come together in his theory.

Hare was a prolific writer. Later books included Freedom and Reason (1963), Moral Thinking (1981), Plato (1982), and Sorting Out Ethics (1997), which contains a complete bibliography of his writings. Nine volumes of Hare's essays have been published, four from the early period up to the early 1970s and five volumes containing his later papers, so that most of his work is now readily accessible. It is distinguished for its lucidity, power, and fair-mindedness, and manifests an integrity which reflects a whole-hearted concern for philosophical truth. Keen interest in his ideas was evident throughout his distinguished career. It was reported at one point that some 200 doctoral theses were being written in the United States on his work. The Philosopher's Index reveals Hare's name year after year in the subject index, documenting the many publications dealing with various aspects of his philosophy. Hare and Critics (1988) is a volume of essays about his work by distinguished philosophers, with detailed replies by Hare.

It is especially appropriate in this context to acknowledge his contribution to the philosophy of education. That contribution is closely connected to his work in ethical theory and especially to his view of the intimate relationship between theory and practice. Hare came into moral philosophy because he was deeply concerned about urgent moral problems, especially those raised by the war which broke out when he was a student at Oxford University in the late 1930s. Faced with a personal moral choice between pacifism and military service, Hare decided in favour of enlisting, subsequently being held as a prisoner of war by the Japanese for three and a half years in conditions, he said, which were indistinguishable at the time from slavery. That experience served to confirm his determination to contribute to the resolution of substantive moral problems and he always bristled at the suggestion that he had ignored these.

Hare believed, however, that no real progress could be made on practical moral questions without a secure foundation in ethical theory, and he was highly critical of certain philosophers who, in his view, simply appeal to intuition in attempting to resolve moral problems. He admits that he was somewhat cautious at the outset in addressing questions of applied ethics until he was confident that the theory he was developing was adequate to the task, hence his early work was primarily theoretical. Having said that, however, as early as 1955 Hare published his first contribution in applied philosophy tackling the problem of obeying orders. Further work followed shortly afterwards on whether reasons of state can override moral considerations; and the final chapter of Freedom and Reason (1963) was an

application of his ethical theory to the problem of racism. Significantly, Hare's inaugural lecture as White's Professor of Moral Philosophy at Oxford, given in 1967, was on "The practical relevance of philosophy". There he states emphatically that he would not be studying philosophy if he did not believe that it had practical relevance. Hare was one of a small group of philosophers in the 1950s and 1960s who redirected philosophical attention towards applied philosophy, thereby helping to create a climate in which philosophy of education, itself an applied field, could flourish in the second half of the twentieth century as applied philosophy came into its own.

Hare recognized philosophy of education as a vitally important branch of applied philosophy, and he did much to encourage both its development and a commitment to the highest standards of philosophical quality and educational relevance. He reminded philosophers of education, in his review of The Concept of Education (1967) edited by R. S. Peters, that a good article in the field should draw on philosophical expertise to address an educational problem which is important and shown to be important. His respect for the subject is partly explained by his interest in and admiration for Plato whom Hare regards as the person who founded philosophy of education. Plato, Hare remarks, could almost be said to have viewed philosophy as the philosophy of education. It is also explained by the fact that the question "Can virtue be taught?", which Hare sees as the driving force behind Plato's entire philosophy, was also a vital question stimulating Hare himself to engage in ethical inquiry. As he puts it in The Language of Morals (4.7), many of the dark places of ethics are illuminated when we ask how parents are to bring up their children.

A considerable part of the discussion in Hare's inaugural lecture concerns moral education, most of Hare's own essays in philosophy of education, now conveniently gathered in the volume entitled Essays on Religion and Education (1992), also address this topic, and his ethical theory influenced many other writers on moral education, including Lawrence Kohlberg and John Wilson. Two of Hare's key contributions may be singled out for special mention. First, he helps us to see how moral education degenerates into miseducation if we forget that morality is such that it must be freely accepted. He argues in "Adolescents into adults" that moral influence is as desirable as it is inevitable, but it turns into indoctrination when we try to stop the growth in children of the capacity to think for themselves about moral questions. This is probably Hare's best known essay in philosophy of education, first given as a lecture in 1961, and it remains as relevant and as helpful to teachers as ever. The educator, Hare reminds us, aims at encouraging the

development of open-minded individuals capable of intelligent reflection on the moral principles they have learned and on the moral problems which confront them. Hare argues that this aim entails the method of open-ended, rational discussion, but he emphasizes that moral development, especially the kind of impartiality demanded by universalizability, will not come about purely by rational discussion. Children, Hare says, must cultivate their sympathetic imaginations.

Second, even in this early paper, Hare calls attention to the importance of critical thinking, going out of his way to emphasize that criticism should mean appraising not fault finding. This, however, was just a hint of what was to come. Hare goes on in subsequent work to develop an intricate and sophisticated two-level theory of moral thinking, specifically an intuitive level and a critical level. This distinction seeks to reconcile (i) our conviction that certain general moral principles must be inculcated in such a way that we will not ordinarily contemplate breaking them, and (ii) our equally firm conviction that what these principles should be, what to think when they come into conflict, and when (or whether) to admit an exception to a particular principle, all demand a level of critical thinking which makes no appeal to our intuitions. Hare has much to say about the nature and value of critical thinking in the context of ethics, but also much to say about the limits and dangers of critical thinking which the general literature on this topic has yet to fully appreciate. If we tried to employ critical thinking all the time, Hare maintains, we would fall victim to special pleading and self-deception. At times, of course, we must appeal to critical thinking, but Hare thinks it a mark of wisdom to maintain a certain doubt about our own abilities.

It would be remiss to conclude without a brief mention of what we can learn from Hare about teaching and studying philosophy itself, insights which often illuminate teaching considered generally. Hare calls attention to such matters as: realizing that one may learn more from one's students than from books; re-thinking one's grasp of a familiar problem so as to present it afresh to a beginning student; recognizing how difficult it is to get clear about even one philosophical matter; the importance of honesty and clarity in argument and discussion; and the need to view the latter as co-operative activities. Hare emphasizes the virtue of listening, and in Moral Thinking (4.1) he deplores the fact that people are rarely sympathetic enough to what someone is trying to say to understand it. He recommends suspension of disbelief in approaching a philosophical position, much as Russell had called for a kind of hypothetical sympathy, prior to engaging in critical commentary. It is important not to let the somewhat combative terminology Hare occasionally employs, such as references to doing battle in seminars and tutors who are merciless

critics, to obscure the centrality of sympathetic listening in Hare's conception of philosophical discussion.

A philosophical self-portrait -- clear, concise, and modest -- can be found in A Dictionary of Philosophy (1996), edited by Thomas Mautner. Oxford University Press website has "R. M. Hare in conversation" on the occasion of his 80th birthday, where Hare tells us, among other things, that he would hate to confess all the famous philosophical works he has never read. Ved Mehta, in Fly and the Fly Bottle (1963) gives us a charming glimpse of Hare and family at home, with a memorable image of Hare working away on philosophy in his caravan study. Hare opens his first book with the reminder that we determine what a person's principles are by what that person does; and in his final book, Sorting Out Ethics (3.1) he remarks that the ambition of all serious moral philosophers is to use rational argument to decide on substantial moral principles. His achievement lies in his unwavering dedication throughout his career to the realization of that ambition.