Review of: "Geach's "Good" and "Bad", Attributive After All"

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REVIEW

of

***Atina Knowles.* 'Geach's "Good" and "Bad", Attributive After All'**

The reviewed paper is devoted to P.M.Geach's polemic essay "Good and Evil" (1956) and its reception in the philosophical tradition, notably, its criticism by R.M.Hare (1957), A.Duncan-Jones (1966), A.MacKay (1970), J.Donnelly (1971), J.Stevenson (1972), C.Pigden (1990), M.Rind & L.Tillinghast (2008), and other authors. Most comments in the preceding discussion focus on the logical distinction between <logically> predicative and <logically> attributive adjectives introduced by P.M. Geach. If *A* is an adjective modifying a noun *B* in a noun phrase (NP), then A is a logically *predicative* adjective in terms of Geach, if a predication *'X is AB'*, e.g. 'X is [$_{NP}$ a red book]' ($ *(x) (B (x) & R (x))*, splits up into a pair of predications '*X is a B'*, e.g. 'X is [$_{NP}$ a book]' and 'X is A', e.g. 'X is red'. If *A* is an adjective modifying a noun *B* in a noun phrase (NP), then A is a logically *attributive* adjective in terms of Geach, if a predication *'X is AB'*, does not split up into a pair of predications '*X is a B'* & '*X is A'*. Adjectives like *red* are logically predicative on the thesis of Geach, while adjectives like *big* are logically attributive. If *'X is* [$_{NP}$ *a big flea*]' is true, then 'X is [$_{NP}$ a flea]' is also true, but 'X is big' is false: the property of being a big flea does not entail being a big insect or a big animal. Geach assessed the adjectives expressing the basic ethic / normative concepts "Good" and "Bad" and argued that they pattern with attributive adjectives like *big* but not with predicative adjectives like *red*. His analysis aimed at refuting the view defended by G.H. Moore and his followers, so called 'Oxford Moralists' that "Good" and "Bad" are indefinable notions that do not stand for any natural property, while the primary function of the corresponding adjectives is to commend the objects they apply to. In Geach's terms, if "Good" and "Bad" are logically attributive adjectives, their primary function is descriptive. A metaphysic perspective of his analysis, which probably should be kept apart from logic and issues in meta-ethics, i.e. the problem of defining the moral concepts is that if "Good(ness)" and "Evil" are not imminent properties characteristic of their objects, there is no predestination in the Geachean world: logically attributive adjectives including "Good" and "Bad" can be interpreted as predicates of variable accidental properties and their valuation requires the identification of the relevant subset of objects.

The reviewed paper by Atina Knowles is written as an apology of Geach's original conception contra its revisions and concerns raised by his critics. The text has a transparent structure with an Introduction entitled 'Geach's arguments about "good" and "bad"', three numbered sections entitled '1. The logical distinction between "good" and "bad"', '2. "Good" and "bad" as "always" logically attributive', '3. "Good" and "bad's functions as "primarily" descriptive' and Conclusions. The

author argues that the objections to Geach's approach are motivated by two groups of facts. First, Geach's essay was too concise to be fully explicit: he only outlined his logical distinction between two classes of adjectives but did not elaborate it at length. Second, the commentators generally misinterpreted and misapplied Geach's illustrative examples and preferred to discuss related or even orthogonal problems inspired by these examples instead of treating his distinction properly. Once this is done, argues the author, the conclusion that "good" and "bad" are logically attributive adjectives is inevitable, since Geach's logical distinction is consistent. I believe that Atina Knowles succeeded in proving the last point and added an excellent commentary to Geach's essay. However, this result does not guarantee that Geach's classification, let alone his labels 'predicative adjectives' vs. 'attributive adjectives', are optimal.

To start with, the terms 'attributive' and 'predicative' are borrowed into logical analysis from traditional grammar, where they refer to syntactic positions: attributive adjectives are nominal modifiers at the NP-level (*A tall man opened the door. John is a tall man.*), while predicative adjectives are lexical heads of the predicate phrase (VP, vP), cf *John is tall*. This level of representation is too shallow for philosophy, just as the differences in the formof English, German, Latin or Russian adjectives, etc. However, philosophers who outline a classification of adjectives and provide examples from everyday speech need some conventions about word classes. I suppose that two assumptions are more or less standard for the works in the field: a) adjectives are a natural language class of expressions denoting properties and primarily specialized as attributive modifiers; b) if an adjective is used in a natural language *L* both as an attributive modifier (*a tall man*) and as a lexical predicate head (*X is tall*), there is no or little change in the form and meaning of the adjective. The condition a) is definitional, while condition b) is strictly speaking falsifiable, since both attributive and predicative adjectives can have special markers cross-linguistically. In some of the world's languages, the morphology of <syntactically> attributive adjectives is richer compared to <syntactically> predicative adjectives. In other world's languages, adjectives get an extra marker in the <syntactically> predicative position (Kennedy 2012). These empirical details notwithstanding, many semanticists (both from the camp of philosophers and from the camp of linguists) assume that if adjective *A* can get in syntactic positions S1 and S2, its categorical meaning, i.e. the meaning of the logical class it stands for does not depend on syntax. Once this assumption is made, the distinction of two or more adjective classes *Class1* vs *Class2* … $Class_n$ can be checked both at the NP-level and at the sentence level, i.e. in the predicative position.

To judge upon Knowles' commentary, Geach saw the clash between his taxon 'attributive*A*' and overt syntax: he admitted that his 'attributive' adjectives can be used as predicates, but claimed that a 'legitimate' form of sentences like *X is good* or *X is bad* is 'X a good or bad **thing**'. The problem is that the same trick with restoring a silent proxy noun / NP in the predicative position can be played with adjectives from Geach's 'predicative' class: *X is red* can be interpreted as a contraction of 'X is a red **thing**'. This has been done by Montague (1974), who generalized an 'attributive' analysis for all adjectives and reconstructed a full NP in the predicative position: *X is red, carnivorous, skilled, big, good, bad*, on Montague's thesis has the structure 'X is a red, carnivorous, skilled, big, good bad **one**'. I'll leave aside Montague's claim that adjectives do not denote properties, but must be recognized as operators that map properties into new properties and confine myself by a comparison of diagnostic positions. Montague and his followers, e.g. Partee (1995) capitalize the attributive function of adjectives and focus on the modifier position at the NP-level. It is less important for their approach, whether an NP containing adjectives is used as a predicate or not. Contrariwise, Geach and probably his advocate, Atina

Knowles are basing on the predicative function and the predicative position, where languages like English license bare adjectives. They classify all adjectives into Class 1 items (their 'predicative' taxon), which are treated as true predicates, and Class 2 items, which are treated as reduced NPs in disguise: *X is big, good » X is a big, good thing*. Thus, both Geach's approach and Montague's approach are reductionist, since neither of them needs a variety of positions to develop a logical classification of adjectives. Geach nevertheless sticks to quasi-syntactic labels for Class 1 and Class2, despite his logical definitions of these groups are solely based on the adjective's classifying potential, not its grammar.

The reviewer does not object to the practice of building formal models of language predicting the features of adjectives. As far as I can see, a reductionist approach a là Montague or a là Geach/Knowles for the most cases works for English. I am less certain about examples like *ICBM is bad* discussed in section **2.**, where Atina Knowles counters the objections raised by Pigden (1990). The latter argues that in such sentences *bad* is not a standard attribute, since weapon is too empty of a term to represent a standard for badness. Knowles uses an argument a là Geach and claims that 'PROPER NAME is good/bad' is not a legitimate expression, which must be normalized as 'PROPER NAME is a good/ bad SORT OF OBJECT'. The communicants know that 'ICBM' stands for a number of roles, e.g., of a weapon or peacekeeper, etc. and can be valued as (in)efficient, i.e., *good* or *bad* for each role on a separate basis. Therefore, the normalized form, on Knowles is 'ICBM is [$_{NP}$ **a bad weapon**]' or 'ICBM is [$_{NP}$ **a good peacekeeper**]', etc. I agree that such paraphrases via predicative NPs are possible, but I am not sure that they are semantically equivalent to the source predicates. A sentence like *ICBM is bad* can also mean 'It is bad that the enemy has ICBM' or 'It is bad to live a world the enemy can launch ICBMs', etc. One can certainly add a proxy object like *thing — It is a bad thing to live in a world, where p*, but proxy or dummy objects are not an effective tool of analyzing language meanings.

Part of the discussion revoked by Atina Knowles goes around the problem of asymmetry of the positive and negative values, GOOD vs BAD: the words like *bad, inefficient, unskillful*, etc. encode a deviation from some inherent standard. Geach himself noticed that *good* and *bad* have non-identical properties, since *bad* resembles so called *alienans* adjectives like *fake, forged, putative, alleged*, while *good* does not. *Alienans* adjectives add a special meaning that the referent lacks the properties typical for objects of its kind. He however, argues that all *alienans* expressions in a strictly binary classification of adjectives based on his criteria pattern with his 'attributive' class. I do not see obvious reasons to challenge this view. It is but noteworthy that in some versions of Montague's approach *alienans* adjectives (called here 'privative') are recognized as a separate class, the members of which are per definition excluded both from both Geachean classes).

Given terminological discrepancies between different traditions and somewhat misleading allusions to syntax, I stick to the following technical designations: 'Class 1' = Geach's 'predicative' adjectives, Montague's 'intersective' adjectives), 'Class 2' = Montague's 'subsective' adjectives, Geach's 'attributive' class without alienans adjectives, 'Class 3' = Montague's 'privative adjectives', Geach's 'alienans' subclass. Like Geach and Knowles, I assume that this classification is exhaustive and each element can belong to one class only. Class 1 are generalized classifiers. *Carnivorous* in the specified meaning 'animal belonging to the order of placental mammals called *Carnivora*' is a Class 1 element: a sentence like *A cat/ a mumrik is carnivorous* is true, iff cats or mumriks belong to the order Carnivora, otherwise it is false. Therefore, any supporting nouns— *a carnivorous feliform, a carnivorous mammal, a carnivorous animal*, etc. in a combination with a

Class 1 are semantically redundant. I guess that Geach had a similar intuition, when he dubbed Class 1 elements '(true) predicative'. The same holds for Geach's example *X is red*: although the ontological distinction of red vs non-red objects is less robust, the logical model does not change. Class 2 elements select a relevant subset of objects, therefore the noun cannot be dropped, see the well-known examples with *big fleas*, *tall jockeys* or *giant midgets*, which are not necessarily *big insects, tall men* or *giant humans*, while *skilled surgeons* are not necessarily *skilled cellists*, etc. Class 3 items pose special problems with prototypical and derived nominal meanings: Atina Knowles discusses the words *putative* and *forged* in her paper.

Now we are able to check the central claim raised by Geach and defended by Knowles: the adjectives *good* and *bad* have descriptive force, since they are Class 2 elements, while other Class 2 items presumably are descriptive. Let us assume that all expressions of the type *a good X*, *a bad X* pattern with Class 2, irrespective of the fact, how sentences like *X is good*, *X is bad* are explained. It is then essential to check, whether all Class 2 elements share the same type of descriptive meaning. I have some reservations about that. Primary meanings GOOD and BAD seem to be in-built into complex lexical meanings of other Class 2 elements, albeit in a different ways with different groups of items. Class 2 adjectives like *skilled*, *able*, *experienced* are based on utilitarian assessments (norms of usage) of the type "good for a practical task T" in the sense of Wright (1963a, 1963b), cf. paraphrases like *X is a* ***skilled surgeon*** º *X is* ***a good surgeon***, *X is* ***good as a surgeon***, *X is* ***good at surgery***. There is some standard for being *a skilled surgeon*, *a strong boxer*, i.e. for each kind of utilitarian goodness. At the same time, Class 2 adjectives like *big*, *tall* are semantically vague, cf. Kennedy (2007) for a theory of vagueness, but project a relation to intrinsic norms linked with relevant subsets of the objects: *X is a* ***tall jockey*** means "X's height is significantly above the average value established for all jockeys". The positive value of the relative tallness and other relativized meanings of vague Class 2 adjectives can be regarded as a special kind of non-utilitarian and non- action – guiding goodness. There is no natural explanation of Class 1 adjectives, i.e. generalized classifiers via the in-built components GOOD and BAD: it is absurd to claim that red or carnivorous objects are better or worse than non-red and non-carnivorous ones. I conclude that the in-built normative components that are reduced to the basic concepts GOOD or BAD are indeed characteristic of Class 2 items, but since polysemous or vague adjectives *good* and *bad* are members of the same class, their meanings cannot be interpreted or defined via complex meanings like *skilled* or *big*.

We arrived at the end of our journey. P.M.Geach's essay was published almost 70 years ago, but his ideas remain attractive for philosophers and semantic scholars. Geach's original essay combined a presentation of his logical classification with a polemic against his contemporaries, where Geach applied some linguistic arguments and introduced a terminology calling for syntactic analysis. Likewise, Atina Knowles's paper, which is a modern version of Geach's approach, explores his distinction of logically predicative vs. logically attributive adjectives and unfolds a polemic with Geach's critics from 1957 up to present time. It is a carefully written text and an excellent read. I heartily recommend this paper both to experts and to all interested in logical analysis and philosophy. Several issues remain controversial. I argued that a comparison with the Montague tradition is desirable and that syntactic information at the input can be minimized. But the need to modify Geachean or Montaguean classifications largely depends on the research task. Atina Knowles does not outline a set of such tasks, but if you primarily need a clear picture of Geach's conception and look for a

motivation of his approach, the reviewed article is an ideal companion.

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