

SOME REMARKS ON GEACH'S PREDICATIVE
 AND ATTRIBUTIVE ADJECTIVES

JOHN DONNELLY

Peter Geach [3] has challenged moral philosophers with a series of 'insights' intended to show the merit of the derivability thesis (i.e., that one can derive moral 'oughts' from purely descriptive statements, that evaluative terms are logically dependent on certain descriptive terms), and thereby cast aspersion on the "Oxford Moralists" (e.g., Hare, Nowell-Smith, etc.) who disavow such a thesis.

In formulating such a program, Geach draws a distinction between (logically) predicative adjectives and (logically) attributive adjectives¹:

(1) if A is an adjective qualifying a noun B , then A is a logically *predicative* adjective if the predication 'is $A B$ ' splits up logically into a pair of predications 'is a B '; and 'is A ' (e.g., the proposition 'something is a red book,' $(\exists x)(Bx \wedge Rx)$, splits into 'something is a book' and 'something is red');

(2) if A is an adjective qualifying a noun B , then A is a logically *attributive* adjective if the predication 'is $A B$ ' does not split up into 'is a B ' and 'is A ' (e.g., the proposition 'something is a big flea', $(\exists x)(Fx \wedge Bx)$ does not split up into 'something is a flea' and 'something is big,' for if *per impossibile* for Geach such a split did occur, then a simple argument could be formulated to show that a flea is a big animal).

Geach appears to have a point well-taken here with his insistence that 'big' and 'small' function as attributive adjectives. While it is true that all fleas are insects, and that all elephants are animals, it clearly does not follow in either case that a big flea is a big insect (i.e., a flea is surely not the size of a butterfly) nor that a small elephant is a small animal. But the question: "is it always part of the logic of 'small' or 'big' to operate as attributive predicates?" isn't as closed as Geach assumes; indeed it seems very much open. Consider the indisputable claim that all cub-scouts are boys, from which it seems to follow quite anti-attributively that a small cub-scout is also a small-boy. But, if this is the case, then 'small' functions in this context not attributively, but rather like certain color predi-

cates (e.g., 'red') which on Geach's account are always predicative. This casts considerable doubt on the legitimacy of Geach's distinction, even on the level of informal logic.

Moreover, if we allow the propositional function Fx to represent ' x is a flea' and Bx to represent ' x is big,' then it seems to follow (applying such logical rules of inference as existential instantiation, generalization, commutation, etc.), contrary to Geach's stated version, that $(\exists x)(Fx \wedge Bx)$ does imply $(\exists x)Fx$ and $(\exists x)Bx$. In the antecedent clause, B and F are predicates, as the medievals would say, that 'inhere in the same substance,' whereas in the consequent they 'inhere' either in the same substance or in two separate substances. If so, then Geach's distinction between attributive and predicative adjectives does not seem so intuitively plausible on the level of formal logic either. Indeed, what precisely fails to follow is the converse implication that from $(\exists x)Fx$ and $(\exists x)Bx$ we can deduce $(\exists x)(Fx \wedge Bx)$.

Geach further maintains that the adjectives 'good' and 'bad' are always attributive as in (2) above, although he concedes that 'bad' is more properly classified as *alienans*; that is, what we predicate of a bad B we cannot predicate of a B . However, whereas 'bad' functions as *alienans* (e.g., ' x is a forged banknote,' where 'forged' is *alienans* fails to split into ' x is a banknote' and ' x is forged'), 'good' functions differently, so that whatever holds true of a B as such holds true of a good B . Apparently, Geach assumes the reader will find his distinction intuitively felicitous, for he fails to provide a criterion (other than the weak 'split-not-split' criterion) for an adjective's being labeled predicative or attributive. Supposedly, Geach would accept ' x is a forged counterfeit' as an instance of an attributive adjective, and being properly *alienans*, it would be illegitimate to split it into ' x is counterfeit' and ' x is forged,' for such a claim would reduce to the unacceptable thesis for Geach that a forged counterfeit is a forged banknote. To be sure, Geach is simply mistaken, for a forged counterfeit may be a forged banknote, as well. Incidentally it would be no strong objection against my argument to claim that the sentence ' x is a forged counterfeit' is redundantly true, for x may be a forged copy of a piece of legitimate Confederate currency. Indeed, substituting 'forged' for 'bad,' and 'counterfeit' for 'A,' then even Geach himself would have to approve of such a counter-example as he admits: "we cannot predicate of a bad A what we predicate of an A " (p. 33). But if my counter-example is operative, then Geach's distinction fails to be sustained, for indeed, not all counterfeits are forged banknotes. It now follows that Geach's attributive adjective 'forged' can function not only attributively but predicatively as well, so that the basic distinction would seem to depend on the particular linguistic context in question. If Geach should retort that my counter-example is nothing but a verbal manoeuvre, I would suggest that an analysis of 'forged signature' or 'forged painting' would lead perhaps less objectionably to the same results.

If Geach should persist in his demands that whatever holds true of a B as such holds true of a good B , then it becomes evident that a disguised

metaphysical thesis has been smuggled into a purely logical context. That is, Geach is not at all clear as to whether his avowed intention is (i) the *logical* task of analyzing the meaning and criteria of certain words and expressions, or (ii) the *metaphysical* task of examining the things and states of affairs themselves about which we talk, when using these words. Aquinas held the metaphysical thesis applicable to morals that a thing (e.g., substance, being, etc.) is both desirable and good, so that everything that *is* good (cf. *De Veritate* xxi, 2). That is, for each thing x , there is a proper subset G (goodness) of its non-universal characteristics which is such that x necessarily has G .² Accordingly if it is the case that whatever exists is good, that it is an essential property of a thing to be good, it would follow that nothing is evil, that evil is a privation of good. The term 'good' functions then as an attributive adjective, as a predicate that is essential to the nature of a thing (e.g., what Aquinas termed a "transcendental attribute").³ But, whereas my previous criticism of Geach dealt with his logical distinction, both on the formal and informal level, I need not criticize his concealed metaphysical doctrine which invites a host of the existence-of-evil objections.

Enough, I believe, has been said to show Geach's distinction to be bogus. My claim is simply that Geach's formulation of the distinction is bogus, although the distinction itself between attributive (i.e., syncategorematic terms) and predicative (i.e., categorematic terms) adjectives would seem to be a legitimate one. For example, 'is a circular object,' where 'circular' is predicative, and 'is any object' where 'any' is attributive, would seem to support the basic logical distinction in question.⁴

NOTES

1. Oddly enough, R. M. Hare [4], the principal protagonist of the "Oxford Moralists" finds Geach's distinction acceptable, as well as A. Duncan-Jones [2] who remarks: "I accept Mr. Geach's useful distinction between attributive and predicative applications of adjectives." (p. 113).
2. There is an instance where Geach's metaphysical account is logically sound. Suppose the propositional function Mx stands for ' x is a man' and Gx for ' x is good.' Now, if the A proposition reads $(x)(Mx \supset Gx)$, and the propositional function Mx has no true substitution instances (e.g., there are no men), then the property of G notwithstanding, the A proposition in question has only true substitution instances, as all its substitution instances are conditional statements with false antecedents. This 'paradox' of material implication, I suspect, is not what Geach had in mind.
3. Geach, as well as Aquinas, seems to commit here the fallacy of inferring *necessitate consequentis* from *necessitate consequentiae*. That is, if we allow ' p ' to represent the statement that 'Seggie is a man' and ' q ' to represent the statement that 'Seggie is good,' and ' N ' to indicate the modal operator 'it is necessary that,' then it appears Geach wants to affirm such a fallacy in upholding his metaphysical claim, inasmuch as he concludes that $(p \wedge N(p \supset q)) \supset Nq$.

4. To be sure, Geach notwithstanding, certain terms may function both predicatively and attributively. D. C. Dorrrough [1] has usefully suggested that if an adjective is such that it always functions attributively, it be spoken of as a "primary syncategoreme" (e.g., 'any,' 'all,' 'mere,' etc.) whereas if an adjective is such that it functions sometimes attributively, sometimes predicatively, it be spoken of as a "secondary syncategoreme" (e.g., 'poor,' 'many,' 'few,' etc.).

REFERENCES

- [1] Dorrrough, D. C., "A note on primary and secondary syncategoremata," *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic*, vol. XI (1969), pp. 97-98.
- [2] Duncan-Jones, Austin, "Good things and good thieves," *Analysis*, vol. 26 (1965), pp. 113-118.
- [3] Geach, Peter, "Good and evil," *Analysis*, vol. 17 (1956), pp. 33-42.
- [4] Hare, R. M., "Geach: Good and evil," *Analysis*, vol. 17 (1956), pp. 103-111.

University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, Indiana