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DISCUSSION

HARE'S ARGUMENT FROM LINGUISTIC CHANGE

JAMES W. NICKEL

ALTHOUGH it is now generally allowed that to use a sentence of the form "*X* is a good so-and-so" is, in general, to assert that *X* has certain nonevaluative characteristics in virtue of which it is a good so-and-so, it is often held that this "descriptive" component of sentences of this form cannot be part of the "primary meaning" of such sentences. In this paper I discuss and criticize two arguments given by R. M. Hare in support of this kind of conclusion.

Hare holds that certain facts about linguistic change make it impossible for the "primary meaning" of "good" to be "descriptive," and hence he concludes that the capacity of "good" to be used to commend constitutes its "primary meaning" and that any "descriptive" component can only be part of the "secondary meaning" of "good." These facts about linguistic change are: (1) that the word "good" can be used to change the existing standard of goodness for a given class of comparison, and (2) that "good" can be applied to classes of comparison for which there is no generally accepted criterion or standard of goodness. I will argue that these facts about "good" do not entail that the "primary meaning" of "good" does not have a descriptive component, and that they do not show that it is necessary to introduce a notion of "evaluative meaning" or "prescriptive meaning" in order to account for the primary meaning of "good."

1. *The argument from linguistic change.* Hare gives the following argument to show that the descriptive meaning of "good" cannot be its primary meaning.

... we can use the evaluative force of the word in order to *change* the descriptive meaning for any class of objects. This is what the moral reformer often does in morals; but the same process occurs outside morals. It may happen that motor-cars will in the near future change con-

siderably in design (e.g. by our seeking economy at the expense of size). It may be that then we shall cease giving the name 'a good motor-car' to a car that now would rightly and with the concurrence of all be allowed that name. How, linguistically speaking, would this have happened? At present we are roughly agreed (though only roughly) on the necessary and sufficient criteria for calling a motor-car a good one. If what I have described takes place, we may begin to say 'No cars of the nineteen-fifties were really good; there weren't any good ones until 1960.' Now here we cannot be using 'good' with the same descriptive meaning as it is now generally used with; for some of the cars of 1950 do indubitably have those characteristics which entitle them to the name 'good motor-car' in the 1950 descriptive sense of that word. What is happening is that the evaluative meaning of the word is being used to shift the descriptive meaning; we are doing what would be called, if 'good' were a purely descriptive word, redefining it. But we cannot call it that, for the evaluative meaning remains constant; we are rather altering the standard.¹

Hare's analysis of what one is doing here is that one is using the prescriptive or evaluative meaning of "good" to change its descriptive meaning. It should be pointed out, however, that exactly the same thing can be done with "large" which has no evaluative or prescriptive meaning, and hence it seems that the notion of "prescriptive meaning" does not provide the needed key to the explanation of this type of procedure. To see this, consider the following analogous argument:

It may happen that buildings will in the near future change considerably in size (e.g., by building one of Buckminster Fuller's pyramids which is large enough to house a hundred thousand people). And it may be that then we shall cease giving the name "a large building" to buildings that now would rightly and with the concurrence of all be allowed that name (e.g.,

the Empire State Building or the Astrodome). How linguistically speaking would this have happened? At present we are roughly agreed (though only roughly) on the necessary and sufficient criteria for calling a building a large one. If what I have described takes place, we may begin to say "No buildings of the nineteen sixties were really large; there weren't any large ones until 1970." Now here we cannot be using "large" with the same descriptive meaning as it is now generally used with; for some of the buildings of 1960 do indubitably have those characteristics which entitle them to the name "large building" in the 1960 descriptive sense of that word.

We have followed Hare's argument almost word for word this far, substituting "large" for "good" and "building" for "motor-car." But we cannot make the next statement which Hare makes without saying something false. For now Hare starts to give his explanation of this linguistic phenomenon: he says that the evaluative meaning of "good" has been used to shift the descriptive meaning. But this explanation will not work for "large" since it has no evaluative meaning, yet what has been done with "large" with regard to changing a standard of largeness is exactly the same as what was done with "good."

It is doubtful, therefore, that Hare's explanation is the correct one. If a general explanation can be provided which will apply to both "good" and "large" then it will be preferable. And it seems that such an explanation can be provided. To explain the possibility of using "good" to change a standard of goodness, it is not necessary to say that the primary meaning of "good" is prescriptive or evaluative (and hence nondescriptive). The explanation of this possibility, both for "good" and for "large," is that by asking, "Are all so-and-sos which have P , Q , and R really good?" or, "Are all so-and-sos which have measurements M really large?" one calls into question the criterial relationship which had previously been taken for granted (namely that all so-and-sos which had P , Q , and R were good, and that all so-and-sos with measurements M were large). By calling into question

what had previously been taken to be definitionally true, one thereby sets the stage for a change of definition or standard—which one then attempts to effect by saying that good or large so-and-sos *really* have some other set of defining characteristics or measurements. This can be done with almost any adjective, and hence a unique explanation of its possibility in the case of "good" is not needed.²

We see, then, that since the performance of "good" in this respect is exactly analogous to that of "large," and since the primary meaning of "large" is presumably "descriptive," it does not follow from the fact that "good" can be used to change a standard of goodness that its primary meaning cannot contain a "descriptive" component.

2. *The argument from the possibility of applying "good" to new classes of comparison for which there is no accepted standard.* Another argument for the conclusion that the "prescriptive meaning" of "good" is primary and its "descriptive meaning" is secondary is derived from the fact that learning the meaning of "good" in "good cactus" is not an entirely new lesson when one already knows its meaning in "good man," "good house," "good sailboat," "good screwdriver," etc. Hare puts this argument as follows:

One of the most noticeable things about the way we use 'good' is that we are able to use it for entirely new classes of objects that we have never called 'good' before. Suppose that someone starts collecting cacti for the first time and puts one on his mantel-piece—the only cactus in the country. Suppose then that a friend sees it, and says 'I must have one of those'; so he sends for one from wherever they grow, and puts it on his mantel-piece, and when his friend comes in, he says 'I've got a better cactus than yours.' But how does he know how to apply the word in this way? He has never learnt to apply 'good' to cacti; he does not even know any *criteria* for telling a good cactus from a bad one (for as yet there are none); but he has learnt to use the word 'good', and having learnt that, he can apply it to any class of objects that he requires to place in order of merit.

He and his friend may dispute about the criteria of good cacti; they may attempt to set up rival criteria; but they could not even do this unless they were from the start under no difficulty in using the word 'good'. Since, therefore, it is possible to use the word 'good' for a new class of objects without further instruction, learning the use of the word for one class of objects cannot be a different lesson from learning it for another class of objects—though learning the criteria of goodness in a new class of objects may be a new lesson each time.³

And since learning the meaning of "good" in "a good *C*" (where "*C*" stands for a new class of comparison) is not an entirely new lesson, but learning the criteria or standard for a good *C* is, Hare concludes that the criterion or standard for a good *C* is not part of the primary meaning of "a good *C*."

Perhaps it will be helpful to have a slightly more formalized version of this argument. Such a formalization might be as follows:

Premise 1.—If knowing the use of the word "good" in the phrase "good *C*" (where "*C*" stands for some class of comparison) involved knowing the standard for a good *C*, then it would not be possible to know the use of "good" with regard to a new class of comparison without knowing the standard for goodness in that class.

Premise 2.—But it is possible to know the use of "good" with regard to a new class of comparison without knowing the standard for goodness in that class.

Conclusion.—Therefore, knowing the use of the word "good" in the phrase "good *C*" (where "*C*" stands for some class of comparison) does not necessarily involve knowing the standard for a good *C*.

And from this conclusion Hare draws the final conclusion that the standard for a good *C* is not part of the primary meaning of "good."

Now this argument is valid, since it has the form "If *P* then *Q*, but not *Q*, therefore not *P*." Furthermore, it seems that the first premise is true. Hence, either the argument is sound and the conclusion is true, or Premise 2 is false.

It may be thought that Premise 2 cannot be false, since Hare's example about the neophyte cactus growers shows that one can know the use of the word "good" with regard to a new class of comparison without knowing the standard of goodness for that class. But it seems to me that the force of this example is lost if one considers what is meant by "knowing the use." It is important to notice that in discussing the relationship between the *meaning* of "good" and the criteria or standard for its correct application, Hare slips into talking about *use* instead of meaning. Hence, this argument will prove his point about the independence of the primary meaning of "good" from the criteria of goodness only if knowing the *use* of "good" is the same thing as knowing the *meaning* of "good." But the only sense in which one can "know the use" of "good" without knowing the standard for its application to the class of comparison in question (i.e., the only sense of "knowing the use" which makes Premise 2 true) is one in which "knowing the use" is *not* equivalent to knowing the meaning. Hence, either the second premise is false (and hence the argument is unsound), or the argument's conclusion about the possibility of knowing the *use* of the phrase "good *C*" without knowing the standard for a good *C* is irrelevant to the question of whether one can know the *meaning* of "good *C*" without knowing the standard for a good *C*. I hasten to explain.

A person might be said to know the use of a linguistic expression *E*, if he (1) knows its grammar, and (2) knows what linguistic acts it can be used to perform and what sort of responses it can be used to get people to make—i.e., if he knows its grammar and its illocutionary and perlocutionary potential. If a person knew these things about *E*, he would be able to use *E* in sentences which are grammatically well formed, and he would know what illocutionary and perlocutionary acts *E* could be used to perform. Let us say that to know (1) and (2) about *E* is to know the "use₁" of *E*. But knowing the use₁ of *E* is not

tantamount to knowing the meaning of *E* (although it would involve knowing part of the meaning of *E*) because a person could know the use₁ of *E* without *ever* being able to tell whether a certain use or application of *E* (as in "*X* is an *E*") is a true application—and it seems that if a person could never tell whether a statement made by a sentence containing *E* was true, we would say that he does not know or fully understand the meaning of *E*.

Now it seems that Hare's cactus growers know the use₁ of "good," and hence if Premise 2 is interpreted to mean "It is possible to know the use₁ of 'good' with regard to a new class of comparison without knowing the standard for goodness in that class," then this premise will be true and the argument will be sound. But the conclusion will then be that one can know the use₁ of "good *C*" without knowing the standard for a good *C*—and this conclusion is irrelevant to the question of whether one can know the *meaning* of "good *C*" without knowing the standard for a good *C*. Hare's cactus growers know the use₁ of "good" in "good cactus" because they know its grammar and its illocutionary and perlocutionary potential. But since they do not, by hypothesis, yet know any standard for goodness in cacti, they would *never* be able to tell whether a statement of the form "*X* is a good cactus" is true or not, and hence we would hesitate to say that they know or fully understand the *meaning* of "good" in "*X* is a good cactus."

Thus, it seems that a necessary condition for knowing the meaning of an adjective in a certain sort of application is that one have some idea of what would count for and against the truth of statements made by sentences in which the word occurs. And to know this is to know the standard or criterion for the correct application of the adjective in that sort of application. So, if one is to know the use of "good" in "good *C*" in the sense in which knowing the use is roughly equivalent to knowing the meaning, one must know (1) the grammar of "good," (2) the illocution-

ary and perlocutionary potential of "good," and (3) the characteristics of *C*'s which count toward the truth of statements made by sentences of the form "*X* is a good *C*." Let us say that knowing these three things about a given linguistic expression *E* is knowing the "use₂" of *E*. And Hare's cactus growers do not know the use₂ of "good" in "good cactus" because they do not, by hypothesis, have any idea of what characteristics count toward goodness in cacti. Hence, in the sense of "use" which is relevant to questions about the relationship between meaning and criteria, it is not possible to know the use—i.e., the use₂—of "good" in "good cactus" without knowing the criteria for goodness in cacti.

We see, then, that in accordance with the way in which "knowing the use" is interpreted, the argument is either unsound because the second premise is false, or sound but irrelevant to the question of whether the criterion or standard for a good *C* is one of the components of the "primary meaning" of "good *C*." Hence, this argument, like the previous one, fails to show that the "primary meaning" of "good" cannot have a "descriptive component."

Now, by having cast doubt on the soundness of these two arguments, I do not pretend to have presented a conclusive argument against Hare's position, nor do I pretend to have presented a case for naturalism. I would suggest, however, that closer attention ought to be given to the question of whether it is not part of the meaning of sentences of the form "*X* is a good *C*" to ascribe some definite set of characteristics to *X*—a set which may vary with different values of "*C*." For example, is it not part of the "primary meaning" of "*X* is a good map" to assert that *X* is a map which is accurate, and is it not part of the "primary meaning" of "*X* is a good mother" to assert that *X* is a mother who attempts to see to it that food and shelter are provided for her children? Another way of putting this would be to ask whether being a (generally) accurate map is not a

necessary condition for being a good map, or whether attempting to see to it that food and shelter are provided for one's children is not a logically necessary condition for being a good mother.

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NOTES

1. R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford, 1952), p. 119.
2. In his chapter on "Persuasive Definitions," in *Ethics and Language* (New Haven, Conn., 1944), C. L. Stevenson recognizes that this sort of procedure can be performed with most adjectives.
3. Hare, pp. 96-97.