

CHAPTER II

HARE ON MORAL REASONING:

Let us begin by considering the question : Are there any rules governing what is to count as a moral reason? So far I have mentioned two sorts of answer which might be given. That given by Hare says : there are no rules; you yourself decide what sort of considerations are relevant. That given by Mrs. Foot says: the rules are extremely strict ones; the individual has no choice at all as to what is to count as relevant to a moral judgement. Now it seems to me that any account which forces us to say either of these things must be incorrect. But before I put forward my own positive theory, I should like to consider the accounts of Hare and Mrs. Foot in greater detail and try to show what is wrong with them. In this way I can at least protect myself against the charge of knocking down men of straw. I shall begin with Hare's theory.

In both of his books Hare tells us that the purpose of his philosophy is to defend the 'rationality of morals' or to show that morality is 'a rational activity'. Consequently his account allots a place of central importance to the notion of a reason. At the beginning of Freedom and Reason for example, he tells us that 'both naturalism and my own view ... hold that judgements about particular things are made for reasons'¹, and later he goes so far

as to say that "ought" judgements, strictly speaking, would be misused if the demand for reasons or grounds were thought of as out of place".²

This, I think, would meet with fairly general approval among contemporary philosophers. But some would take strong exception to what he says about the nature of moral reasons. His account is implicit in one short passage in *The Language of Morals*, where we are told that:

There are two factors which may be involved in the making of any decision to do something ... They correspond to the major and minor premisses of the Aristotelian practical syllogism. The major premiss is a principle of conduct; the minor premiss is a statement, more or less full, of what we should in fact be doing if we did one or the other of the alternatives open to us. Thus if I decide not to say something because it is false, I am acting on a principle, 'Never (or never under certain conditions) say what is false', and I must know that this, which I am wondering whether to say, is false.³

Here Hare is presenting us with a certain picture of the typical moral argument or process of moral deliberation. We are invited to construe it on the model of a syllogism, subject to the normal rules of deductive inference. Thus to take Hare's own example, an argument designed to show that one ought not to make some particular statement (X), might proceed as follows:

One ought never to say what is false
X is false
therefore, One ought not to say X.

The conclusion of the argument states a moral judgement which the agent makes, or a decision which he has reached; the premisses provide his justification for it.

Now I want to make two points about the theory which Hare offers in this passage, which seem to me to cast serious doubts on its plausibility.

In the first place, we may note that, while in the particular example which Hare chooses the minor premiss is one which most people would regard as relevant to the conclusion, this need not be so. Whatever we offered as a minor premiss, a valid syllogism could be produced by introducing the appropriate major premiss. Consider, for example, the following argument:

One ought always to hit one's brother-in-law on
Tuesdays
Today is Tuesday
therefore, you ought to hit your brother-in-law.

Now I do not think that the day of the week would normally be regarded as a relevant reason for engaging in hostilities towards one's relations. But there is no doubt that on Hare's account it

could quite easily be so. For the major premiss of the above argument ensures its relevance. And the same would go for any reason which we cared to offer.

This is not to say that Hare is completely blind to these consequences of his theory. In the last chapter of *Freedom and Reason*, where he is considering the question of racial conflict, he does point out that on his principles someone may offer as justifying the ill-treatment of other races reasons which many of us would be loth to regard as relevant, e.g. physical characteristics such as the colour of a man's skin or the shape of his nose. (This is so because the argument, 'All people with certain physical characteristics ought to be ill-treated; this man has those characteristics; therefore, this man ought to be ill-treated', is valid.) Hare interprets this as showing that his account of moral justification is not committed to any particular moral standpoint. And this, of course, is true. What Hare does not seem to realise is that, if we accept his account, then there is no consideration, no matter how irrelevant it might seem to be, which could not be regarded as a moral reason. Neutrality is bought at the price of vacuity.

In the second place, I want to draw attention to some of the differences between what Hare accepts as constituting a moral reason, and what we should normally accept. We have seen that he regards moral arguments as processes of syllogistic inference to

a moral conclusion, with the premisses providing our reasons for accepting the conclusion. So it is at least clear that he is committed to the view that a statement corresponding to one of his minor premisses could not alone fully justify a moral judgment. (It might, of course, be the only reason given, but this could only be because a major premiss had been assumed, as in the case of an enthymeme). Hare would not, for instance, accept that to point out that a statement was untrue, could ever be a sufficient reason for asserting that someone ought not to make it. And it seems to me that this conflicts with our ordinary use of the word 'reason'.

To see this, let us consider what might be regarded as a paradigm case of someone making a judgment for a reason. Suppose a woman has to make a choice between telling her husband, who has an incurable disease, the truth about his condition, or deceiving him into thinking that he is suffering from a trivial complaint. (It is this problem with which one of the characters in Tennessee Williams's Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is faced.) And suppose, to take the most straightforward case, that she discusses the matter with her family beforehand, and decides that since her husband would prefer to be told the truth, however terrible, she ought not to deceive him. What are we to say about such a case?

Well, two things are clear. (a) The decision is a moral one, based on purely moral considerations. Questions of self-interest are irrelevant. (b) The wife's reasons are the ones which

she gives. This is not to deny that after studying the case a Freudian analyst might come to the conclusion that her real reason was, say, an unconscious hate of her husband, and the reasons given are mere rationalisations. But such a case would necessarily be an exceptional one (which ex hypothesis this is not). All the reasons we give could not be rationalisations, for the notion of a rationalisation is parasitic upon that of a genuine reason.

Now it seems to me that we should naturally express the wife's reasoning in the above example, as follows:

My husband would wish me to tell him the truth
so I ought to tell him the truth.

But it is Hare's contention that this way of expressing it is misleading and that in order to rectify this it is necessary to introduce the major premiss, 'one ought always to do what one's husband wishes', and thus bring out the syllogistic form of the argument. It will then be valid 'by the ordinary rules of logic'.⁴ The difficulty here is that, while it is possible to turn any non-deductive argument into a syllogism by introducing a major premiss, to do this with moral arguments, or with practical arguments generally, is unilluminating, since the major premiss will often turn out to be one which no one would accept.

To see why Hare's account is unilluminating, let us consider what he would say about the case which I have just mentioned. His contention is that the wife's reasoning requires a major premiss if

it is to provide a full justification of her decision. That is to say, her argument should really be represented as:

One ought always to do what one's husband wishes

My husband wishes me not to deceive him

therefore, I ought not to deceive him.

The difficulty here is that she would probably deny that she was applying any such major premiss. Indeed it is unlikely (though not impossible) that she would want to commit herself to any general statement about what one ought to do in situations where one's husband's wishes are involved. Nor will it do to say (as Hare does in *The Languages of Morals*)⁵ that such a general statement would be only a provisional principle to be modified in the light of experience. Most wives would not feel themselves bound to abide by their husband's wishes if (i) to do so would be harmful to him, or (ii) if he were not *compos mentis*, or (iii) if they were legally separated, or (iv) if he wished them to share their home with his mistress. But it is obvious that these examples do not even begin to exhaust the range of possible exceptions. Nor would any list of examples, however long. It is just possible to think of circumstances in which obeying one's husband's wishes would precipitate China into revolution. But could it be said that a principle which allows for this possibility is more accurate than one which doesn't? Or is there some comprehensive formula which

would cover all these evils? Perhaps, but it would be likely to turn out principle into a trivial tautology like 'One ought to obey one's husband's wishes, except where to do so would be wrong'.

Nevertheless, I do not think that it will do merely to say that Hare's premiss is superfluous. For we should then be open to the objection that indeed people do say things like 'One ought not to tell lies' or 'One ought to consider one's husband's wishes'. Clearly there is something wrong with an account which holds that 'One ought to tell the truth' is more accurately formulated as 'speak the truth in general, but there are certain classes of cases in which this principle does not hold'⁶. 'One ought to tell the truth' is not just a vague generalisation like 'All Frenchmen wear berets', which needs to be qualified by lists of exceptions before it even begins to sound plausible. But if Hare's account is wrong, then what is required is not to banish such moral judgements from the realm of significant discourse, but to give an account of them which will enable us to grasp their function there.

Let us return to the first point which I made about Hare's theory. I said earlier that one of the reasons why Hare thinks that any reason might be regarded as relevant to a moral judgement is that he thinks that it is always possible to introduce some general statement of the form 'One ought to do x' which will ensure its relevance. Now I suggest that there is some truth in this contention. Statements like 'One ought to tell the truth' or 'One ought to consider one's husband's wishes' do show the relevance

for the reasons we give for moral judgements, only not because, as Hare thinks, they form part of syllogisms which entail these judgements, but because they help to establish the moral context, the framework, within which the reasons are given. Perhaps I can clarify this. Suppose that we people are arguing about whether to report a relative to the police for some fairly minor criminal offence, and that during the argument the one says, 'One ought not to conceal the truth'. Now the purpose of this remark will be to give the other an insight the range of considerations which he regards as relevant to the case, to give him some idea of the moral attitude that he is adopting. To this the other might reply, 'Well yes, but blood's thicker than water, you know'. And again this remark would help to show the range of considerations which he is willing to accept, although here there is less temptation to construe what he says as the major premiss in a syllogism. The first man's remark emphasises the importance of honesty and integrity, and insists that these are the important considerations regardless of who is involved. The second man insists that the demands of the family cannot just be ignored. In both cases what they say does not restrict them to giving any particular reason for the moral judgements they make (as it would if Hare's account were correct), but it does restrict them to giving reasons within a certain range. We should be surprised to hear the second man say, 'So we'll turn him in; after all, you can't go round telling lies to protect scoundrels'.⁷

Now obviously Hare's theory will only be plausible if statements of the form 'One ought always to do so-and-so' can have any content whatsoever and still remain intelligible. For if this were not so, he would be forced to admit that the reasons we give cannot have just any content, for there would be certain reasons which could not be incorporated into a valid syllogism. Hare never considers this possibility because he concentrates on syllogisms whose major premisses could function in ordinary discourse, e.g. statements like 'One ought to tell the truth', etc. True he sometimes uses phrases like 'One ought to do x', but these only help the deception. For we tend to think that the variable contained in them could have any value, and this is just what is in question.⁸