

CHAPTER V

UNIVERSALIZABILITY : HARE AND J. L. MACKIE

What role can reason play in ethical decision-making? That has been the central question of ethics since Socrates sought to refute the moral scepticism of the sophists. It is also the connecting thread of Hare's work. His position emerged out of the non-cognitivist theories defended by Ayer and Stevenson. A major objection to these theories was that they could not allow reason a role in determining basic moral positions. While Hare shares with the non-cognitivists the view that moral judgments do not state facts, he has always denied that this view allows no place for reason in ultimate moral decisions. In Freedom and Reason and Moral Thinking he has developed the notion of universalizability to the point at which he feels able to claim that it gives sufficient scope to reason to allow us to reach, in principle, a determinate conclusion.

Although J. L. Mackie wrote his Ethics : Inventing Right and Wrong before Hare had published the fully developed statement of his position as in Moral Thinking, Mackie's discussion of universalizability is still widely regarded as pinpointing the key difficulties in Hare's position. Mackie argued that there is not one single notion of universalizability but three:

- (a) The irrelevance of numerical differences
- (b) Putting oneself in the other person's place
- (c) Taking account of different tastes and rival ideals.

Only the first of these, Mackie claimed, can be said to be part of the meaning of moral terms, or logically implied by our moral concepts. Yet only the third notion of universalizability will suffice to bring us to the conclusion Hare seeks, that universalizability leads us to a form of utilitarianism. Moreover, Mackie continues, even where a notion of universalizability is implicit in our moral concepts, there is a substantive decision involved in limiting one's action to those one is prepared to prescribe universally. Nothing can logically compel us to make this decision.

In Moral Thinking Hare denies that there are different stages of universalization. He says that there is, rather, a progression in the use made of a single property, namely, the property of entailing identical judgments about all cases identical in their universal properties. The difference is significant, for if there are three stages of universalizability as Mackie claims, those whom Hare calls 'fanatics' might claim that there is no reason to go beyond the first two stages. Such fanatics could still claim to hold a universalizable morality. They could with, Mackie's support, say that they accept the full notion of

universalizability implied by our moral concepts, and yet they would, of course, escape the crucial third step of Hare's argument, the one which compels them to treat their ideals as if they counted for no more, than any other ideal held with equal intensity, if, on the other hand, all three 'stages' are merely the progressive development of a single logical property, it would seem that anyone who accepts the first aspect of universalizability must also accept the second and third aspects of it. Then the fanatic would have to choose between rejecting universalizability altogether and accepting all that Hare argues as implicit in the notion.

Hare has consistently maintained that the basis of universalizability is to be found in the meanings of the moral words. But if we ask ourselves whether ordinary people consider that a moral judgment must give equal weight to all ideals, irrespective of their content, the answer would surely go against Hare. To this extent, at least, Mackie is right. Very many ordinary people are not consequentialists. And even those who are, they tend to regard deontological views as properly falling within the sphere of morality. How then can Hare argue that the moral words we ordinarily use require us to disregard the content of the ideals we may hold? And even if somehow Hare could make out this claim, would the result not simply be to show, very clearly, that Mackie was right when he said that to decide to act in accordance with

universalizable judgments is always a substantive decision which reason alone does not compel us to make?

Can Hare defend his position on ideals by appealing to our ordinary understanding of moral language. There is another possibility, namely that, ironically of course, Hare and Mackie are in agreement that moral judgments do not state objective truths. In criticizing the idea that universalizability requires us to give equal weight to all moral ideals, Mackie wrote that it was to believe that the objective validity of one's own ideals provides an overwhelmingly strong reason for taking no account at all of ideals that conflict with them. Mackie is right. Hare's suggestion that all ideals should be treated equally, without regard to their content, is bound to be resisted by all those who claim that their ideals are objectively valid, while other people's ideals are false and mistaken. But Mackie is a moral sceptic, he does not believe that any ideals can be objectively valid. Once we grant such scepticism, what else can an ideal be except a certain type of desire? And why should we treat ideals differently from other desires when we universalize?

Hare also holds that there can be no objectively valid moral ideals. For him, moral judgments are prescriptions. Truth or falsity, in the sense in which it applies to descriptions, is not applicable to prescriptions. Because he rejects the idea

that moral judgments are descriptive, Hare can reject the view that ideals are different from desires because they are true or false. Hare makes this point in his discussion of fanaticism in Moral Thinking. He has in mind a doctor who believes that he should prolong life at all costs, even in a situation in which the inevitable result is merely that the patient endures an additional worth of suffering before dying. Hare can deal with the fanatic by basing his argument on the falsity of descriptivism. That is, the doctor can not say that he knew that he ought not to let the patient die. He could say that if some form of descriptivism were true. Hare is here saying, in effect, that we cannot rely on universalizability alone to all the work of dealing with the fanatic. The doctor's intuitions are disputable. So it is prescriptivism which entails the falsity of descriptivism, and Hare insists on the irrelevance of the content of people's ideals. The upshot of all this is that if some people say that their ideals matter, we should not heed such a claim.

If universalizability is simply a matter of the logic of the concepts we use, there can be no logical barrier against the creation of a new set of concepts which limits the scope for universalizability. Hare admits this possibility in the introductory pages of Moral Thinking. It is Mackie's point that a substantive decision is involved in choosing which set of concepts to accept. The new concepts may form a restricted set of concepts.

If members of a society do not care about the welfare of outsiders, whether of another nationality, race or species, they will easily accept that some appropriately restricted set of concepts captures everything important about the questions asked by the set of concepts Hare has analysed, and leaves out only some unimportant matters with which they do not wish to be bothered. Hare might say that prudential arguments might work against the adoption of a narrowly constrained set of concepts. A restriction on the scope of universalizability seems to involve an inconsistency in a strict logical sense. At whatever point universalizability stops, one can raise the question : 'Why stop there?' Why not also take into account the preferences of others? To stop short of this point can therefore be criticized as a refusal to take into account the relevant fact that other beings also have preferences which are similar to the preferences of those who fall within the scope of the restricted sense of universalizability. The point is that be it a case of group egoism or individual egoism, a restricted notion of universalizability relies on an arbitrary disregard of relevant preferences. And the point Hare scores is that our set of moral concepts must include an unrestricted notion of universalizability.