Liberals, fanatics and moral philosophers

Aspects of R.M. Hare's 'Freedom and Reason'

I have recently re-started work on a study of Tolerance and rummaging through my books for any which I might usefully read or re-read as background or foreground picked out R. M. Hare's *Freedom and Reason*, chapter 9 of which has the title 'Tolerance and Fanaticism'. I have now read the book through, which is something I did not do in my time as a Philosophy student: marginal annotations to my copy (purchased for seven shillings and sixpence) show that in the past I had read only chapters one, two, three and five.

I was impressed in my reading by the presence in Hare's book of explicit, substantive moral argument conducted from the point of view of a liberal, protestant morality and directed, principally, against positions attributed to Nazi and racist 'moralities' and to a lesser extent against those who would make crimes of sins. Whilst Hare does make the common distinction between the activities of moral philosophy, on the one hand, and moralising and the moral life on the other, his book does not, either in intention or execution, include only the former to the exclusion of the latter. The image I had of Hare's work as typical of an academic philosophy which eschewed substantive moral discussion or action was false. I think part of the explanation for this is that teachers of philosophy, working in exam-oriented systems which attach immense importance to objectivity, neutrality etc exclude from their curricula the substantive (first order) moral discussion contained in books like Hare's. I doubt if I was the only student to read only the analytical (second order) bits of *Freedom and Reason*. I think that my image of Hare was probably a creation of the system which first mediated his work to me.

Whatever mediators might do, Hare has and states a clear conception of his readership and what he wants from it, and the kind of reading which he thinks it ought to give him. The most important feature of this conception is a negative one, for Hare does not imagine himself as addressing either students or teachers of Philosophy (or any other subject), but rather as writing for and being read by liberal members of the professional classes: judges, stockbrokers, army officers and leaders of Himalayan expeditions are the characters (not traditionally liberal!) who figure both in his hypothetical arguments and as the audience for his discourse. Explicitly, Hare sees himself in an intellectual reaction to such people founded upon an intellectual division of labour which creates moral philosophy as one profession among many.

The moral philosopher's most important direct relationship is with these liberal professionals; he relates directly to 'ordinary members of the public' [p180] only insofar as he himself is a liberal. One of the major, if not the major, task of the moral philosopher is to assist liberals in their war of attrition against fanaticism (here in its Nazi and racist forms) and its confused but basically non-fanatical adherents:

... on the whole (though there are set-backs) liberalism advances against fanaticism, provided that there is freedom of communication, and that the influential part of the public thinks seriously about moral questions, understands their nature, and respects the truth. The liberal should therefore above all struggle to preserve these conditions; and that is why it is important to the liberal that the moral philosopher, who is professionally concerned in preserving them (especially the second), should do his job properly. Fanatics will always be with us... The strategy of the liberal must be to separate from the true fanatics, whose ideals really are proof against the ordeal by imagination and facts, those who support them merely because they are thoughtless and insensitive.
[p184]

Though Hare obviously makes a large number of unargued assumptions about the structure of fanatical movements, the relation between leaders and led, the quantitative relation between true fanatics and the simply confused, what is undeniable is that he has a coherent, liberal conception of philosophical practice and its relation to other practices, notably the political-educational practice of influential liberals. The conception may be wrong; I think it is. But it is a fuller, much more practical, certainly less academic conception than that usually attributed to people like Hare by radical critics. It is rather sad that Hare's actual readership is probably so very different from that which he intends. He deserves a better class of liberal reader than he gets.

The work of a radical moral philosopher would presumably differ from that of Hare at least in its range of practical concerns; its substantive arguments; and its intended audience (say: jury people rather than judges). I think it would be less optimistic about the power of Reason than is Hare (but then why write books?) and probably it would be more sceptical of the viability of the analytical distinction between moral philosophy and morals - it would be likely to answer the essay question 'Is the principle of universalizability a purely formal principle?' in the negative, though I don't think it would have to in order to count as a radical work.

The way in which Hare relates the (formal) principle of universalizability to the (substantive) principle of toleration is something I should like to comment on, both as illustrative of remarks in the preceding section and as relevant to my own concerns.

Consider the following passage:

Suppose that somebody argues as follows: according to the universalist, when a man makes a moral judgement he is committed to saying that anybody who says something different about a similar case is wrong; therefore, according to the universalist, toleration in moral matters is impossible. In order to understand this matter clearly, it is necessary to distinguish between thinking that somebody else is wrong, and taking up an intolerant attitude towards him. The universalist is committed to a denial of relativism ... he holds that if anybody disagrees with me about a moral question, then I am committed to disagreeing with him, unless I change my mind. This appears harmless enough tautology, and need hardly trouble the universalist. But the universalist is not committed to persecuting (physically or in any other way) people who disagree with him morally. If he is the sort of universalist that

I am, he will realize that our moral opinions are liable to change in the light of our experience and our discussion of moral questions with other people; therefore, if another person disagrees with us, what is called for is not the suppression of his opinions but the discussion of them, in the hope that, when he has told us the reasons for his, and we for ours, we may reach agreement. Universalism is an ethical theory which makes moral argument both possible and fruitful; and it enables us to understand what toleration is, as we shall later see.
[p49-50]

I don't think this passage is a model of clarity; I think it can be read as saying or suggesting that the principle of toleration can in some way be derived from the principle of universalizability, perhaps in a way which would flout 'Hume's Law' and perhaps in a way which would cast doubt on the claimed formal status of the universalizability principle, or which would lead to an ideological claim for formal status for the substantive toleration principle. It need not be so read, but then it has to be said that Hare is wrong at one point. He writes 'Universalism is an ethical theory which makes moral argument both possible and fruitful...'. Now, whilst it is true that universalism makes moral argument *possible* (we are not obliged to agree to differ, as emotivism would require if it were correct), it is false that it makes argument *fruitful*, except in a most trivial, tautologous way which Hare does not have in mind, for he also writes 'If he is the sort of universalist I am, he will realize that our moral opinions are liable to change in the light of our experience and our discussion of moral questions with other people'. But this realization can only be based on evidence, or it is a matter of (liberal/Enlightenment) faith. It does not *follow* from the thesis of universalisability, though that thesis explains the *logical* possibility that what Hare asserts is empirically *liable* to happen.

That Hare does or tends to jump from proving a logical possibility to asserting it as an empirical fact is evident from the text of chapter 9, in which he sets out to show the liberal how to deal in argument with the Nazi. He suggests that but for a hard-core of 'really intractable Nazis' [p171] the rest will be motivated not by moral ideals but by self-interest and for such a person 'If his conduct is interpreted in this way, he is open to arguments' [p171]. Here 'open' can only mean 'logically open' which is not the same as 'empirically open'. It cannot and does not solve the practical problem of the liberal faced by the Nazi. For people logically open to argument in virtue of the *structure* of their beliefs may nonetheless refuse to argue, fail to accept the outcome of an argument, fail to act on such an outcome etc. Hare recognises this (see, e.g., chapter 5 on 'Backsliding') but does not consider the empirical consequences of such empirical facts. For example, Clear Thinkers in the nineteen thirties, in whose steps Hare follows, were not (I imagine) notably successful in stopping the spread of Nazism and Fascism by separating the confused from the fanatics whose logic was impeccable. What has to be asked and found out is how successful they actually were, which means looking at how they worked and with whom. Contrasts should be made with the work of those who had different strategies for halting the Nazis and Fascists and their relative successes and failures. At a minimum, if he were writing today, Hare would need to read and comment on Reich's *Mass Psychology of Fascism* and *What is Class Consciousness?* I think he could accept this, for there is no doubting the seriousness of his intent (try pp177-85 of the book if you doubt this). On the other hand, the astounding failure in a book so preoccupied with Nazism, racism and even world war to discuss the relation of moral and political philosophy, morals and politics, must be attributed to a structural weakness of Hare's liberal-individualist morality rather than to any personal failing on Hare's part.

Whilst Hare's moral philosophy either proves that rational moral argument is possible over a much wider area than had previously been thought, or (to put it relativistically) sets out to create the conceptual conditions in which such argument is possible, it does leave open the possibility of rational disagreement. There are those who disagree with 'us' whose logic is impeccable, and whom Hare christens 'fanatics' when they allow their ideals 'to override all considerations of people's interests even the holder's own in actual or hypothetical cases' [p176]. These people cannot believe in the liberal ideal of *toleration*, 'that is to say a readiness to respect other people's ideals [or interests -TP] as if they were his own' [p177].

Hare defines the limits of this tolerance in classically Millian terms [p178]. The liberal 'tolerates other people's pursuit of their ideals provided that, where the pursuit of one ideal hinders the pursuit of another, there shall be, as in the cases of conflicting interests discussed above, a just distribution of advantages and disadvantages. It is only the last proviso which prevents the liberal from allowing even the fanatic to pursue his ideals without impediment; but the liberal is not required by his own ideal to tolerate intolerance' [p180].

This, in the context of a discussion of Nazism, would seem to put Hare on the side of the International Socialists and other groups intolerant of the National Front and wishing to smash it by their own action if it isn't banned by the State. Interestingly, in the recent *Socialist Worker* pamphlet *Organise against the National Front, the new Nazis*, distinctions analogous to Hare's are drawn between National Front sympathisers and new members with some of whom 'discussion is worthwhile', and the 'hard core fascist members of the National Front' for whom 'only one argument is successful: physical force' [p9]. The pamphlet is only less 'philosophical' than Hare's book in its greater concreteness - the National Front rather than Hare's sometimes indeterminate 'Nazis' and its sensitivity to the actual empirical possibilities of argument - whereas Hare tends to relate toleration to the bare logical possibility of argument. (I am intrigued to know if the author(s) of this pamphlet have read Hare, and whether Hare has read this pamphlet.)

To recapitulate. I suggest to anyone reading or re-reading *Freedom and Reason* that he or she focus not just on the narrowly philosophical theses for which Hare is famous (universalisability, prescriptivity), but on the detailed conception and exemplification of a moral practice which he advances. I think Hare is wrong in substance and form, but I do think his book could only have come from the pen of an educator who had himself been educated; and Hare tells us whereabouts in the last sentence on page 183.

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