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HARE ON DESCRIPTIVE MEANING RULES

At the beginning of Chapter 2, on 'Descriptive Meaning', of his book *Freedom and Reason* (O.U.P., 1963), Mr. R. M. Hare asserts that the meaning of a descriptive word, such as 'red', 'is or involves the use of an expression in accordance with certain rules'. What does he mean by this?

There would seem to be three possibilities.

(a) He means that there are limits to the accepted applicability of words like 'red'. These limits are not clearly defined, but are such, for example, that if a person, in our society at the present time, says of a blue object that it is red he will be held to have mis-used the word 'red'.

(b) He means that if two things are the same colour, and one of them is red, the other will be red too.

(c) He means that for a word to be used correctly its application must *involve* (as distinct from merely being *in accordance with*) a rule, in the sense that for someone to be naming a colour he must, on using the colour-word, have in mind a reason for its being applicable.

What Hare says in Section 1 of the chapter suggests the first of these interpretations; what he says in Section 2 suggests the second; and what he says in Section 3 suggests the third. If by the word 'rule' he means 'a principle to which action or procedure is intended to conform' (one of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* definitions) then his assertion that there are descriptive meaning *rules* would seem to indicate that he would accept the third interpretation as giving his meaning.

What he says, in Section 3, which seems to support the third interpretation is this. 'One of the features of descriptive meaning . . . is that it relies upon the concept of *similarity*. . . . A descriptive meaning-rule is one which lays it down that we may apply an expression to objects which are similar to each other in certain respects. . . . For example, suppose that I say that *X* is red; I am committed to holding that anything which is like *X* in the relevant respect is also red. But suppose that I am asked what *is* the relevant respect. I shall be able to answer this question only by giving an indication, vague or precise, of what it was about *X* that made me call it red; *i.e.* by explaining what I meant by calling it red. This explanation, if I can give it, will determine in what respect another object has to resemble *X* before it becomes possible to, and impossible not to, apply to it the descriptive term 'red'. . . . All I am saying is that on any one occasion of the use of the word 'red' the speaker must have *some* feature of an object in mind as that to which he is drawing attention in using the word. He may be very unclear about the precise boundaries of the concept he is employing; but there must be *something* about the object in question which, if it were repeated in another object, he would treat as entitling him to

call that object red too. If this were not so, what he said would have no descriptive meaning at all.'

Hare says 'all I am saying'; but what he says is not, in fact, uncontroversial. It contrasts strikingly, for instance, with what Wittgenstein, in the second half of the *Brown Book*, says about (i) the suggestion, conveyed by the expostulation 'Surely a similarity must strike us, or we shouldn't be moved to use the same word', that some act must precede the act of using the word (*Brown Book*, Part II, Section 2), and (ii) the mistake labelled by the word 'to make' as it occurs in the question 'What made you call this "red"?' (*Brown Book*, Part II, Sections 5 and 10).

If Hare would accept the third interpretation as giving the meaning of his assertion that there are descriptive meaning rules, then he is faced with the connected problems (1) of formulating the principle of correct usage other than tautologically ('Only red things are to be called "red"') and so uselessly, and (2) of showing Wittgenstein to be wrong.

This is not a matter of merely marginal importance, since the intelligibility of what Hare says about the meaning of evaluative statements depends upon the intelligibility of his notion of descriptive meaning.

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