

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

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This article deals with Peter Geach's distinction between attributive and predicative adjectives, and tries to place the adjectives "good" and "bad" within that dichotomy. It is divided into roughly equal parts: the first is an exposition of Geach's claims in the now-classic "Good and Evil," while the second engages various criticisms and rejoinders to Geach's claims in the secondary literature. Although it brings up intriguing questions and makes points I thought were worth pursuing, I found the paper poorly organized and at many points needlessly difficult to follow. The title suggests that it is a defense of Geach's claim that the adjectives under discussion are indeed attributive, but it isn't always clear that this is really at issue in the author's polemics. I will point out some points of opacity and suggest directions in which I think some of the author's inquiries could be fruitfully developed.

Early in her exposition of Geach, the author says "Geach does not explain what his logical distinction between attributive and predicative adjectives is based on only how it is recognized" and later reiterates that his criterion "only explains how we know that 'good' and 'bad' are attributive, and not why they or any other attributive adjective is such." I am open to this distinction, but I think she needs to say more to motivate it. After all, it is quite common to identify a given object or phenomenon as an X by pointing to the characteristics in virtue of which it qualifies as an X. How do we know that isn't the case here? I have similar qualms about the later assertion that "Moore further explains, that he is not interested in what the meaning of the word 'good' and its opposite 'bad' is, but what these terms denote." How do we know the meaning of these terms isn't specified by what they denote?

Author follows up that criticism by saying "According to Geach, attributive adjectives are 'inferentially irregular', which makes 'good' and 'bad' attributive since they sanction 'invalid' or 'irregular' inferences." Now, Geach never actually says this. It may be a defensible interpretation of some highly compacted comments he makes, but I think it's incumbent on someone who endorses that reading to explain and defend how she gets to it, especially since Geach's comments on inference are so compacted. Setting aside the exegetical question, though, the question that looms large for me is, why would sanctioning invalid inferences make the use of an adjective attributive, rather than illogical and wrong?? It seems to me the proof might work the other way around if one already accepts Geach's contention that the predicative use of these adjectives is illegitimate.

The author writes that "there are five distinct issues which become immediately apparent. Namely, how are 'good'

and ‘bad’ defined as ethical terms, what properties do they denote, what is these properties’ nature, how are ‘good’ and ‘bad’ defined as elements of language, and what are their natures and functions as such.” I don’t find the questions about natures immediately apparent; I’m actually unsure what it means to specify the nature of a property or element of language, beyond specifying the property itself. In light of Geach’s skepticism about non-natural properties, perhaps more should be said to motivate the question of natures. The last paragraph on that page begins “Geach’s investigation into the role ‘good’ and ‘bad’ play is also conducted with respect to their functions as adjectives – elements of language that is.” So it seems the penultimate question has a simple and direct answer? Why did it appear to the author to be a pressing question in the first place?

The author notes that “Geach does not tell us if he analyzes ‘good’ and ‘bad’ as epistemological or ethical terms, though it seems in the end, these qualifications cannot be reasonably distinguished and adequately explained without considering both.” While goodness is a prominent topic in Ethics, I can’t say I’m aware of any epistemological treatment of goodness. Does it consist in accuracy, reliability, discernment, or something else? Perhaps this explains why, unlike the author, I would have naïvely expected it to be quite obvious whether a discussion of goodness was ethical or epistemological, even without an explicit indication. In any case, if an adequate explanation of the topic really isn’t possible without considering both, then it is worrisome that the author doesn’t take up an epistemological viewpoint, or even refer to it again in the course of the paper. The only other point at which epistemology is related to goodness is when the author reports, without comment, Pidgen’s observation that Geach’s position that “unless you first determine what something is, you cannot tell whether it is good or not” would “turn the argument epistemic rather than logical.” That is an unusual dichotomy, because logic is commonly employed with the aim of coming to know. It is impossible to tell from the author’s brief treatment whether the disjunction is supposed to arise specifically when reasoning about goodness and, if so, how.

The author states that Geach’s “investigation is concerned with logically attributive and logically predicative adjectives only.” What is the force of that “only”? Are there adjectives that aren’t logically attributive or logically predicative?

According to the author, Geach thinks “one 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’.” But one can’t; one needs to add the premise that the red thing in the distance and the car in the distance are one and the same.

As far as I can tell, the author misrepresents or obscures the point of some of Geach’s arguments. She says he answers the question of whether “commending a thing is logically or empirically connected to its being a good thing... by pointing out that if the connection is logical, then ‘good’s function is not descriptive. But if the connection is an empirical one, then calling a thing good is not part of ‘good’s nature.” (Incidentally, this is a good illustration of the author’s disconcerting habit in this paper to open quotation marks without closing them, blurring the line between Geach’s text and her commentary.) Now, Geach does address the question the Oxford Moralists raise of whether calling a thing good are connected empirically or analytically, but I don’t think what’s at stake is whether “calling a thing good is part of ‘good’s’ nature.” The premise that “calling a thing good is part of ‘good’s’ nature” just doesn’t seem very appealing; it seems too

likely that things can be good without anyone calling them anything. Rather, the issue seems to be that the Oxford Moralists want to force a choice between making the connection merely contingent, or making it analytic and having to reckon with the question the author puts thus “How would the description of a thing as good or bad influence one’s choice to act or not act if the function of these adjectives is merely to describe things?” The author describes this as a difficulty in “explain[ing] the ‘descriptive force’ behind these adjectives.” If anything, it seems more like a difficulty in explaining their *prescriptive* force, but that doesn’t get at the heart of it either. Although the author refers to Geach’s of grounding the connection in “the *ratio* of ‘want’,” she doesn’t bring out that Geach thinks the Oxford Moralists are pushing a false dichotomy, or even that they are proposing a dilemma.

In this connection, the author’s account also obscures one of what I personally consider one of the most intriguing subtleties of Geach’s paper. On the one hand, he says normative questions can only be answered with “an appeal to something the questioner wants” and dismisses the possibility propounded by and associated with Kant of “another sort of relevant reply—an appeal not to inclination but to the Sense of Duty.” On the other hand, he tries to recover the force of the Categorical Imperative with an argument that clearly parallels Kant’s efforts to show that normativity is embedded in the very structure of agency: “Although calling a thing ‘a good A’ or ‘a bad A’ does not of itself work upon the hearer’s desires, it may be expected to do so if the hearer happens to be choosing an A. Now what a man *cannot fail to be choosing* is his manner of acting; so to call a manner of acting good or bad *cannot but serve to guide action*” (emphasis added) The author’s gloss on this is that “if donating to charity in our case, is described as good or virtuous act *and one wants to be virtuous*, one will be inclined to donate.” (emphasis added) Rendering Geach’s position thus undoes his work to preserve the unconditional force of normative claims, while grounding it in desires. Kant and Geach would agree that choosing our mode of conduct is unavoidable; that makes it a suitable basis for grounding an unconditional requirement. On the other hand, the condition the author adds, that I want to be virtuous, is *not* unavoidable. Thus, it can only ground what Kantians call an hypothetical imperative. Of course, there are those who would argue that only such imperatives are possible, but that doesn’t seem to have been Geach’s position.

Although the author’s exposition of Geach has its rough spots, she does seem to have been at pains to lay out his position in detail. She is less thorough in her presentation of his critics and commentators. I wonder if that’s a wise choice. Geach’s article is a classic by now, and widely known to readers with a variety of focuses; the secondary literature discussed isn’t nearly as well known. From this perspective, it would make more sense to me to take more familiarity with Geach’s text for granted and explain the secondary literature in greater detail. For instance, the opening paragraph of “The logical distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’” references “Donnelly’s poor interpretation and representation of Geach’s argument” and “Stevenson’s laconic defense” without explaining what they are (although she goes on to discuss an example by Donnelly). This paragraph also attributes to Geach the view that “logically attributive adjectives *never* sanction valid inferences.” I would have liked to have seen this reading spelled out in more detail, since I don’t discern it in Geach’s text and offhand I don’t see why it would be invalid to infer, e.g., “John is older than Jill” from “John is Jill’s putative father.”

Author posits that Donnelly’s cub-scout example can be assimilated to Geach’s argument “by stipulating that all fleas are males and then infer that a ‘small flea’ is also a ‘small male’.” I have my doubts about this. I think a closer look at

what justifies the inference in each case is in order; it wouldn't surprise me if they turned out to be asymmetrical. What if we replaced "small flea" with "small whale"? Would a stipulation about the gender of whales allow us to infer that "a small whale" is also "a small male"? If not, that stipulation isn't doing all the work.

Author endorses Rind & Tillinghast's criticism that "the *inferentially irregular* behavior logically attributive adjective sanctions does not sufficiently define this adjective" without spelling out what that behavior consists in. Geach's text doesn't use that term, so I think it behooves us to specify what part of his argument is being referred to. I can, of course, *surmise* what the term means, but I'd avoid placing the onus on the reader. This is particularly unfortunate because "*inferentially irregular* behavior" seems to be the crux of the author's criticism of Rind & Tillinghast.

I could go on in this vein, but I think the marginal utility of exploring the details would decline quickly: the author fields various criticisms of Geach's distinction, and although some of her replies are thought-provoking, they tend to be fairly quick replies to arguments that are insufficiently fleshed out.

The paper's most original and significant arguments are concentrated in the Conclusion. This is obviously non-standard and seems to me ill-advised. The claim that "if a good man or a good action are predicatively so there is no room for moral deliberation, for being good or bad predicatively means that one is such essentially, and evaluating man or human action becomes an exercise in futility" is intriguing but counterintuitive. To take Geach's paradigm case of a predicative adjective, an apple reddening as it ripens is clearly undergoing a process, and my nose reddening when the temperature drops isn't red *essentially* (as I can verify by going indoors). The paper's closing sentences take up the issue of essentialism again, asking "would not [sic] we rather be called good for we are good, and not because we are commended? God knows, we often commend people and actions not because they are good, but because they serve a purpose. A purpose itself, not always commendable." This seems to imbricate, if not conflate, the so-called Euthyphro problem with the question of the adjective's descriptive force. It ignores Geach's observation that expressions like "a good thief" are too rare and marginal to give the primary meaning of the adjective.

The author contends that the aforementioned inferential irregularity isn't the basis of the adjective's attributivity, but a symptom of it: in fact, as I understand her argument, attributivity is based on the adjective's modificand, which can't be pinpointed based on syntax. This is an interesting view, and I think it would be worth developing into a full account. In lieu of that account, the author contrasts the sentences "John is a good athlete" and "John is an American athlete," observing that the adjective modifies a different substantive in each case. This example could certainly offer material for an explanation of attributivity. I think it could be enriched by comparison and contrast with other sentences, such as "John is a morally good athlete" or "John is a noble athlete." What are the dynamics that govern the relation between adjective and modificand? Two points that I think would be worth addressing are: (1) how this is different from Rind & Tillinghast's position (referenced in passing) that the attributive adjective is "substantive-dependent"; and (2) how she reconciles it with her claim, also advanced in the Conclusion, that attributive and predicative adjectives are different in kind. That is, if the adjective is governed by its modificand, what precludes it functioning attributively with some and predicatively with others (e.g., "good heart" or "good laws" versus "good deterrent" or "good time.") How is the adjective "good" related to the noun "good"?

Personally, I was disappointed that the paper ended without ever defending the author's opening suggestion that Geach would have to "grant Moore and Ross that 'good' does stand for an unnatural property of things good." Why include this if the paper won't even discuss non-natural properties?

To bring this all together, I think this would be a better paper if it laid out the claims it contests in the secondary literature in greater detail, allowing for a more detailed criticism, and made the author's own position more central to the exposition, rather than cramming it into suggestive but abbreviated statements in the conclusion. If space is an issue, I think the exposition of Geach can be shortened with little loss, given that most readers drawn to this paper will probably already be familiar with his.