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The Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 14, No. 56 (Jul., 1964), 261-265.

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AESTHETICS AND HARE'S ANALYSIS OF 'GOOD'

I want to consider some points which arise out of Hare's claim¹ that moral and non-moral uses of 'good' are logically similar, taking the case of 'aesthetically good'.² As Hare thinks that the meaning of 'good' remains constant on all occasions of its use, the problem arises as to how we are to distinguish moral from non-moral uses of 'good'. A plausible starting point is to say that moral and other uses of 'good' can be sorted out by reference to characteristics. Thus we can have either moral or non-moral evaluations of men according to whether the characteristics being considered are moral or non-moral. If we say that Jones is a good man, and then mention his friendliness, wit, wide experience and intelligent conversation, we are likely to be commending Jones as a companion. Whereas if we mention such things as his benevolence, fortitude and consideration then we are likely to be commending him as morally good. But would such a move help to make the distinction between aesthetic and other non-moral uses of 'good'? At first sight it appears that it does. If I say that a sherry decanter is good because the stopper balances well with the body of the decanter, and the shape is pure and uncluttered, then I am commending the decanter aesthetically. If, on the other hand, I say that it is good because it is easy to pour from without spilling and the glass is strong, then I am not commending it aesthetically. So some characteristics are typically mentioned when making aesthetic commendations, and this is how we distinguish aesthetic from other uses of 'good'. Of course this is not to say that there is only one set of aesthetic characteristics for all aesthetic uses of 'good'. The set of aesthetic characteristics will vary according to the class of object being commended aesthetically. Thus it would be nonsense to say that a novel was good because of the balance of its layout, or that a house was good because of its witty dialogue. But it can still be insisted that for a given class of objects the relevant set of characteristics for saying 'aesthetically good' are different from those for saying 'good' in some other way.

The troublesome question is this: Just what are these "aesthetic" characteristics? Hare's criteria are intended to provide a bridge between statements of fact and evaluations. Earlier I said that one of the aesthetic characteristics of the sherry decanter was its pure and uncluttered shape. But its having a pure and uncluttered shape is clearly not a fact about the sherry decanter—it is already an evaluation. I am not merely stating that it has a certain shape, I am commending its shape. So it would appear that

¹R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford, 1952), pp. 137 ff.

²Hare does appear to think that his analysis applies in the case of 'aesthetically good'. On p. 80 he uses 'good picture' as an example and on p. 122 'good poem'.

if there are any criteria for 'aesthetically good' which play a similar role to the criteria for 'morally good', then these criteria link more particular evaluations with more general ones, and do not link facts with evaluations.

It may be replied that in this respect 'aesthetically good' is no different from 'morally good'. For, you will remember, my list of characteristics for judging a man to be morally good were benevolence, fortitude and consideration, and the terms for these so-called "characteristics" are value-loaded. They are no more facts about a man than its pure and uncluttered shape is a fact about the sherry decanter. Now it is quite true that we use more particular evaluations, such as 'he is benevolent' as reasons to back up a more general evaluation, such as 'he is a good man'. But I think we do this for convenience, not because we are unable to start from the facts which will be relevant to our moral evaluations. One could go through all the benevolent-making situations, describing each in antiseptic factual terms, and then draw the evaluative conclusion 'he is benevolent'. And of course if our claim that he is benevolent is questioned this is what we do. We use terms such as 'benevolence' and 'fortitude' as a convenient way of starting an argument about whether a man is morally good half-way to its conclusion. This saves time, and we can always go back to the facts if our first-level evaluations are questioned. It has been argued³ that in judgements of moral character too criteria are not so important as it might be thought. I do not want to take up this issue here, but even if this is true, the reason for the unimportance of criteria in judgements of moral character is different from the reason for their unimportance in aesthetic judgements. For we can always go back to the facts when attempting to back up a judgement of moral character.

But can we ever go back to the facts when trying to back up a claim that something is aesthetically good? We can go back to the *thing* (the poem, the decanter, the film), but we can't go back to the *facts*. For any fact you care to mention will not constitute a reason for saying that something is aesthetically good. Consider the following points:—

(1) We make moral judgements of actions on the basis of mere descriptions of them, while we don't make aesthetic judgements without having seen, read or heard. 'I didn't see what he did' is no reason for refusing to give a moral judgement of his action, if we have been given a detailed and reliable description of it (i.e. an account of the facts). 'I haven't seen it, read it or heard it' is a reason for withholding an aesthetic judgement (though *not* for withholding a moral judgement) on a work of art. I might qualify this by adding that at least in the case of very simple objects (such as a jug) it may be possible to give such a precise description that one can "picture" the actual object, and make an aesthetic judgement upon it in its absence. But here we are not stating facts as reasons for an aesthetic judgement: we are being put in the position of being able to consider the object (at one remove, as it were).

³In "Grade Not", by J. L. Evans, in *Philosophy*, Vol. XXXVII (1962), p. 25.

(2) It may be said that things have aesthetic characteristics as distinct from ordinary characteristics, examples of aesthetic characteristics being form and balance. My reply is that to say something has form and balance is not to make a factual statement about it, but to evaluate it. Admittedly we do say "It *has* balance" or "It *lacks* balance"; "It *has* form" or "It has no form". But although these appear to be factual statements they are actually evaluative. For two people may be looking at the same painting, they may both have good eyesight and know how the word 'balance' is used in these contexts, and yet be in disagreement as to whether this painting has balance.

Similar remarks may be made about many other terms used in aesthetic criticism—for example: dynamic, strained, vigorous, anaemic, washed out, precious, trivial, characterless, witty and delicate. One can call these aesthetic "characteristics" or "qualities" if one wishes, so long as it is remembered that they are very different from ordinary qualities, such as 'red' and 'circular'. I do not wish to say, of course, that we would point out just the same features of a painting when we wanted to show that it was delicate as we would when we wanted to show that it was dynamic. The appropriateness of these words would be defended by pointing out different features in each case. But I still wish to insist that these words are evaluative. For example, the same features might be described by one person as delicate, but by another as fiddly. The logic of such terms needs much more investigation, and it is not enough just to say that they are part descriptive and part evaluative. However, all I require for my present argument is that they are at least partly evaluative, and this much seems to be clear.

(3) In an argument about whether a painting was good somebody might say "Take the nose". Is this not arguing from a fact about the painting to an evaluation of the painting? I don't think so. Rather it is *selecting* a part of the painting for our consideration. It does not amount to mentioning an aesthetically good-making characteristic of the picture—it is simply drawing our attention to a certain part of the picture. It would be ludicrous to suggest a rule such as 'All pictures with a nose like that are good'. And this is not just because in another picture a nose like that may be a defect. The point is not so much that a nose like that is not a general feature of good paintings (though this is true) as that it is not, in the required sense, a "feature" at all: we are pointing out something, not describing it. The trouble with such a rule would be that we cannot *say* what it is for a nose to be like that. Just what it is about the nose that is good-making always eludes us, unless we resort to accounts of the nose which are already evaluative. Why this is so I do not know, though I doubt if we are only saving a minute description,⁴ or whether we might just as easily have had a language in which aesthetic descriptions are evaluatively neutral.⁵ I should qualify

⁴As Albert Tsugawa argues in "Aesthetic Judgements" in *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. LXX (1961), p. 12.

⁵As is argued by A. Isenberg in "Critical Communication", reprinted in Elton, *Aesthetics and Language*, p. 167.

this by saying that sometimes we do speak of giving reasons in aesthetics when all we are doing is directing somebody's attention towards a certain aspect of the work of art in the way I have just described. I am not sure whether giving reasons presupposes reference to general rules or criteria. Certainly the things we point out can be made public in the sense that we can draw other people's attention to them, and so they might be said to constitute reasons.⁴

(4) At this point somebody might say "But surely we do find criteria in aesthetics which link factual statements with evaluative conclusions, e.g. 'A painting is good in so far as it resembles the actual object painted' or (in architecture) 'Form should follow function'". Now I agree that these statements can be used to link factual premises with evaluative conclusions, but I would deny that they are really criteria for 'aesthetically good'. For neither of these statements provides *reasons* for saying that something is aesthetically good. I am not saying that what we have here are criteria, but bad ones; I am saying that they are *irrelevant* to deciding whether something is aesthetically good. If somebody thought that the closeness with which a painting resembled the object painted was a reason for saying that it was aesthetically good (as opposed to "good as an illustration") then he would have shown that he didn't understand what 'aesthetically good' meant. And similarly if somebody said that a building was well-suited to a certain function, and thought that that was a reason for saying that the building was aesthetically good, then he wouldn't know what 'aesthetically good' meant. However, I will allow that such remarks may be reliable generalizations about which buildings are aesthetically good. It may just so happen that more often than not a building whose shape follows its function is aesthetically good. But it is not a *reason* for saying that it is aesthetically good. This distinction can be made clear by an illustration. Suppose that all good men and only good men had a pimple on their right shoulder. If this held true we might say that such a pimple was a mark of a morally good man, but we would be no more inclined to say that it was a reason for a man's being morally good than we are now.

There is one more point about criteria for aesthetic commendation. Aesthetic approval obviously has something to do with relations of certain kinds—balance, harmony and so on. Now even if somebody discovered rules for relating shapes, colours and so on in a way which everybody found aesthetically good, such rules would not be criteria in Hare's sense; they would be useful correlations between certain relationships and what was aesthetically good. (The "Golden Section" and Le Corbusier's Modular are good examples of this sort of thing.) To avoid misunderstandings it should be noticed that I am not just applying the naturalistic fallacy to aesthetics. My point is *not* that it never follows from a certain set of factual statements that something is aesthetically good. My point is that rules of the sort

⁴See "Elucidation and Evaluation" by Dorothy Walsh in *The Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 7 (1957), p. 27.

Le Corbusier lays down are not criteria for saying that something is aesthetically good.

So either we make genuine factual statements, and these factual statements are irrelevant as far as aesthetic commendation is concerned; or else we make remarks relevant to aesthetic commendation, and these remarks are not factual but already evaluative. It does not seem possible to find criteria for 'aesthetically good' which will link factual statements with an evaluative conclusion.

To sum up my remarks about the applicability of Hare's analysis of 'good' to aesthetics. The analysis does not hold because we can find nothing analogous to the criteria which are found in the case of other uses of 'good'. And we can find no criteria because we can find no aesthetic facts. What appear to be aesthetic facts turn out to be irrelevant ordinary facts or else concealed evaluations. However, I will allow that there may be criteria for 'aesthetically good' which link more particular aesthetic evaluations with more general ones. Just as we might have a rule 'If a man possesses benevolence, fortitude and consideration, then he is morally good', so we might have a rule 'If a painting has balance, pure form, etc., then it is aesthetically good'. But such criteria are not the sort Hare has in mind (anyway most of the time).⁷ So when Hare says⁸ that ". . . all value judgements . . . refer to and express acceptance of, a standard which has an application to other similar instances" it has to be remembered that in aesthetics this only applies to standards which link first-level evaluations with more general evaluations. Of course in the limit case of two pictures which are exactly alike, if we say that one is aesthetically good then we must say that the other is too. But we don't often get pictures exactly alike. And if we say "alike in the relevant respects" then my point is that in aesthetics we can't ever say what are the relevant respects without tacitly evaluating.

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⁷Hare (*op. cit.*, p. 138) writes: "Note that certain of the expressions used in specifying the standard (e.g. 'damage' and 'dangerous') are themselves value-expressions; these indicate that the specification of the standard is not in itself complete, but includes 'cross-references' to standards for evaluating . . .". This is similar to the point I am making, but notice that Hare says "the specification of the standard is *not in itself complete*" (my italics). So if my view is correct we would never have "complete" standards of the Hare variety in aesthetics.

⁸*Op. cit.*, p. 129.