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John F. Lange

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R. M. HARE'S REFORMULATION OF THE OPEN QUESTION

G. E. MOORE's Open Question Argument is the most devastating attack to which ethical naturalism has been subjected, in spite of the material presuppositions of his argument and his ultimate reliance on intuition. In recent years, acknowledging his debt to Moore, R. M. Hare has proposed an explicitly linguistic reading of the argument, which has had, and has deserved, enormous influence. In some philosophical circles, it seems to be taken for granted that Hare has successfully cooked the goose which Moore had, in his peculiar fashion, already prepared for the oven. It does not seem to me that the goose of ethical naturalism has yet been cooked, or that it can be cooked by philosophers, not even philosophers as gifted as Moore and Hare.

Naturalism in ethics, like attempts to square the circle and to 'justify induction', will constantly recur so long as there are people who have not understood the fallacy involved. It may therefore be useful to give a simple procedure for exposing any new variety of it that may be offered. Let us suppose that someone claims that he can deduce a moral or other evaluative judgement from a set of purely factual or descriptive premisses, relying on some definition to the effect that V (a value-word) means the same as C (a conjunction of descriptive predicates). We first have to ask him to be sure that C contains no expression that is covertly evaluative (for example 'natural' or 'normal' or 'satisfying' or 'fundamental human needs'). Nearly all so-called 'naturalistic definitions' will break down under this test—for to be genuinely naturalistic a definition must contain no expression for whose applicability there is not a definite criterion which does not involve the making of a value-judgment. If the definition satisfies this test, we have next to ask whether its advocate ever wishes to commend anything for being C. If he says that he does, we have only to point out to him that his definition makes this impossible, for the reasons given. And clearly he cannot say that he never wishes to commend anything for being C; for to commend things for being C is the whole object of his theory (*The Language of Morals*, pp. 92, 93).

For Hare, it is analytic that a value-word commends (or its opposite). Descriptive expressions, on the other hand, are implicitly defined or characterized as expressions which are *not* value-words. (This is not to claim that value-words may not have descriptive content.) In short, Hare asks the naturalist to define 'V', an expression part of the meaning of which is commendatory, in terms of expressions 'C', no part of the meaning of which is commendatory. Hare has contrived an insoluble puzzle for the naturalist; the relevance of this puzzle to the problem of defining axiological predicates remains to be established.

Initially, one thing is evident: Whether or not axiological predicates can be defined in terms of descriptive expressions is not a question to be decided by stipulations concerning value-words and descriptive expressions, but by an investigation of what are acceptably understood to be value and descriptive expressions, and the relationships which obtain among them. And, in the last analysis, the adequacy or inadequacy of a proposed definition is determined not by professional philosophers, but by the speech community of which they form a small part.

Hare obliges the hopeful but doomed naturalist to be sure that 'C', the *definiens*, contains no expression that is "covertly evaluative". There might be some point in that remark if most naturalists were attempting to define 'V' in terms of what Hare calls descriptive predicates, *i.e.* non-commendation-connected predicates, and if some few naturalists were craftily smuggling in value-words with descriptive content. The actual situation, however, is quite different; all naturalists with whom I am familiar are plugging descriptive value-expressions into the *definiens*, and doing so without facial twitches. It is true that when we claim that an *x* is *satisfying*, we are normally commending that *x*, but this does not preclude the possibility that we are saying something *true* about *x*. The fact that 'satisfying' is a value-word does not hinder an empirical investigation to discover what situations and practices tend to be satisfying. For example, public mental health programmes are concerned to implement certain discoveries and beliefs relating to such matters. The program of the ethical naturalist may be conceived of as the attempt to define normative expressions in terms of descriptive expressions. He is not somehow cheating if he defines one set of value-connected words in terms of another set of value-connected words. As a final remark in this connection, one might object to Hare's *a priori* approach to what "a genuinely naturalistic definition must be". If this is a normative question, or a methodological question, it seems it should be decided by naturalists. If it is a factual question of some sort, it seems it should be resolved by an inspection of the practice of naturalists.

However, Hare has a formidable argument with which to confront the naturalist. Two quotations will help to make this argument clear:

... we cannot say that 'x is a good A' means the same as 'x is an A which is C', because then it becomes impossible to commend A's which are C by saying 'A's which are C are good A's' (*ibid.* p. 89).

Let us consider the sentence 'S is a good strawberry'. We might naturally suppose that this means nothing more than 'S is a strawberry and S is sweet, juicy, firm, red, and large'. But it then becomes impossible for us to say certain things which in our ordinary talk we do say. We sometimes want to say that a strawberry is a good strawberry because it is sweet, &c. This—as we can at once see if we think

of ourselves saying it—does not mean the same as saying that a strawberry is a sweet, &c., strawberry because it is sweet, &c. But according to the proposed definition this is what it would mean (*ibid.* p. 85).

Let us suppose we encounter a convenient native informant, one innocent of philosophy but wise in the ways of strawberries. This native informant tells us that 'x is a good strawberry' means 'x is a tasty strawberry'. We then ask him if he ever wants to say that tasty strawberries are good strawberries. Presumably, he would reply in the affirmative, and we might then, with the scent of victory in our nostrils, ask him if he means that tasty strawberries are tasty strawberries. Presumably, he would then say something like 'No, I mean tasty strawberries are swell' or 'I mean I like tasty strawberries'. As far as I can see, our native informant, without "saying anything we ordinarily would not say" could maintain *both* that 'x is a good strawberry' means 'x is a tasty strawberry' and that he had a perfect right to commend x for being tasty, and to commend x by saying that x was *good*. It is not hard to see how this might be the case.

Let us suppose, with Hare, substantially, that every occurrence of 'good' involves commendatory meaning; that there is no purely descriptive occurrence of 'good'. Hare, of course, also believes that in-context occurrences of 'good' have *both* primary and secondary meaning, and that the secondary meaning is descriptive in nature. And, I am sure that he would believe that the relationships obtaining between primary and secondary meaning would vary from context to context. For the sake of our discussion, let us distinguish between what we might call description-contexts and commendation-contexts. A description-context will be a context in which the speaker is primarily concerned to describe x, and a commendation-context is one in which the speaker is primarily concerned to commend x. Presumably, in a description-context it would be the descriptive meaning of 'good' which would be the object of attention, whereas in a commendation-context it would be the commendatory meaning which would be significant. A paradigm description-context might occur when a quality-control inspector at an instrumentation plant says of x that it is a good chronometer; a typical commendation-context might occur when an untrained purchaser declares to an acquaintance 'I bought a good chronometer today'. I think it is clear that the relationship of primary to secondary, or descriptive, meaning is a context-relative relationship, and that it would make sense to say that, in some contexts, an occurrence of 'good' is more descriptive than in others.

If different occurrences of 'good' do have different meanings, Hare's argument is seen to be inconclusive. The plausibility of his argument depends on tacitly shifting from a description-context to a commendation-context, a move which seems peculiar when we recall that his own theory of 'good' suggests context-distinctions

and that he was quite aware of context-distinctions, though of a different type, in his discussion of Moore's Open Question Argument.

Let us assume we have a naturalist who claims that 'good' is synonymous with 'C', and then confront him with Hare's reformulation of the Open Question.

Claim: 'x is a good A' is synonymous with 'x is an A which is C'

If 'x is a good A' is synonymous with 'x is an A which is C', then it will be impossible to commend an A which is C by saying that it is good.

It is not impossible—etc.

Therefore, 'x is a good A' is not synonymous with 'x is an A which is C'.

My point is that 'x is a good A' is ambiguous, and that its meaning is context-dependent. Presumably, the antecedent of the hypothetical statement concerns 'good' in the context of a definition, e.g. 'good strawberry' means 'tasty strawberry', which is a *description-context*, but 'good' as it occurs in the consequent of the hypothetical is clearly thought of as appearing in a commendation-context. The fact that 'good' may mean something other in a commendation-context than it does in a description-context does not mean that it is naive or wrong-headed, or obviously fallacious, to attempt to define or clarify its meaning in the description-context. Granting, at least *per hypothesis*, that 'good' always has a commendatory element, one would naturally assume that 'C', too, was value-connected, even in description-contexts.

The major difficulty connected with the descriptive analysis of 'good' is its multiplicity of uses and, in many contexts, its vagueness. It may be a matter of practical impossibility to develop an acceptable meaning analysis of 'good'. In the light of this, the ethical naturalist is not well advised to pin the success or failure of his program to what may be its most ambitious project. Perhaps, in the future, scientific investigations of language will make possible the achievement of results which the current state of linguistic inquiry precludes. But, even if ethical naturalism could never succeed in providing an acceptable meaning analysis of 'good', this would not be a reason to disparage the effort of attempting to clarify the descriptive content of value-words. It is perhaps to be recommended that the ethical naturalist turn his attention to value-expressions which present comparatively clearly defined problems, e.g. 'courageous', 'proud', 'humble', 'arrogant', 'cruel', 'kind', 'friendly', 'saintly', 'cowardly', 'honest', 'treacherous', 'tenacious', etc. Most ladders are easier to climb when one starts at the bottom.