



## A Note on Hare's Analysis of "Good"

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## VIII.—DISCUSSIONS

### A NOTE ON HARE'S ANALYSIS OF "GOOD"

In his book *The Language of Morals* Hare distinguishes the meaning of "good" from the criteria for its application. The meaning of "good" is common to all occasions of the use of the word, and is that aspect of the use of the word which has to do with commending, favouring or having preference for something. The criteria for the application of "good", however, are not common to all occasions of the use of the word. They vary according to the occasion of the use of the word, because the standards by which we judge members of various classes to be good members of those classes vary according to the class of thing we happen to be judging. Hare further argues that the meaning of "good" and the criteria for applying "good" are independent. The meaning of "good" can be known by somebody who does not know a particular set of criteria for its application. Conversely, we can know the criteria for the correct application of "good" without knowing what "good" means; that is, without realising that "good" is used to commend. It is with the question of the independence of meaning and criteria that I shall be concerned.

I want to argue that the meaning of "good" is independent of *particular sets* of criteria, but not of criteria for its application *in general*. Before we could be sure that someone knew the meaning of "good" we would have to know that he realised that criteria were relevant. For if he did not realise that criteria were relevant we would have no reason to believe that he was not using "good" merely to express his feelings of approval: in other words, we would not know if he had realised that "good" was used to make commendations *backed by reasons*. For example, suppose that we are all aware of the criteria for a good wine and somebody comes along and says of a very bad wine, one that does not measure up at all well to the standards for a good wine, "That's a good wine". So far we do not say that he does not know what the word "good" means. If he regularly commends this wine to others, always shows preference for it himself and so on, we say that he knows what the word "good" means all right, but that he has simply made a mistake in his judgement about this particular case because he does not know the correct criteria for a good wine. So far we are in agreement with Hare, for his distinction between meaning and criteria allows us to say that the person in my example has made an incorrect judgement, and it does not force us into saying that he does not know what "good" means. But now suppose that we tell this person that he is wrong, and that the wine is in fact a bad one. Suppose he replies "You can't argue me out of my belief that this is a good wine. It's the wine that I favour, the one that I would always choose, the one I have preference for. So it must be a good wine." If he replies in this way, then I think we can say that he

does not know the *meaning* of "good". For he has not realised that criteria are *relevant* to deciding whether it is a good wine.<sup>1</sup> I am not saying that he must accept the same criteria for good wines as we do. If he argues about the correct criteria for judging wines this is all right, because he is then presupposing that the question of criteria is relevant. It is only when he fails to recognise the relevance of criteria to his judgement that the wine is good that we have good reason for saying that he does not know what the word "good" means. So the meaning of "good" is not independent of criteria in general: a person must recognise that criteria are relevant when applying "good". He may not, of course, know what particular set of criteria are relevant in a particular case (and in this respect meaning and criteria are independent, as Hare has argued), but even if he is ignorant of the criteria in this particular case he must still realise that there must be *some* criteria: that considerations of criteria are in general relevant.

In view of this I want to suggest a new analysis of "good". The meaning of "good" has two aspects, namely, that of commending or favouring and that of the relevance of criteria. The meaning of "good" thus indicated remains constant on all occasions that the word is used. In addition to the meaning of "good" there are the actual criteria for application of the word in particular cases.

This amendment to Hare's analysis of "good" will, I think, help to remove ambiguities in Hare's use of the expression "the meaning of 'good'" in the course of the argument commencing at section 6.6 (p. 106). This argument starts with consideration of what might be said by someone who has misinterpreted Hare's procedure for explaining the meaning of "good". Such a person might say

'Surely it can now be seen that the word "good" is like the word "red" after all. It refers to a common property, only this common property has the characteristic of being, unlike redness, inaccessible in a peculiar way. It is in fact the property of producing or being in some way associated with certain inner experiences, which cannot be experienced except by the person who is having them; these experiences may be called purposive or preferential, and instances of them are what we refer to as "trying", "aiming at", "preferring", "choosing", etc. . . .'

Hare says that if correct

The effect of this objection would be to undo all my argument; for I have been maintaining that 'good' is unlike 'red' in that its meaning

<sup>1</sup> A distinction must be drawn between the view that "x is good" means "x produces liking" and the view that the *sole criterion* for x's being good is that it produces liking. From this reply as it stands it could be that his sole criterion for wines being good is that they produce liking in him. Further questioning would be required to make sure that he did not hold this (unusual) position. There may, of course, be objections to "producing liking" being the sole criterion of goodness for any class, but even if this is so, the person in my example would not have failed to recognise the relevance of criteria.

is independent of the criteria for its application ; but if the criterion for the application of ' good ' is the having of certain purposive or preferential experiences, it is no longer possible to distinguish meaning from criteria in the way that I have been trying to do.

The implication of the last quotation is that the *meaning* of " good " is a certain " preferential experience " produced in us by some objects. It further suggests that Hare is principally concerned to show that the *meaning* of " good " is independent of the *criteria* for its application ; that is to say, the mistake Hare is anxious to point out is that of confusing the meaning of " good " (*i.e.* a certain " preferential experience ") with the criteria for the application of " good ". In the case of " red " the meaning of " red " and the criteria for the application of " red " are *not* independent. Whereas in the case of " good " the meaning of " good " and the criteria for the application of " good " *are* independent. Yet a little further on Hare says

I require, therefore, to destroy the hypothesis that the meaning of the word ' good ' is fully explained by saying that it is properly applied to the objects of certain recognizable experiences.

and *this* suggests that the meaning of " good " is not (or at least, not merely) a certain " preferential experience ".

Now let us consider the argument by which Hare tries to destroy this hypothesis. Referring back to the example of teaching a foreigner the meaning of " best " and hence, of " good " (section 6.5, pp. 103 ff.), Hare says

For, while it may be the case that if I know that X would choose, all other things being equal, the shmakum with which he could, etc., I am more or less safe in saying ' X *thinks* that the best shmakum is the one with which he could, etc. ', it is by no means the case that I am safe in saying ' the best shmakum is the one with which X could, etc. ' (p. 107).

Hare's argument is, then, based on the distinction between " is good " and " thinks good ". The " preferential experience " may be common to all occasions on which it is true to say that a thing is thought to be good, but more than the " preferential experience " is required in order for us to say that the thing is good, namely, the correct criteria must have been applied. This argument leaves the impression that Hare thinks that the correct criteria are part of the meaning of " good ". (For otherwise how could this argument count against the hypothesis he requires to destroy ? Something more than a " preferential experience " is required and what else could this " something more " be ?) Yet on page 108 Hare again speaks of the meaning of " good " as though it only referred to the " preferential experience ".

What the learner has done can be made clear as follows. He has gone on, in spite of adverse experiences, assuming that criteria and meaning are the same. Therefore, having quite correctly learnt, from my previous remark, that the thought that he had when he chose or

was inclined to choose a certain sort of shmakum was correctly expressed by saying that the best shmakum was, etc., and that having learnt this, he had learnt the *meaning* of the word 'good', not only as applied to shmakums, but as applied to anything else, he naturally thought that he had also learnt something about the *criteria* for applying the word. But in fact he had learnt nothing at all about the criteria for applying the word. For about the criteria for shmakums he knew already, and about the criteria for other things he was no whit the wiser, since they are all different from the criteria for shmakums. What he had learnt was the *meaning* of the word, and nothing about its *criteria*.

It would appear then that Hare is using the expression "the meaning of 'good'" in two different ways, viz.:

(1) As merely referring to a "preferential experience" produced by certain objects.

(2) As referring to *both* the "preferential experience" and the correct criteria for application in a particular case.

I want to suggest, firstly, that (1) does not go far enough. One is not more or less safe in saying "x thinks that the best shmakum is the one with which he could, etc." Before we can say even that he thinks something is good we must know that he recognises the relevance of criteria as well as knowing that he has the "preferential experience". Secondly, (2) goes too far. We do not want to include the "correct" criteria as part of the meaning of "good", for that would make it impossible to say that someone knew what he meant when he said that something was good, only he happened to be using the wrong criteria. If my amended analysis of "good" is adopted we can show that the meaning of "good" is not adequately explained by saying that "good" refers to a certain "preferential experience" produced by some objects. Something more is required, namely, that the person should recognise the relevance of criteria.

Later Hare points out that essentially the same question can be raised in terms of "preferential behaviour" instead of "preferential experiences". At this stage Hare gets very close to making my point. Take, for example, the following passage on page 109:

The fact that a person, or set of people, behave preferentially towards a certain member of a class is not in itself a necessary or sufficient condition for saying that it is a good member of the class; it is only the most important of the many things that might make us want to say that they *think* that it is a good member.

Now here Hare is saying that "preferential behaviour" is only *one* of the things required before saying that somebody thinks something is a good member of a certain class. This would let in the recognition of the relevance of criteria as another of the things required before we can say that somebody thinks that something is good. The question of whether it is good or whether he only thinks it is good is to be answered not only by seeing whether he behaves

preferentially towards it, but also by seeing whether he is employing the right criteria for judging this class of thing. In other words, to decide between "is good" and "thinks good" presupposes that the relevance of criteria is already recognised.

Later Hare changes his account of the meaning of "good". His new account (pp. 117 and 118) runs as follows: There is an evaluative meaning of "good" and a descriptive meaning. The evaluative meaning of "good" is that aspect of the meaning of the word the function of which is to commend, express favour and guide choices. This aspect of the meaning of "good" is common to all occasions on which the word is used. The descriptive meaning of "good" is not constant, but varies according to the particular criteria by which we judge members of various classes to be good. Hare's argument for this change in his position is that the question "What do you mean—a good x?" may be answered by mentioning the criteria for good xs, and hence criteria have to be included as part of the meaning of "good". Now I do not think that this point requires a change in Hare's original analysis of "good". For "What do you mean—a good x?" and "What is the meaning of 'a good x?'" are different questions. The first question amounts to asking "What am I to take you as indicating when you speak of 'a good x'?", and may be quite properly asked even when the questioner already knows the *meaning* of the expression "a good x", in the sense that he is familiar with that English expression. The second question, however, would typically be asked by someone who was not familiar with English and wanted to know the meaning of the English expression "a good x". The second question may also be a request for a philosophical analysis of the expression "a good x". Now we would not answer the second question by specifying the criteria for good xs. As we are concerned with the second question and not the first I can see no reason for changing the original analysis of "good".

In admitting particular criteria as part of the meaning of "good" Hare has gone too far in the opposite direction to that of his earlier analysis: all that is required is that the relevance of criteria should be admitted as part of the meaning of "good". It also follows from this that Hare's parallel distinction between the "evaluative" and "descriptive" meaning of "good" is unnecessary, strictly speaking. The fact that we can gain information from the remark "That is a good x" can be explained by referring to a number of contingent propositions about what sort of xs the person making the judgement is inclined to call good xs.

There is an important question raised by both Hare's original analysis of "good" and by my amended analysis. It is the question of how we are to settle disputes about what *are* the proper criteria for the application of "good". I am not going to discuss this issue now, but one thing is clear about its nature: discovering the correct criteria for the application of "good" is not a further part of the analysis of the meaning of "good". In other words, the question

"What are the correct criteria?" is not a further part of the *logical* investigation of the meaning of "good": it is a question which must take account of the *content* of each particular judgement. This is a further reason for saying that the particular criteria are not a part of the meaning of "good".

As I have said earlier, the question "Is it good, or does he only think it is good?" presupposes an answer to the question "Is he, in this case, using the correct criteria for the application of 'good'?" So the question "What, in this case, are the correct criteria?" is a *value* question. Otherwise the question "Is it good, or does he only think it is good?" could be settled by an appeal to the facts just as the question "Is it red, or does he only think it is red?" can be settled by an appeal to the facts. Because he includes the particular criteria as part of the meaning of "good", and because he writes as though knowing the correct criteria was, in some cases, like knowing a matter of fact, Hare gets very near to suggesting that the "thinks good/is good" distinction is parallel to the "thinks red/is red" distinction. This is a suggestion contrary to the position which otherwise Hare rightly wants to maintain.

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