

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

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The aim of Knowles' paper is to show that Geach's distinction between (logically) attributive and predicative adjectives is "based on an adjective's modifying behavior and not on an adjective's inferential character" (Abstract). Once this is shown, Knowles claims, it will become evident that "good" and "bad" are always attributive and primarily descriptive. Knowles spends more time on attributivity than descriptiveness, and so will I.

The core claim, that Geach's distinction is based on an adjective's modifying behaviour, is not explicitly addressed before the conclusion, but on the face of it the idea is pretty straightforward. Consider a situation where there is a subject of predication x , predicates P and Q that apply to it, and an attribute M that modifies, not x , but rather P or Q . Take Knowles' example:

"Red" in the expression "x is [a] red car" for instance, modifies x, therefore, it could be inferred that "x is red" and "x is a car". "Good" in the expression "x is [a] good book" however, modifies "book", wherefrom, one cannot infer that "x is good", only that "x is a book". (Conclusion)

If we try to formalize this as usual, Geach's point becomes immediately apparent. Arguably, "x is a red car" may be semi-formalized as follows (treating x as something like a proper name):

$$x \text{ is a red car} = x \text{ is a } P \text{ and } x \text{ is } Q.$$

Geach's basic point is that "y is a good book" may not be formalized like this. As a negative point, then:

$$x \text{ is a good book} \neq x \text{ is a } P \text{ and } x \text{ is } Q.$$

Seen in this way, Knowles is clearly right. Geach's basic point, that "x is a good book" does not divide into "x is a book" and "x is good", is in the first instance a point about the logical form of a statement, and only mediately about its inferential role. It is that "x is a good Q" is not a conjunction, and therefore "good" should not be treated as a predicate according to standard predicate logic. Which leaves us with the question: How else shall we treat it? Apparently somewhat like this:

$$x \text{ is a good book} = x \text{ is an } MP.$$

But this is merely a typographical hint, not a formal notation. It is to extend the vocabulary and syntax of standard predicate logic, which had better be done properly and explicitly.

In the absence of a precise account of predicate modifiers, the distinction between “modifying a thing” and “modifying a predicate” is far from clear. We are told that “red” modifies *x* and “good” modifies “book”. Now of course *x*, the thing of which we say that it is red, is a car, so there is a clear sense in which “red” does modify a car — *x* is a car and “red” modifies *x*. Likewise, the fact that “good” modifies “book” is difficult to distinguish from the fact that it modifies *x*. After all, *x* is a book. There is, of course, an important distinction to be drawn; my present point is merely that it cannot be drawn by means of standard predicate logic. To describe how “good” applies to a book, we will have to say things like the following: “good” applies to *x qua* book, “under a description”, not *de re* but *de dicto*, *secundum quid*. In order to get a firm grip on Geach’s distinction, we will thus have to extend both the syntax and the semantics of standard predicate logic. Our syntax will need to distinguish between predicates and predicate modifiers, and our semantics will need room for a layer in between words and things, to account for the descriptions “under which” things are called “good” and “bad”.

Unfortunately, neither Geach nor Knowles get into any of this. Geach goes on to argue against Oxford philosophers, and Knowles spends the bulk of her paper arguing that certain objections to Geach are based on a misconception.

As Knowles concedes, the authors she addresses do not reject Geach’s claim that “good” and “bad” are attributive adjectives. The only thing that is up for debate is whether “good” and “bad” are *always* attributive and *never* predicative.

For the record, I am not convinced that Geach is right about this. Take, for instance, land mines, and suppose we agree that they are bad. According to Geach, the statement that we agree on, “land mines are bad”, involves a hidden predicate: “landmines are bad *Q*” for some predicate *Q*. Which predicate? Clearly, to say that landmines are bad is not to say that landmines are bad *weapons*. As far as weapons go, landmines are impeccable. They are *good* weapons. Equally clearly, however, “weapon” is the only specific predicate that we ought to consider here. When we say that land mines are bad, we are not trying to say that they are bad paper weights, bad garden decorations, or bad peacekeepers. We are condemning them *on account of* them being weapons. If they weren’t weapons, they would not be bad in the intended sense. They are bad *because*, *insofar as*, and *to the extent to which* they are weapons, although they are not bad weapons. There is certainly more to be said here. My present point is merely that the claim that all uses of “bad” are attributive is not at all helpful when it comes to statements such as “land mines are bad”. I take this to be Pigden’s point about intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM). Here, I think, Geach has exaggerated an otherwise important insight.

As for the inferential behaviour of “good” and “bad”, Knowles says at one point that “[a]ccording to Geach, attributive adjectives ... sanction ‘invalid’ or ‘irregular’ inferences”. (Or even: “Geach argues ... that logically attributive adjectives *never* sanction valid inferences”.) I don’t think this is what Geach would want to say. First, no fact about logical form should ever sanction an invalid inference, and nothing should ever fail to sanction *all* valid inferences. Perhaps the scare

quotes are supposed to indicate that the inferences in question are only apparently invalid, but this is not quite clear enough. Second, attributive adjectives do not actually sanction apparently invalid inferences. Rather, they render inferences invalid that would otherwise seem harmless: Contrary to expectations, “x is a good book” does not imply “x is good”. Therefore, the suggestion that attributive adjectives sanction ‘invalid’ inferences is somewhat misleading. I am also not convinced, by the way, that we can infer that “a ‘thing in the distance is a red car’ from the independent facts that ‘something in the distance is red’ and ‘something in the distance is a car’”. Clearly, “something is a car” and “something is red” does not imply “something is a red car”. Only “something is a car” and “*this same thing* is red” does. But then, these two facts are no longer neatly independent, which undermines the distinction Knowles wishes to draw.

Speaking of apparently valid inferences that turn out invalid: Knowles and others, following a hint by Geach (“‘bad’ is something like an *alienans* adjective”, *Good and Evil*, p. 33), seem to be convinced that “bad” cancels or calls into doubt the predicate that it modifies. Counterfeit money is not really money, a toy gun is not really a gun, alternative facts are not real facts, which makes “counterfeit”, “toy”, and “alternative”, in these contexts, *alienans* (*alienantes*?) adjectives. I don’t think “bad” belongs in this group. Geach is right that “bad”, when applied to books, may cancel certain predicates that we would usually want to be true of books. But it cannot act as an *alienans* adjective in the sense of canceling or weakening the force of the very predicate it modifies, i.e. “book”. When we call a book bad, we do not want to deny that it is indeed a book. If we did that, we would no longer be justified in applying the standards by which we judge it to be a *bad* book. Fake books are exempt from many of the standards that apply to real books, but bad books had better not be. If this is true, “bad” is not an *alienans* adjective.

As for “good” and “bad” being descriptive, I don’t see how this would follow from them always being attributive. To me, it looks like one could perfectly well argue that the modification that “good” and “bad” bestow on whatever they modify is non-natural or commendatory rather than descriptive. These are two independent questions. Therefore, I do not think that by showing that Geach’s distinction is one of logical form rather than inferential behaviour, Knowles is equipped to say anything about the descriptiveness of “good” and “bad”.

All in all, I think the paper makes a couple of good points, and it revives a debate that is worthwhile but seems unfinished. And as it turns out, “good” and “worthwhile”, as used in the previous sentence, are indeed logically attributive adjectives.