

## CHAPTER VII

### HARE ON THE LEVELS OF MORAL THINKING

In the latest stage of his thinking culminating in Moral Thinking Hare has added to his earlier Universal Prescriptivist meta-ethics a particular theory of the separation of levels of moral thinking. The basic idea of Hare's doctrine of 'the separation of levels' is that beside metaethics or metamorals there are two kinds of substantive moral thinking. The first point of his version of the doctrine of the separation of levels is best put by saying that there are or might be two kinds of normative moral thinking : (a) pure uncritical or 'intuitive' moral thinking, in which moral agents use or would use only relatively simple 'prima facie principles' of 'limited specificity' in directing their actions. This is what most of us do in our ordinary moral thinking. These principles are acquired somehow but not by the use of any kind of critical thinking or reflection, (b) pure critical thinking in which moral agents make or would make no use of any such principles of limited specificity in directing their actions, but only of the method of universal prescriptivism, applying it directly to each particular situation. Such thinking would, in effect, be situational ethics plus universalization, and so would issue in principles of unlimited specificity which would not represent prima facie duties in Ross's sense but actual ones.

It should be observed that each of these pure kinds of thinking is a species of one-level moral thinking. And in each of them the requirements of prescriptivity and universalizability is or can be met. Theoretically moral thinking can as a whole take either form. There is no need to have a two level structure, a society of proles and a society of archangels. A human society might use both kinds of moral thinking, one for certain questions, and the other for other questions.

According to Hare human beings are neither proles nor archangels, 'we all share the characteristics of both to limited and varying degrees and at different times'. Therefore our moral thinking need not as a whole, take either of these pure one-level forms. Nor should it. It should not be wholly intuitive or codal, because the principles of limited specificity used as premises in such thinking may conflict, be inadequate to new situations, and be vague or just plain mistaken. Some kind of critical moral thinking is therefore necessary. Indeed, none of our moral thinking should be of the pure intuitive sort. Any intuitive moral thinking we should do be preceded or accompanied by some kind of critical moral thinking, either our own or someone else's. That is, our intuitive moral thinking should be the lower level in a two-level structure of which some kind of critical moral thinking is the upper level; it should be impure in the sense of being critically based and hence not 'uncritical'. Our codal moral

thinking, if any, ought to be a criticized codal thinking.

According to Hare, our human moral thinking does not, as a whole, take the form of pure critical moral thinking. It could do so if we were archangels. But, unlike archangels, we are afflicted with various human weaknesses — ignorance, lack of time, partialities to self and to friends and relatives, etc. We therefore need a code of principles of limited specificity, accompanied by strong moral feelings like compunction, and should, in fact, do codal or intuitive moral thinking most of the time. It follows that our moral thinking as a whole should include both critical moral thinking and intuitive moral thinking and that the intuitive moral thinking should be based on the critical moral thinking.

The idea of a two-level moral theory is no doubt attractive. Several lines of thought lead to the conclusion that there are different levels of moral thinking. A moral theory like utilitarianism is sharply at variance with ordinary moral thought, and so a two-level theory can seem as a way of explaining the divergence. Precepts of common-sense morality may be defended as principles from the point of view of this theory, for people to believe and act upon. Rule-utilitarianism has often been perceived in this way. One may also be led towards a two-level theory by a desire to do justice to the perceived complexity of ordinary moral argument. No storable principle tells the whole story of the moral

claim which it embodies. There is always more to be said about why the acts mentioned are wrong or permissible or required, about which cases are to be recognized as exceptions, and so on. Thus the existence of a level of 'critical thinking' behind commonly accepted principles seems to be indicated by an examination of ordinary moral thought itself, considered in isolation from any moral theory.

It may be the case that a distinction between levels of moral thinking sometimes justifies our continued reliance on ordinary thinking even in case in which the judgments it leads to are wrong. The relation between the two levels could be an instrumental one. Again, according to another line of thinking the two levels may be deemed to be quite continuous with one another; 'critical thinking' being only the completion of less reflective moral thought. In this case, the two levels of thinking never yield conflicting practical judgments. And if at all they do, the judgment given by 'critical thinking' is always the unequivocally correct answer about what to do.

Both of these lines of thought are represented at various points in Hare's work, though it is the latter which is predominant in Moral thinking. His view of the relation between critical and intuitive thinking seems consistently to be one supported by utilitarian rationale. One subject of critical thinking as Hare describes it is the question of what 'intuitive'

principles it would be best for us to employ. But critical thought also, and primarily, yields conclusions about which acts are 'really' right. By determining what is right they define the goal of moral practice, and a set of intuitive principles is justified if trying to act by those principles would maximize our chances of performing acts which are right. Conformity to intuitive principles does not insure that an action is right — at most that it is 'morally rational'. None the less, morally good people will rely on such principles most of the time as principles which are taken seriously and cannot be violated without compunction.

Hare sometimes presents the distinction as one between the kinds of moral thinking appropriate to two different kinds of people, parents and 'archangels' on the one hand, and on the other, children and 'proles'. Parents and archangels can engage in critical thinking because they have the opportunity to do so and because of their greater ability : greater knowledge of the relevant facts and greater powers of dispassionate judgment. Having the benefit of these advantages, they can attempt to discover the truth about what is right, and on this basis, choose intuitive principles which are to be implanted into their children or proles. The latter, by contrast, should not attempt to discover the truth but should merely react, in accordance with these implanted principles, to the situations which confront them.

Without denying that there is such a thing as moral education and that parents do have to take decisions, employing what one hopes is their greater wisdom, about how to bring up their children, it must be admitted that there is something quite unattractive about the picture of Hare's two levels. The idea that discovery of truth about what is right is reserved for 'the wise', while most of us most of the time are supposed instead to react instinctively in accordance with implanted principles, is hardly appealing, a part from the fact that the terminology of archangels and proles is not enough illuminating.

What Hare is discussing is not really two separate groups of people but two points of view which the same person may adopt at different times. We are, almost all of us, sometimes 'parents' and sometimes 'children', sometimes 'archangels' and sometimes 'proles'. But does this remove the difficulty? Certainly there is such a thing as moral self-education, and we do sometimes undertake to make ourselves more sensible to certain considerations. Yet it cannot be denied that cases do arise in which there is no time for reflection and one must simply act on the basis of one's immediate reactions. It does not seem that the process of applying and acting on 'intuitive' moral principles is in general simply a matter of responding to 'implanted' motivations. When applied to a single person, Hare's distinction between the intuitive and critical standpoints involves a division of labour in moral thought which is at odds with at least part of our moral experience.

There is a sense in which Hare distinguishes three levels of moral thinking : the metaethical, which is non-substantial , and philosophical, besides the intuitive and the critical. Substantial issues are deliberated on at either the critical or the intuitive level. At the critical level of moral thinking no moral intuitions of substance can be appealed to. It proceeds, he tells us, in accordance with canons established by philosophical logic and thus based on linguistic intuitions only. These canons are the logical apparatus of universal prescriptivism. Moral thinking at the intuitive level fails to conform to the canons of the critical level.

What, then, is Hare's view of the nature of moral thinking at the intuitive level? We acquire, by education, a number of relatively simple general principles. These principles we usually follow unquestionably so long as there is no conflict between them. If we have been well brought up this situation is satisfactory most of the time. But we are powerless to resolve conflicts between principles in a rational manner unless we resort to thinking at the critical level, otherwise we must resort to such irrational procedures as weighing the principles. Further we cannot at the intuitive level rationally examine the principles that we at first uncritically accept, or rationally replace those found to be unacceptable.

There is no definite list, in Hare's opinion, of the relatively general principles which all men do, can, or should

accept. What principles are desirably held is partly determined by the situation in which a person finds himself and the character he has; acts of supererogation are those performed by people who are able and willing to conform to principles to which we do not expect the generality of men to conform. But critical thinking will demonstrate that it is desirable for all ordinary mortals to have some set of relatively general principles and usually to obey them without question.

After having outlined Hare's account of the nature of moral thinking at the intuitive level, we may now ask the following questions : (a) Is the conflict of duties or principles confined to the intuitive level? Hare refers to these phrases on pages 26 and 32 of Moral Thinking. Does he mean that all moral conflicts are conflicts of principle? Keeping promises and truth-telling are two examples of what many people regard as principles. But there are many relatively general moral adages which I and many others accept, though certainly not as principles, for example, the proposition that one should avoid causing inconvenience to other people. That an action would inconvenience somebody is a reason, often, one among many other considerations, that tells against its performance, a reason, but not a sufficient reason in all circumstances. Keeping the promise of taking my children to picnic and taking my friends around may be a case of conflict, but hardly a conflict of principles. As we have mentioned a

little while ago, 'keep promises' is a principle, and one does not stand under any obligation to take friends around. There is no duty, no ready-made principle requiring me so to do. This case does not exemplify such a conflict. Hare appears to include under the term 'principle' a number of very different things.

Many of us use the term for some rules of conduct which we set for ourselves or accept from others, and at times follow them refusing to consider arguments to the contrary. Principles such as these need not be moral. They may be prudential ones, and might be violated in readily conceivable circumstances. There is no single model of conflict as Hare has suggested.

Let us now turn to Hare's main objection to intuitive moral thinking which is not underpinned by critical moral thinking. He speaks scornfully of the attempt to deal with a conflict of duties, or setting it by a judging or weighing process. Judging and weighing have no decision procedure. But there need not be any special objections to judging and weighing in the moral sphere. Just as evidence for fact has to be weighed, so has evidence for value. In prudence we may have to decide in the light of complex facts. Hare's critical moral thinking cannot avoid weighing and judging. If we are to aim at maximum satisfaction of desires or needs, or maximum pleasure, do we not have to weigh the evidence? Does not one have to use one's judgment in trying to decide, by imaginatively putting ourselves in the other person's

place? It seems that the weighing of evidence and judgment are inevitable in all walks of life. So, though it would be desirable to have a better philosophical understanding of it, its presence at the intuitive level does not seem to be a serious objection to the self-sufficiency of that type of thinking, or, if it does invalidate intuitive moral thinking, it invalidates also just about all our thinking outside pure mathematics. Rightly has Urmson called Hare's use of the term 'principle' monolithic.

There is a vast array of actions having moral significance which are frequently performed by ordinary human beings, who are neither saints nor heroes. These actions are neither duties nor obligations, nor involve conformity to principles. As well as acts of moral saintliness and heroism, this class includes many humbler types of action within the reach of all of us. There are various types of action which we might call kind, considerate, chivalrous, charitable, neighbourly decent, or acts of self-denial and self-abnegation. Acts so described are in many circumstances neither duties nor obligations. To fail to do them would not be positively wrong, though perhaps, unneighbourly, unkind, etc., nor are they dictated by principle. Nor are these various terms synonymous with each other and with 'supererogatory'. If we are to do justice to the rich complexity of moral life, we need a much more rich and varied set of concepts than the small set to which Hare confines himself.

In ordinary moral thinking we attempt to determine our duties and obligations with a more complex apparatus than Hare allows. Beyond simple moral principles there are all kinds of considerations of greater and lesser importance and with varying relevance which are ordinarily taken into account. Further, weighing and judgment are indispensable in all assessment of evidence, and relevant factors in matters of fact and questions of prudence as well as in morality. In all these areas it is very difficult to get philosophically clear on the nature of this weighing and judging. But this is no ground for denying either its existence or its indispensability. It seems that Hare does shy away in allowing for whole range of moral life which are not concerned with fulfilment of duty and obligation.