PHILOSOPHICAL LECTURE

DESCRIPTIVISM

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I

THE term 'Descriptivism' was first suggested to me by a phrase of the late Professor Austin's. He refers in two places to what he calls the 'descriptive fallacy' of supposing that some utterance is descriptive when it is not;[1] and, although I agree with him that the word might mislead, it will serve. 'Descriptivism', then, can perhaps be used as a generic name for philosophical theories which fall into this fallacy. I shall, however, be discussing, not descriptivism in general, but the particular variety of it which is at present fashionable in ethics; and I shall not attempt to discuss all forms even of ethical descriptivism, nor, even, all the arguments of those descriptivists whom I shall consider. A sample will be all that there is time for. I cannot claim that my own arguments are original—I am in particularly heavy debt to Mr. Urmson and Professor Nowell-Smith; but if old mistakes are resuscitated, it is often impossible to do more than restate, in as clear a way as possible, the old arguments against them. Philosophical mistakes are like dandelions in the garden; however carefully one eradicates them there are sure to be some more next year, and it is difficult to think of novel ways of getting rid of their familiar faces. 'Naturalistas expellas furca, tamen usque recurrent.' But in fact the best implement is still the old fork invented by Hume.

An essential condition for the use of this tool is that there should be a distinction between description and evaluation; and, since the more sophisticated of modern descriptivists sometimes seek to impugn this distinction, I must start by establishing its existence, though I shall not have time to add to what I have said elsewhere about its nature.[2] This problem is very like that concerning the distinction between analytic and synthetic

[1] *Philosophical Papers*, p. 71; cf. *How to do things with words*, p. 3.

[2] *The Language of Morals* (*LM*), esp. chap. 7; *Freedom and Reason* (*FR*), pp. 22–27, 51, 56.

(indeed, it is an offshoot of that problem). Both distinctions are useful—indeed essential—tools of the philosopher, and it is no bar to their use that we have not yet achieved a completely clear formal elucidation of their nature.

The fundamental distinction is not that between descriptive and evaluative *terms*, but that between the descriptive and evaluative meaning which a single term may have in a certain context. In order to establish that there is a distinction between descriptive and evaluative meaning, it is not necessary to deny the existence of cases in which it is difficult to say whether a term is being used evaluatively or not. There is a clear distinction between a heap of corn and no corn at all, even though it is hard to say just when the corn that I am piling up has become a heap.[1] The descriptive and evaluative meaning of a term in a given context may be tied to it with varying degrees of tightness (we may be more, or less, sure that one or other of them would or would not get detached if we were faced with varying instances of its use: for example, if the cause to which a man was contributing large sums of money were one which I considered not good but pernicious, would I still say that he was generous?). But for all that, the distinction between descriptive and evaluative meaning may be a perfectly sustainable one.

II

We can show that such a distinction exists, at any rate, if we can isolate one of these two sorts of meaning in a given context, and show that it does not exhaust the meaning of the term in that context. Suppose, for example, that we can show that in a certain context a term has descriptive meaning; and suppose that we can isolate this descriptive meaning by producing another term which could be used in the same context with the same descriptive meaning, but such that the two terms differ in that one has evaluative meaning and the other not; then we shall have established that there can be these two different components in a term's meaning.

Let us suppose that somebody says that a certain wine (let us call it 'Colombey-les-deux-églises 1972') is a good wine. I think it will be obvious that he says that it is a good wine *because* it has a certain taste, bouquet, body, strength, &c. (I shall say 'taste' for short). But it is equally clear that we do not have

[1] See Cicero, *Lucullus*, 16; Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. Math.* i. 69, 80 and *Hyp. Pyrrh.* ii. 253.

a name for precisely the taste which this wine has. A descriptivist might therefore argue as follows (thereby committing the fashionable fallacy of *nullum nomen nullum nominandum*): there is nothing more we can say about this wine, by way of telling somebody what is good about it, or what makes us call it good (which would be to give the descriptive meaning of 'good' in this context); we can only repeat that it is good. It is good because it tastes as it does, admittedly; but this is like saying that a thing is red because it looks as it does. How else could we describe the way it tastes than by saying that it is good? Therefore the description cannot be detached from the evaluation, and the distinction is rendered ineffective.

In this instance, such an argument would not carry conviction. If a descriptivist tried to show, by this means, that the descriptive meaning of 'good' in this context could not be isolated, we should no doubt answer that the difficulty lies only in the non-existence of a *word* for the quality that we are seeking to isolate. But this does not matter, provided that it is possible to coin a word and give it a meaning. This I shall now show how to do. I may point out in passing that, if we did not have the words 'sweet', 'juicy', 'red', 'large', and a few more, it would be impossible, without inventing words, to isolate the descriptive meaning of 'good' in the phrase 'good strawberry'; but this would not stop us saying that the phrase has a descriptive meaning distinct from its evaluative meaning. We should just have to coin a word meaning 'like this strawberry in respect of taste, texture, size, &c.'; and this is what I am now going to do in the 'wine' case.

Let us invent a word, 'φ', to stand for that quality of the wine which makes us call it a good wine. The quality is, as I have explained, a complex one. Will you allow me to suppose, also, that (as is not improbable) by the time 1972 wines of this sort begin to be good, the science of aromatics (if that is the right name) will have advanced enough to put the wine-snobs out of business; that is to say, that it will have become possible to manufacture by chemical means additives which, put into cheap wines, will give to them tastes indistinguishable by any human palate from those of expensive wines. We should then have a chemical recipe for producing liquid tasting φ. This would make it easy (though even without such a scientific advance it would be perfectly possible) to teach somebody to recognize the φ taste by lining up samples of liquids tasting φ, and others having different tastes, and getting him to taste them, telling him in

each case whether the sample tasted φ or not. It is worth noticing that I could do this whether or not he was himself disposed to think that these liquids tasted good, or that, if they were wines, they were good wines. He could, that is to say, learn the meaning of 'φ' quite independently of his own estimation of the merit of wines having that taste.

It is possible, indeed, that, if he did think that wines having that taste were good wines, he might mistake my meaning; he might think that 'φ wine' (the expression whose meaning I was trying to explain to him) meant the same as 'good wine'. It is always possible to make mistakes when a person is trying to explain to one the meaning of a word. But the mistake could be guarded against. I might say to him, 'I want you to understand that, in calling a wine φ, I am not thereby commending it or praising it in any way, any more than it is commending it or praising it to say that it is produced by this chemical recipe; I am indeed (for such is my preference) disposed to commend wines which have this taste; but in simply saying that a wine is φ I am not thereby commending it any more than I should be if I said that it tasted like vinegar or like water. If my preference (and for that matter everybody else's) changed in such a way that a wine tasting like this was no longer thought any good, and we could do nothing with it but pour it down the drain, we could still go on describing it as φ.'

Now it seems to me that the descriptivist argument which we are considering depends on what I have just said being quite unintelligible. If a man can understand the explanation of the meaning of 'φ', he must reject the descriptivist argument. For if the explanation works, then it is possible to explain the meaning of 'φ' ostensively as a descriptive expression; and when this has been done, we can separate out the descriptive from the evaluative meaning of the expression 'good wine' in the sentence 'Colombey 1972 is a good wine'. For it will be possible for two people to agree that Colombey 1972 tastes φ, but disagree about whether it is a good wine; and this shows (which is all that I am trying to show) that there is more to the statement that Colombey 1972 is a good wine than to the statement that Colombey 1972 is a wine which tastes φ. The more is, of course, the commendation; but I shall not in this lecture try to explain what this is, since I have done my best elsewhere.

This answer to the descriptivist argument is not, as might be thought at first hearing, circular. It is true that I introduced into it the distinction between commendation and description,

which was what I was trying to establish; but I did not merely assume it as a premiss in my argument—I produced a clear example in which we could not do without it. What I did was to ask, 'Was it possible to understand what I was saying when I explained to the man that to call a thing φ is not thereby to commend or praise it, any more than it is praise or commendation to say that it tastes like the product of a certain chemical recipe, or that it tastes like vinegar or water?' And the premiss which I put into the argument was that this was perfectly intelligible. A determined descriptivist might at this point protest 'It isn't intelligible to me'; but I can only ask you whether, if he said this, he would not be professing to find unintelligible a distinction which we all know perfectly well how to operate (a familiar habit of philosophers). The distinction has, indeed, to be elucidated, and this is the task of moral philosophy; but it exists.

III

This 'wine' case is one where the difficulty arises because there is no word available having the descriptive meaning of 'good' in a certain context without its evaluative meaning. But a very similar difficulty arises when, as in most moral and aesthetic cases, there is no *one* word which has just the descriptive meaning that we want, but a multitude of possible ways of describing, in greater or less detail, the sort of thing that we have in mind. Here what is required is not ostensive definition (though that may help) but a long story. It is, for example, very hard to say what it is about a particular picture which makes us call it a good one; but nevertheless what makes us call it a good one is a series of describable characteristics combined in just this way. We can see this quite clearly if we think of the painter himself building up the picture—putting in features and then perhaps painting them out again and trying something else. There is no doubt whatever that what makes him satisfied or dissatisfied is something there on the canvas which is certainly describable in neutral terms (e.g. he has a lot of things round the edge of the picture which draw the eye, but no feature in the middle which does so). Or, to take a simpler example, let us suppose that the painter is somebody like Kandinsky, and that the only thing that dissatisfies him about the picture is the precise colour of one of the exactly-drawn circular patches near the top right-hand corner. Suppose then that the painter is suddenly and

incurably paralysed, but wants to finish the picture; can he not get a pupil to alter the colour for him, telling him, in neutral descriptive terms, just what paints to mix in what proportions and where to put the resulting mixture in order to make it a better picture? The paralysed painter would not have to say 'Make the picture better' or 'Make the circular patch in the top right-hand corner a better colour'; he could tell the pupil just how to do these things.

If, instead of asking what makes a man call *this* picture a good one, we ask what in general makes him call pictures (or wines or men) good ones, the position becomes even more complicated. But in principle it remains true that the descriptive meaning which the man attaches to the expression 'good picture' could be elicited, as a very complex conjunction and disjunction of characteristics, by questioning him sufficiently closely about a sufficiently large number of pictures.[1] For to have a settled taste in pictures is to be disposed to think pictures good which have certain characteristics. That such a process would reveal a good deal about his taste to the man himself does not affect the argument; the process of rendering articulate the grounds of evaluation is always a revealing one. If his evaluations have been made on vague or uncertain grounds, as will be the case with a man whose taste is not well developed, the process of trying to explain the grounds may well cause the evaluations themselves to change in the course of being made articulate. This again is irrelevant to the argument; for nobody wants to maintain that the descriptive meaning attached to people's evaluations is in all cases precise or cut-and-dried.

Lest you should think that I have been talking about pictures simply in order to make a logical point about value-judgements, I should like to say that there seems to me to be a lesson, in all this, about how to improve one's appreciation of works of art. In so far as I have attained to any articulate appreciation of any sorts of works of art—or of anything else which has aesthetic merit—it has been by trying to formulate to myself what I find good or bad about particular works, or about the works of a particular style or period. This is, of course, no substitute for the completely inarticulate absorption in a work—say a piece of music—which alone makes art worth while; but analysis does

[1] Though not competent to judge of such matters, I do not find the experiments described by Prof. H. J. Eysenck, *Sense and Nonsense in Psychology*, chap. 8, at all incredible, though I do not agree with his interpretation of them.

undoubtedly help. I have derived much more profit from looking at pictures and buildings, listening to music, &c., and asking myself what it is about them that I find worth while, than I have from reading the works of critics; and when critics have helped me, it has been by doing the same sort of thing, i.e. drawing attention to and characterizing particular features of works of art which contribute to their excellence. I think that many descriptivists would agree with me about this. But unless what I have said is true (viz. that the descriptive meaning of 'good' in a given context can always in principle be given) critics would be unable to tell us why they think certain works of art good; they would just have to go on repeating that they are good.

IV

Morality is in these respects quite like aesthetics. There are certain ways of behaving, describable in perfectly neutral terms, which make us commend people as, for example, courageous. Citations for medals do not simply say that the recipient behaved courageously; they give descriptive details; and though these, for reasons of brevity, often themselves contain evaluative terms, this need not be the case, and in a good citation it is the neutral descriptions which impress. They impress us because we already have the standards of values according to which to do *that* sort of thing is to display outstanding merit.

A descriptivist might object to this argument that in some of my examples, although it is perfectly easy to say what the *descriptive* meaning of the term in question is, there is no separately discernible *evaluative* meaning. For example, it might be claimed that if we have said that the man has done what he has done, then we have said, implicitly, that he has been courageous; and if 'courageous' is a term of commendation, we have commended him. The commendation is simply the description. This I think to be false. With the standards of values that we have, and which it is natural for us to have in our historical circumstances (or perhaps in any likely historical circumstances), we shall all be disposed to commend such a man. But the commendation is a further step which we are not logically compelled to take. A man who said that such behaviour did not make a man any better would be morally eccentric, but not logically at fault. I have argued this point elsewhere.[1]

[1] *FR*, pp. 187–9.

It follows that it is possible for two people without logical absurdity to agree about the description but disagree about the evaluation—though it would not affect my argument if nobody ever actually disagreed. And therefore the distinction between evaluative and descriptive meanings is not impugned.

V

I have sought to establish that there is this distinction, because I shall need it later. I shall now go on to deal with some particular descriptivist arguments. Most of the arguments which I shall be discussing have a feature in common: namely that the descriptivism which they seek to establish is of a very minimal kind. That is to say, they seek to establish only that there are *some* logical restrictions upon what we can call good, right, &c. They fall far short of attempting to prove anything that could be helpful to us when faced with any serious moral problem, as will be at once apparent to anyone who tries to use the types of reasoning proposed in any actual moral perplexity. But in this lecture I shall address myself mainly to arguments for these very weak forms of descriptivism, because they might seem more difficult to refute.

Consider the following argument. It is not possible, it might be said, to think *anything* good, or good of its kind, just as it is not possible to want *anything*; it is possible to want or to think good only such things as are thought to be either the subjects of what have been called 'desirability characterizations', or else means to attaining them. This expression 'desirability characterizations' comes from Miss Anscombe's book *Intention*, pp. 66 ff.; but I hesitate to ascribe the argument itself to her, because, as I shall show, the expression admits of at least two quite different interpretations, and I am not sure in which sense, if either, she was using the term; and therefore I am not sure which of two possible versions of the argument, if either, she would support. Since, however, although both versions are perfectly valid, neither proves anything from which I wish to dissent, I shall not try to do more than clear up the ambiguity—an ambiguity which has, I think, led some people to suppose that the argument does prove something with which a prescriptivist like myself would have to disagree.

The first way of taking the expression 'desirability characterization' is to take it as meaning 'a description of that about the object which makes it an object of desire'. If I may be

allowed to revert to my previous example: suppose that I want some Colombey 1972, or think it a good wine, because it tastes φ; then to say that it tastes φ is to give the required desirability characterization. If this is how the phrase is to be taken, then the argument shows that whenever we think something good, we do so because of something about it. Since I have often maintained the same position myself, nobody will expect me to demur.[1] It shows further that the 'something about it' must be something thought desirable, or thought to be a means to something desirable. I do not think that I want to object to this either, provided that 'desire' and 'desirable' are taken in fairly wide senses, as translations of the Aristotelian *orexis* and *orekton*. So interpreted, the argument shows that, whenever we think something good, it must be, or be thought by us to be a means to, something to 'try to get'[2] which (in actual or hypothetical circumstances) we have at least some disposition. This conclusion, which has, it may be noticed, marked non-descriptivist undertones, is one I can agree with. The crucial thing to notice, however, is that the argument does nothing to show what may or may not be the subject of a desirability characterization. It could, so far as this way of taking the argument goes, be anything you please. Thus, if our desires concerning wines were different, which they logically could be, 'tasting φ' might be an '*un*-desirability characterization'; and we should not be in the least put out if we found a man who wanted *not* to drink Colombey 1972 because it tasted like that.

The second way of taking the expression 'desirability characterization' is as follows: we give a desirability characterization of an object if we say something about it which is *logically* tied in some way (weak or strong) to desiring. An example of this would be to say that something would be fun; others would be to call it pleasant, or interesting, or delightful. Notice that, in this sense of 'desirability characterization', to say that the wine tasted φ would *not* be to give a desirability characterization of it; for there is no logical connexion between thinking that a thing tastes φ and desiring it. As I have said, a man might without logical fault say that he wanted *not* to drink Colombey 1972 because it tasted φ; and he might also say something less committal, namely that the fact that it tasted φ did not make him either want to drink it or want not to drink it—in short that he was indifferent to its tasting φ. But it would be logically odd

[1] *FR*, p. 71; *LM*, p. 133.

[2] See Anscombe, op. cit., p. 67; *FR*, p. 70.

for somebody to say that the fact that something would be pleasant, or fun, or interesting, or delightful, did not make him—to the smallest degree—disposed to do it (though of course he might not be disposed to do it when he considered the whole situation, including its consequences and the alternatives).

It may be that there is also a connexion in the reverse direction between being fun, &c., and being desired or thought good; though, if so, the nature of the connexion is obscure and tenuous. It may be, that is to say, that if we have said that we want something, or that we think it good, it is natural for us, if asked why, to say that it would be fun, or pleasant, or to give it some other characterization falling within an ill-defined class which includes these. It may even be true that it is logically compulsory, on pain of making ourselves incomprehensible, that we should be prepared to give such an explanation.

The difficulty with this suggestion is that it is not possible to rule out, *a priori*, additions to the list of desirability characterizations in this second sense. And it is a somewhat vacuous claim that an explanation falling within a certain class must be forthcoming, if the class itself is so easily expansible. 'Exciting' is a desirability characterization—and in at least some uses a desirability characterization in the second of my two senses. Let us suppose, then, that there is a race of men who have not, up till now, valued the experience of danger (perhaps because their conditions of life have been such as to give them altogether too much of it), and have therefore not had the favourable characterization 'exciting' in their vocabulary, but only such unfavourable characterizations as 'frightening' and 'terrifying'. Then, when their life becomes less exposed to terrors, they begin to know what it is to be bored, and so come to value excitement for its own sake. There then comes to be a need for the favourable characterization 'exciting', and they duly invent it. This is an example of what I mean by an addition to the list of desirability characterizations in the second sense.

One reason why it is easy to be confused by these two possible senses of the phrase 'desirability characterization' is that words which are very commonly used as desirability characterizations in the first sense often end up by becoming desirability characterizations in the second sense. That is to say, they acquire a logical, as opposed to a merely contingent, connexion with being desired. The Latin word *virtus* underwent such a shift, owing to the contingent fact that the properties which are typical of the male sex are properties which the Romans desired people to

have. Thus in particular cases it is sometimes hard to say whether a word is being used as a desirability characterization in the second sense. But this will not cause concern to anybody unless he is a victim of the 'heap' fallacy to which I referred earlier.

A confusion between the two senses of 'desirability characterization' might lead a careless descriptivist to suppose that descriptivism could be established in the following way. We should first establish that anything that is thought good must also be thought to be the subject of some desirability characterization, or a means to such (and here it does not matter for the argument in which sense the phrase is used; let us allow for the sake of argument that this premiss is true in both senses). We should then point out (correctly) that only some *words* can be desirability characterizations (sense two). Then we should assume that this proved that only some *things* can be the subjects of desirability characterizations (sense one). And so we should think that we had proved that only some things can be thought good. But the two connected fallacies in this argument should by now be obvious. The first is the equivocation on the phrase 'desirability characterization'. The second is the assumption that by proving that there are certain words that cannot be or that must be used in conjunction with the statement that something is good, we have proved that certain things cannot be thought good.

It must always be possible to want, or to think good, *new* sorts of thing (for example, new experiences); and therefore it can never be nonsense to *say* that we want them, or that they are good, provided that we are careful not to describe them in a way which is logically inconsistent with this. It is said that under the influence of mescaline people say things like 'How simply marvellous that at the corner of the room three planes meet at a point!' So perhaps they might, on occasion, say (to use Miss Anscombe's example) 'How simply marvellous to have this saucer of mud!' And if somebody asks what is marvellous about it, why should they not reply, with respectable precedent, 'We can't tell you; you have to have the experience before any word for it would mean anything to you:

> Nec lingua valet dicere,
> Nec litera exprimere;
> Expertus potest credere'?

It may readily be admitted that whenever we desire something,

it must be because of something about it; but if pressed to say what this something is, we may be tempted, since most of my opponents on this question are of the opposite sex, to rejoin with Wilbye's madrigal:

> Love me not for comely grace,
> For my pleasing eye or face,
> Nor for any outward part;
> No, nor for my constant heart;
> For those may fail or turn to ill,
> So thou and I shall sever.
> Keep therefore a true woman's eye,
> And love me still, but know not why,
> So hast thou the same reason still
> To dote upon me ever.

Note that the poet does not here say that there is *no* reason for a woman's loving, but that she does not have to know (in the sense of 'know how to say') what it is.

That logic cannot determine what we are going to be attracted by or averse from was well known to Shakespeare. He makes Shylock say, when challenged as to his motives for demanding the pound of flesh,

> Some men there are love not a gaping pig;
> Some, that are mad if they behold a cat;
> And others, when the bag-pipe sings i' th' nose,
> Cannot contain their urine; for affection,
> Mistress of passion, sways it to the mood
> Of what it likes or loaths. (*M. of V.* iv. 1)

And he knew about love-potions, of one of which he says,

> The juice of it, on sleeping eyelids laid,
> Will make or man or woman madly dote
> Upon the next live creature that it sees . . .
> The next thing then she waking looks upon,
> (Be it on lion, bear, or wolf, or bull,
> On meddling monkey, or on busy ape,)
> She shall pursue it with the soul of love.
> (*M.N.D.* ii. 1)

There are no logical limits (at least none relevant to the present issue)[1] to what such potions could make even a descriptivist

[1] For some restrictions which, though interesting, do not affect the present argument, see Anscombe, op. cit., p. 66 and A. Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will*, p. 112. Since states of affairs can be desired for their own sakes, the restriction that what is desired must be desired *for* something is a vacuous one.

philosopher desire; and therefore, if an argument about what can (logically) be thought good is based upon what can (logically) be desired, it is bound to fail. Logic tells us, indeed, that, if a man claims to desire a certain thing, there are certain *words* which he must not apply to it, and perhaps also that there are certain other words, some of which at least he must be prepared to apply to it. But the latter half of this logical restriction is rather indefinite and elusive, and I leave it to those who have a stake in it to make it more determinate than it is so far. The trouble is that, as Miss Anscombe rightly says, *bonum est multiplex*; and I can see no way of putting a logical limit to its multiplicity.

VI

The point that I have been making—or a closely related point—can be put in the following way. We can perhaps distinguish between objective properties of objects—i.e. those which they have, however a person is disposed towards them—and subjective properties, which an object has only if a person is disposed towards it in a certain way. I must confess that I do not like these words, because they have been used in too many different senses; but perhaps, as so defined, they will serve our present purposes. In a similar way, we might distinguish between objective conditions which have to be satisfied before we can use a certain word of an object, and subjective conditions. The former consist in the possession by the object of objective properties; the latter in a person's being disposed in a certain way towards it. Now descriptivists often seem to be wanting to demonstrate to us that there are certain objective conditions for the use of words like 'good'. But the most that arguments like the foregoing can show is that there are certain subjective conditions.

Here, moreover, we must guard against another, related, ambiguity in the expression 'conditions for the use of a word'. It might mean 'conditions for a word being said to be used correctly to express what the speaker who calls a thing "good" (for example) is wishing to convey'; or it might mean 'conditions for a thing's being said to be good'. This ambiguity is well illustrated on the first page of an article by Mrs. Foot.[1] In outlining a position which she is going to attack, she asks: 'Is a connexion with the choices of the speaker ever a *sufficient* condition for the use of the word "good", as it would be if a man

[1] *Ar. Soc. Supp. Vol.* xxxv (1961), 45.

could ever call certain things (let us call them *A*s) good *A*s simply because these were the *A*s which he was thereafter ready to choose?' She goes on to argue that it is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition; in this she deviates from Miss Anscombe, who thinks that if we call a thing good, we must attribute to it some desirability characteristic, and that 'the primitive sign of wanting is trying to get'.[1]

Now if here 'a sufficient condition for the use of the word "good" ' meant 'a sufficient condition for a thing's being said to be good', then it is, I think, quite plain that a connexion with choices is not a sufficient condition. At any rate, I have never thought that it was; indeed, though the view has sometimes been attributed to me that 'So and so is a good *x*' means the same as 'So and so is the *x* (or kind of *x*) that I would choose', this is a position which I have explicitly argued against.[2] Now there are indications in the article which might lead one to suppose that Mrs. Foot was taking the words 'sufficient condition for the use of the word "good" ' to mean 'sufficient condition for a thing's being said to be good'. The chief indication is that few if any of her arguments are even plausible unless this were what she was trying to disprove. Also, her words in several places naturally bear this sense. For example, on p. 53 she says (referring to an example of a person playing a game with pebbles) 'It is not by his readiness to pick up the pebbles that he *legitimizes his words*'; and she has just said that, on the contrary, 'It is a plain matter of fact that the particular *A*s' (in this example pebbles) '*will be* good for his purposes, or from his point of view' (my italics). A similar kind of expression occurs earlier on p. 46, where she says, of a man talking about knives, 'He could not say that a good knife was one which rusted quickly, *defending his use* of the word "good" by showing that he picked out such knives for his own use.' It certainly looks, at first sight, as if in both these instances, by 'legitimize his words' and 'defend his use' she means, not 'show that he really does think that sort of knife or pebble good, and is therefore expressing correctly what he thinks', but rather 'show that the knives or pebbles which he calls good *are* good'. So it looked to me, when I first read the article, as if, when she was constructing these arguments, she had the purpose of attacking a position which I, at any rate, have never defended, and with which, therefore, I need not concern myself.

[1] Op. cit., p. 67; see above, p. 123.

[2] *LM*, p. 107.

However, we must consider the other possible interpretation, in view of the fact that, unless my memory is deceiving me, and my notes incorrect (and I am not confident on either point), this was the interpretation which she authorized at the meeting at which her paper was discussed, after I had pointed out to her that on the first interpretation she was attacking a position which was not mine. If this second interpretation were what she meant, then in the 'pebble' example she would be maintaining that, if a man were ready to pick up a certain kind of pebble for playing a game, and habitually did so, to point this out would not be a way of showing that those were the pebbles that he thought good for his purposes or from his point of view, and thus 'legitimizing' the use of the word 'good' by showing that it correctly expressed his thought (however preposterous the thought). But if so, she was maintaining something that is not very plausible. For if a man consistently and deliberately chose a certain kind of pebble, we *should* infer that he thought that kind of pebble good for his purposes or from his point of view; if we had doubts, they would be about what on earth the purposes or the point of view could be. I conclude that either she was attacking a position which I have never held, or else she was attacking one which I might, with certain explanations, accept, but attacking it in a way which could carry conviction only to somebody who confused the two possible interpretations of the phrase 'condition for'.

VII

This seems to be the best point at which to deal with another common descriptivist manœuvre. The manœuvre is rendered attractive by the following fact, which I think we can all admit. There are some things which, if wanted or thought good by somebody, seem to call for no explanation (for example, food, a certain degree of warmth, &c.). Other things, if wanted or thought good, require explanation. The explanation can perhaps be given: a man who wants a flat pebble may want it to play ducks and drakes with, and think it good for this purpose; but, as we progress to more and more bizarre examples, the explanation gets harder and harder to give. It therefore seems to be open to the descriptivist to take a very extraordinary imaginary example, and ask rhetorical questions about it, such as 'Suppose that a man says that somebody is a good man because he clasps and unclasps his hands, and never turns NNE.

after turning SSW.; could we understand him?'[1] It is implied that an anti-descriptivist has to claim that he can understand such an absurd statement, and this is treated as a *reductio ad absurdum* of his position.

This type of argument rests on a confusion between, on the one hand, logical absurdity and its various weaker analogues, and, on the other, various sorts of contingent improbability. That is why I said earlier that the problem about the distinction between descriptive and evaluative is an offshoot of the problem about the distinction between analytic and synthetic. It is contingently extremely unlikely, to say the least, that I should become able to lift a ton weight with my bare hands; but it is not logically impossible for this to happen, nor is it logically absurd, in any weaker way, to claim that it has happened. By this I mean that if a man claimed to be able to do this, there would be no ultimate obstacle to our understanding him. Admittedly, we might well think at first that we had misunderstood him; it is so improbable that anybody should even think that it had happened, that, if a person claimed that it had happened, we should think at first that he could not be meaning the words in their literal senses. We might think that he meant, for instance, that the weight in question was counter-balanced, so that he could put his hands underneath it and lift, and make it go up. That is to say, when a man says something which is sufficiently improbable (as we think the universe to be constituted), we tend to assume that he cannot mean it literally, and that therefore we have to search for some non-literal meaning if we are going to understand him. But for all that, what he says has in its literal sense nothing *logically* wrong with it. It follows that no conclusions whatever are to be drawn concerning the meanings or uses of words from the oddity of such a remark; what is odd is not the use of words, but that anybody should think such a thing.

The case before us is much the same. If a man said that somebody was a good man because he clasped and unclasped his hands, we should, indeed, at first find ourselves wondering whether we had understood him. But the reason is that, although what has been said is perfectly *comprehensible* in its literal sense, it is very odd indeed for anybody to think it. We should therefore look around for non-literal senses or contrived explanations, and should be baffled if we failed to find any. Why would it be odd for anybody to think this? For a reason which can, indeed,

[1] The example comes from Mrs. Foot's article in *Ar. Soc.*, 1958/9, 84.

be gathered from the writings of descriptivists, who have given a tolerably correct account of it, vitiated only by their assumption that it can teach us anything about the uses or meanings of words, and that therefore it can support, or discredit, logical theses. The reason is that very few of us, if any, have the necessary 'pro-attitude' to people who clasp and unclasp their hands; and the reason for this is that the pro-attitudes which we have do not just occur at random, but have explanations, albeit not (as the descriptivists whom I am discussing seem to think) explanations which logic alone could provide. To think something good of its kind is, let us say, to have at least some disposition to choose it when, or if, choosing things of that kind, in actual or hypothetical circumstances. After what I have said earlier, you will not, I know, confuse this thesis with the thesis that for something to *be* good is for us to have a disposition to choose it. Now we do not have, most of us, any disposition to choose, or to choose to be, men who clasp and unclasp their hands. We do not, accordingly, think that men who do this are good.

The explanation of our not thinking this is that such choices would hardly contribute to our survival, growth, procreation, &c.; if there have been any races of men or animals who have made the clasping and unclasping of hands a prime object of their pro-attitudes, to the exclusion of other more survival-promoting activities, they have gone under in the struggle for existence. I am, I know, being rather crude; but in general, to cut the matter short, we have the pro-attitudes that we have, and therefore call the things good which we do call good, because of their relevance to certain ends which are sometimes called 'fundamental human needs'.

To call them this, however, is already to make a *logical* connexion between them and what it is good for a man to have. This, indeed, is why descriptivists have fallen into the trap of supposing that, because the word 'good' is logically tied in certain contexts to the *word* 'needs', it is therefore logically tied to certain concrete *things* which are generally thought to be needs. But since this mistake is the same mistake as I discussed at length in connexion with desires, it need not detain us. The two words 'desires' and 'needs' have both misled descriptivists in the same way—and that because there is an intimate logical relation between what is needed and what is desired, so that in many contexts we could say that for a thing to be needed is for it to be a necessary condition for satisfying a desire. It follows that if 'things desired' do not form a closed class, 'things needed'

will not either. If, as I said, logic does not prevent us from coming to desire new things, or ceasing to desire old ones, it cannot, either, determine what we do or do not need.

A man who used the word 'good' of things which were unrelated to those ends which most of us call 'needs' might, nevertheless, be using it, quite correctly, to express the thought which he had; but this might be (if a sufficiently crazy example were taken) a very extraordinary thought for a man to have, because most of us have a high regard for our survival, and for such other things as I mentioned, and our pro-attitudes are fairly consistently related to these. It is not, indeed, logically necessary that they should be. Those of some people are not. And it would not affect my argument (though it would obviously affect gravely that of the opposite party) if there were some things which some people just do, unaccountably, have a high regard for, like the music of Beethoven.

In short, our disposition to call only a certain range of things good (and to choose and desire them) can be explained—in so far as it can be explained—without bringing in logic; and therefore the explanation contributes nothing to logic either, and, specifically, tells us nothing about the meanings or uses of the evaluative words, except that they have certain common *descriptive* meanings.

VIII

I shall end this lecture with an attempt to clear up a quite simple confusion about the word 'because'—a confusion which seems to me to lie at the root of a great many things which descriptivists say. If I am choosing between an ordinary mushroom and a poisonous toadstool to put in the dish that I am making for myself, I naturally choose, and prefer, and think it best to choose and that I ought to choose, the mushroom and not the toadstool; and I think this *because* the latter is poisonous (i.e. such as to cause death if eaten). That the toadstool is poisonous is my *reason* for rejecting it. Now it might be thought that, if I reject it *because* it is poisonous, there must be some logical connexion between the statement 'It is poisonous' and the statements 'It ought not to be chosen to eat' or 'It is not good to eat'; or between my thought that it is poisonous and my disposition not to eat it. By 'logical connexion' I mean that the *meanings* of the expressions are somehow linked (the precise nature of the link need not concern us; some descriptivists would

make it a firmer one than others). Now to say this is to confuse logical entailment, together with its many weaker analogues, on the one hand, with the relation between choice and reasons for choice on the other. The relation between choice and reasons for choice is not a logical relation. There is no logical compulsion on me, or even any weaker logical constraint, to refrain from eating what I know will kill me. I refrain from eating it *because* I know it will kill me; but if I did the opposite, and *ate* it because I knew it would kill me, I should not be offending against any logical rule regulating the uses of words, however fashionably tenuous the rule is supposed to be.

There is, indeed, a logical inference that can be elicited from this situation. Given that the toadstool would kill me, I can infer that I ought not to eat it, if I also accept a further premiss that I ought not to eat what would kill me. To accept this other premiss is to have one of a class of things which I shall call, in Professor Braithwaite's phrase, 'springs of action'.[1] Desires belong to this class, as do convictions that something is better than something else. In fact anything belongs to it which can, as it were, turn a descriptive statement into a reason for doing something; or, more formally, the expression of which in language (though not, of course, its *description* in language), together with some descriptive statement, logically entails some prescription. But there is no logical link between the descriptive premiss, *by itself*, and the prescriptive conclusion.

A parallel from a quite distinct field of discourse, which has nothing to do with prescriptions, will perhaps make this point clear. There is a valid logical inference from the statement that cyanide is a poison, together with the statement that this dish contains cyanide, to the conclusion that this dish contains poison. But there is no logical connexion which can justify the inference from the statement, by itself, that the dish contains cyanide, to the conclusion that it contains poison. This is because the other premiss, that cyanide is a poison, is synthetic. Nevertheless, the dish is poisonous *because* it contains cyanide.

Now if anybody thinks that one can never say '*q* because *p*' unless there is a logical connexion between '*p*' and '*q*', he is likely to attempt to place opponents of descriptivism in the following dilemma. Either we have to admit that there is a logical connexion between statements of fact, taken by themselves, and evaluative conclusions (which is to surrender to at any rate a

[1] *Ar. Soc. Supp. Vol.* xx (1946), 9. Aristotle's *orexeis* and Kenny's 'volitions' (op. cit., p. 214) play similar roles.

weak form of descriptivism); or else we must hold that evaluative judgements are never made *because of* anything—i.e. that they are quite irrational. It is to be hoped that if descriptivists reflect upon the falsity of this dilemma, they will abandon at least some of their arguments.

This lecture has been polemical. I felt it necessary to discuss certain mistaken views (as I think them to be); for it seems to me that, if we could put them behind us, we might liberate the subject for a real advance. In this sense my lecture has had a constructive purpose.