Gary E. Varner


Gary Varner’s latest book is, in many ways, two books in one. Part I serves as an exceedingly clear primer on the work of R. M Hare. It can be profitably read in isolation from Parts II and III by anyone seeking to better understand Hare’s distinctive brand of utilitarianism. By the same token, Parts II and III combine to form a stand-alone contribution to debates about personhood and the ethical treatment of non-human animals. Taken in its entirety, *Personhood, Ethics, and Animal Cognition* is thus both a valuable piece of scholarship and an engaging discussion of timely ethical issues.

Varner contends that “[u]tilitarianism is a family of theories with one thing in common: they all hold that, *at least ultimately*, the right thing to do is whatever will maximize aggregate happiness” (p. 3). As he notes, the “*at least ultimately*” qualification “points to the complexities involved in specifying what that principle implies in practice, what it would mean to live a life inspired by the principle” (p. 4). Put differently, not all forms of utilitarianism are created equal, and the plausibility of any version of utilitarianism will thus depend on its particular nuances—how it differs from competing alternatives—rather than the intuitive plausibility (or implausibility) of the greatest happiness principle.

It is in this vein that Varner’s treatment of key features of Hare’s thought is particularly helpful. In Chapter 2, he offers a formal reconstruction of Hare’s argument that utilitarian conclusions can be deduced from the logical properties of all genuine moral judgments. According to Hare, when we make moral judgments, we are thereby making judgments that are universalizable (in that they can be applied to all relevantly similar cases) (p. 37), overriding (in that they identify what we ought to do “all things considered”) (p. 38), and prescriptive (in that “one would act consistently with it wherever it applies, at least other things being equal”) (p. 39). When we then consider what moral decision-making looks like when it takes seriously these features of moral judgments, Hare contends that our thought heads in a decidedly consequentialist direction. Varner thus characterizes the key moment in Hare’s argument as follows:

To treat a prescription as universal is to acquire the preferences of everyone affected by one’s action in the sense of willing whatever option would maximize the satisfaction of all one’s preferences, under the assumption that one will have to undergo, in random order, the experiences of everyone affected by one’s action (p. 45).
In other words, simply by thinking about the logical features of our moral judgments, we can arrive at a consideration of how our actions will affect the preferences of myriad others. And on Hare’s view, that way of thinking is the essence of what it is to think like a utilitarian.

If successful, the argument thus shows how utilitarianism follows directly from the logical properties of our moral judgments. While the mere presentation of this view is unlikely to convince those otherwise disinclined to consequentialism, Varner’s reconstruction compellingly highlights the unique nature of Hare’s case for utilitarianism. Rather than focusing solely on the intuitive plausibility of the principle of utility itself, Hare attempts to derive that principle from other commitments that he takes to be widely shared. Whether this argument is ultimately successful can be debated, but it is clear from Varner’s discussion that it should not be dismissed too quickly.

In Chapter 3, Varner examines the importance Hare places on what he calls intuitive-level rules. It is a longstanding objection to utilitarianism that securing the greatest overall happiness often seems to require that we think in decidedly non-utilitarian ways. Hare’s response to this line of thought is to argue that moral thinking takes place at two levels. Under certain specified conditions, it is necessary for us to think in explicitly utilitarian terms. But circumstances are often too complex to determine what course of action will maximize utility. Moreover, humans are saddled with certain limitations: “we have limited data-processing abilities and make mistakes” and “we are inclined to ‘cook the data’ and deceive ourselves into thinking that we are justified in doing things that suit our individual interests, when clear utilitarian thinking would require us to sacrifice for the greater good of the whole” (p. 48). Thus, most of the time, it is appropriate for us to rely on rules that are more “deontological in ‘flavor’” (pp. 14–15).

According to Varner, there are four prominent examples of such rules—common morality, personal morality, professional ethics, and laws (pp. 51–55)—and he spends considerable time explaining various features of how they operate. Of particular interest is his explication of Hare’s claim that “it may be possible to know intuitive-level principles without being able to recite them” (p. 71). On this view, we are often justified in thinking at the level of intuitive-level rules even when we cannot state explicitly what those rules are and the rules themselves “include a list of exceptions that is too complex to be formulated in words” (p. 63).

To support this claim, Varner appeals to the notion of connectionist reasoning—reasoning that works out from prototypical cases rather than deducing conclusions from necessary and sufficient conditions. Thus, “connectionist models do not work by being programmed with principles that are then applied in deductive fashion;