



Hare's Failure to Define Good Reasons

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VII.—DISCUSSIONS

HARE'S FAILURE TO DEFINE GOOD REASONS

THE nub of the problem of defining a good reason is the relation between two kinds of meaning, which R. M. Hare calls "descriptive" meaning, and "commendatory" or "prescriptive" meaning. Some terms have only the first kind of meaning, others only the second. Those which have both kinds are said to have a third kind of meaning, which Hare calls "evaluative" meaning.¹ Sentences such as "This strawberry is large, red, and juicy" have descriptive meaning, and those such as "This strawberry is good" have prescriptive, or, provided that you know the characteristics that make a strawberry good, or the criteria or standard of goodness in strawberries, evaluative meaning (*LM*, 111). Nonetheless, descriptive meaning does not *entail* prescriptive meaning in any case. Even if you did not know what makes a strawberry good, you would still know that I was commending it if I called it "good" (*LM*, 104-105, 129-130) and presumably you could know that the strawberry was red, large and juicy without knowing that it was good. Descriptive meaning changes; evaluative meaning² is constant for every kind of object for which the relevant commendatory terms are used (*LM*, 119). Yet there are close and important relations between the two, since "... we can use the evaluative force of the word to *change* the descriptive meaning for any class of objects", that is, we can alter the standard for saying that something is good through the prescriptive function of a word. Indeed, Hare would agree that descriptive meaning is the foundation of good reasons for commending or prescribing a thing or an action. He claims that "to universalize is to give the reason" (*FR*, 5) and that "The feature of value-judgements which I call universalizability is simply that which they share with descriptive judgments; namely, the fact that they both carry descriptive meaning" (*FR*, 15). Descriptive meaning rests upon the concept of similarity or resemblance (*FR*, 10-13) and in moral judgments one must decide what a "relevant similarity" is. Thus, the problem of formulating rules for descriptive and prescriptive meaning is of the same logical sort in both cases. (*FR*, 13-14) In Hare's words:

... when we make a moral judgement about something, we make it *because* of the possession by it of certain non-moral properties. Thus ... moral judgements about particular things are made for reasons; and the notion of a reason, as always, brings with it the notion of a

¹ R. M. Hare, *The Language of Morals*, Oxford University Press, 1952, pp. 114-117; *Freedom and Reason*, Oxford University Press, 1963, p. 26. I shall refer, in the body of the text, to these works as "*LM*—(page number)", or "*FR*—(page number)".

² This should, I think, be "prescriptive" meaning, since evaluative meaning is composed of two other kinds, only one of which is constant, i.e. prescriptive meaning.

rule which lays down that something is a reason for something else . . . the naturalist thinks that the rule in question is a descriptive meaning-rule which exhausts the meaning of the moral term used ; whereas in my own view the rule . . . does not exhaust their meaning (*FR*, 21).

But what is the force of this italicized "because" ? It is not logical, as we already know (*LM*, 94). Thus, to say that moral judgments are universalizable because of their descriptive function or meaning is uninformative, since descriptive universalizability does not entail prescriptive universalizability, or at least, nothing Hare has said anywhere establishes such a relation. Calling the meanings of terms which have both kinds of meaning by a third name, "evaluative" meaning, does not explain how they are related, and it is in fact quite misleading. Merely calling something by another name does not change its nature. Nor can the relation be merely causal, since that would render the notion of a *good* reason vacuous. But if the relation is neither logical nor causal, then what sort of a relation is it ? And if we cannot answer this question, then how can we say what a good reason is ? In fact, I do not think that we can on Hare's terms, and I shall now explain why this is so.

To ask "Good what ?" is to ask ". . . for the class within which evaluative comparisons are being made", and to ask "What makes you call it good ?" is to ask for the "virtues" or "good-making characteristics" of something (*LM*, 133). Assume that the "what" we are interested in is the class of good reasons. This is a class within which evaluative comparisons can be made, for otherwise the concept of a *good* reason is nonsense. Further, assume that the answer to the second question is that our reasons have such properties as truth, relevance, practicability, etc., all of which are non-moral properties. These then are the "relevant" particulars about the reasons, the "virtues" which I give in answer to the question "What features of it are you commending ?" (*LM*, 129-130). From this it follows that if I say that R is a good reason, then (a) I am commending R, and (b) I am commending R because it has certain features (truth, relevance, etc.) which are either good (commended) or good-making (properties which cause me to commend), and (c) the properties of R are "relevant particulars", that is, they are the features I am commending. In short, Hare must hold that a sufficient condition for R's being a good reason is that I commend it, or someone does, or that I commend R's properties, or someone does, provided that there is at least one instance of the application of the rule under which R falls as a reason. Therefore, if R has properties a, b, c then a, b, c, are only properties on the basis of which R is commended (is a good reason) if a, b, c are themselves commended, or cause me (or someone else) to commend because of properties which they have which are commended, *ad infinitum*.

Another and perhaps clearer way to put these points would be to start from the awareness that the meaning of "This is a good R" for Hare is its use to commend R, conjoined with its informative

function. To ask "Why is R good?" is to ask for R's good-making characteristics or "virtues". But of course, merely giving these properties will not do, that is, will not explain why R is a good reason, because (a) "good" is a term of commendation, and as such cannot be defined in terms of non-evaluative words, (b) the good-making characteristics of R are properties denoted by non-evaluative words, and (c) giving the properties alone does not enable me to commend R. So if R is to be a good reason, then the definition of R must include evaluative words, that is, it must commend R, or its properties, on the basis of other reasons which are commended, etc., etc.

Consider the issue graphically :

1. "R is good."
2. "R is true relevant, and practical."

We can understand 1 without understanding 2, and *vice versa*. If we understand them both, we see that 1 does not entail 2, nor *vice versa*. They have different meanings. Conjoining them does not alter this fact, even if, as a whole, the conjunction has yet a third function. The conjunction :

2A. "R is good and R is true, relevant and practical" is still a union of two sentences with two different meanings, and two different uses. (Hare must claim that their meanings are their uses, I think, but since this issue makes no difference to my claims, I shall not discuss it here.) The use of 1 is to commend; of 2, presumably to refer. Suppose there is an action A and you say: 3 "A is good" I ask you why, and in reply you say "Because R, and R is good". This will not do, because the meaning of "R is good" (1) is to commend R, and the relation between your commending A and why you commend it is not described by saying that you commend it because you commend something else. But 2 will not do as a reply either, because if I then ask why 2 is a *good* reason, then you must either commend R again, which solves nothing, or give another reason, which starts the problem all over again, or repeat yourself. If your reply is a conjunction of 1 and 2, then mine is a conjunction of the criticisms here.

In sum, we seem to be presented with the following mistake. We have 1, 2, and 2A, whose meanings are (say) x, y, and z, respectively. Hare tells us that x is the foundation of z, since without x, we can offer no reasons in support of z. But to establish this claim, he must show us that there is some relation between x and y, such that terms which mean both x and y also mean z. He admits that the relation between x and y is not one of entailment, and given his terms (that universalizability depends only upon x) it follows that the relation between terms with both x and y, and those with z, is also not one of entailment. We know that the relation cannot be merely causal. I have shown that the attempt to explain the relation on Hare's terms ends in an infinite regress. Therefore, I conclude that we cannot define good reasons as he thinks we can.

These criticisms cannot be avoided by the so-called "inverted-commas" use of "good", because (a) by definition one is not commending when one uses a word this way, and (b) one *is* commending when one calls a reason good.

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