



## Hare on the Meaning of "Good"

Charles Daniels

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## HARE ON THE MEANING OF "GOOD"

1. In his *Language of Morals*, Professor Hare offers his own version of one of Moore's arguments against naturalism :

... my argument is that 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'. (p. 89).

In other words, one can commend A's which are C by saying "A's which are C are good A's", but not by saying "A's which are C are A's which are C". Thus, it is alleged, the two sentences do not have the same meaning. When one says the latter sentence one is saying something that is obviously analytically true. So when one says the former what one says is not analytically true by virtue of a synonymy between it and the latter sentence.

Just as it is possible to *do* certain things with certain instruments, e.g. make incisions, it is also possible to do certain things with certain sentences, e.g. commend. Suppose I can do a certain act with a certain sentence, but not with another sentence. Does it follow that the first sentence is not synonymous with the second? No. I can, for example, perform the act of defining or that of explaining with the sentence "A puppy is a young dog". I cannot perform either act with the sentence "A puppy is a puppy". It does not follow from this that the sentences do not mean the same, that "puppy" is not synonymous with "young dog", or that "A puppy is a young dog" is not analytically true.

There might be a naturalist who thought that "good" was a word that had meaning in more than one way, that it was actually synonymous in the "puppy"—"young dog" way with, say, "pleasing", yet had more commendatory meaning (or whatever) than "pleasing". He might maintain that both the sentences "A's which are pleasing are good A's" and "A's which are pleasing are pleasing A's" were analytically true owing to this synonymy, but that one could commend pleasing A's by using the first sentence and not by using the second because of a difference in the commendatory meaning of the two words. The lack of such a difference would be what prevented one from commending good A's by saying "A's which are good are good A's". He might go further and hold that one could condemn pleasing A's by saying "A's which are pleasing are evil A's" despite the fact that this sentence was, in his opinion, analytically false.

2. As a matter of fact, though, the specific meaning (of the second sort mentioned in the preceding paragraph) of "good" is not captured by the English word "commend".

Cases in which one says "I commend..." without using the word "good" or any of its synonyms (of the "puppy"—"young dog" sort) are cases in which one commends without using the word "good" or any of its synonyms (of that sort). On the other hand, if

one says "His falling in the mud puddle was good because he ruined his new suit", one is using the word "good" not to commend, but to gloat.

3. The "puppy"—"young dog" synonymity mentioned above is not to be confused with what Hare calls the *descriptive meaning* of "good". If we overhear Adolf Hitler saying "He's a good man" and Albert Schweitzer saying "He's a good man", we will have a fairly good idea of the kind of man each has in mind, provided that we know what kind of men Adolf and Albert are. The idea we have constitutes or strongly contributes to the *descriptive meaning* of "good" or "good man". Both Adolf and Albert are commending, according to Hare, but the *criteria* upon which they base their commendations are quite different, even conflicting.

Yet it is somewhat misleading to call this "meaning" in the same breath that one talks about meaning of the "puppy"—"young dog" kind. Why does one fix upon a word or phrase in a particular language as the *locus* of this kind of meaning, rather than the kinds of people there are, or the sorts of feelings they normally have, or their beliefs and character traits? It is as if I were to say that the exclamation mark, or a certain type of tone of voice, had descriptive meaning because, knowing my best friend to be absolutely mad about antique automobiles, I have a fair idea, even without looking, of the kind of car he is referring to when he says "Wowie, look at that one!" at the auto show. It won't be a '62 Plymouth. He might have said "Isn't the *next* one a smasheroo?", the exclamation mark having vanished completely.

4. Are value words essentially or characteristically prescriptive? There is something, it may be said, that statements containing value words share with imperatives. (One might add that they seem to share it with such statements as "Your slip is showing" and "Your fly's unzipped", questions like "Did you know that there's a shark in the water behind you?", and exclamations like "Fire!") In explanation of what prescriptivity is, it might at least be noted that there is something very odd in calling a thing good and then adding, parenthetically, that its being good is, of course, no reason at all for anyone to act in any special way toward it or for it to receive any special consideration.

The trouble with prescriptivity, though—if this is deemed a *sufficient* indication of what it is—is one of incipient triviality: that if one ascribes *any predicate whatever* to a thing and then goes on to add parenthetically that its having that feature is no reason for anyone to act in any special way toward it or for it to receive any special consideration, the question arises of why one bothered to speak at all—for one has convicted oneself, straightway, of engaging in idle chatter. The mere fact that a thing has a certain feature is not by itself reason to say that it does. Just think of all the true things we know and could say, but happily, because we have no reason to, don't. The very fact that one calls attention to a feature

of a thing by the act of speaking of it is *prima facie* evidence that one thinks it merits some special regard. If this is true, moreover, then very nearly *all* language is characteristically prescriptive. And if we yield to the temptation to say that value terms act *more* prescriptively than certain others, what we say will be of interest only if we follow through by making more distinctions and specifying just how it is they work to accomplish this.

One reason for introducing prescriptivity in special connection with value words might be this: In certain contexts it is not always clear just why a speaker calls attention to a feature of a thing by talking about it and what special regard he thinks it merits. One might suggest that in speaker-hearer situations of this sort, when there is a lack or a potential lack of understanding in either of these areas, value words serve as clarifiers or adjusters. The Nazi who has failed to make it clear to his (perhaps obtuse, perhaps insensitive, perhaps sheltered) listener why the Jewishness of a particular person is noteworthy (worth *his* talk in *this* situation with *this* audience) is liable to use value words or a different tone of voice in the following rounds of exchange. The possibility of this use of value words may or may not be dependent upon the words having meaning in some other way or ways.

*Yale University*

CHARLES DANIELS