

ON GEACH ON GOOD

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ABSTRACT: Some objections to Geach's claim that 'good' is always essentially attributive are discussed and rejected.

Fifty years ago, P. T. Geach argued that *good* is always essentially attributive, never predicative. He thought that every meaningful *good*-ascription either is already of the form *...is a good A*, where 'A' is a placeholder for a noun, or could be explanatory reformulated according to that scheme. Moreover, this *...is a good A* can not be reformulated as, or as Geach says, does not logically split up into, a conjunction *...is good and is an A*. This impossibility is suggested as a test of attributivity in the relevant sense: While in cases with a genuinely predicative adjective like *red* we can rephrase, for instance, *this is a red house* as *this is red and this is a house*, we cannot, says Geach, rephrase *this is a good man* as *this is good and this is a man*.

Several philosophers have protested through the years. Some insist that there actually are meaningful ascriptions of plain goodness (to use J. J. Thomson's term). Others agree with Geach that there is no plain goodness, but think that *good* can not always be replaced by *a good A* - there are other ways of being good, they think. Some also hold that whether or not

good should be analyzed in this way or that, Geach's test is not a good one, since it is far from clear how it should be applied, and far from clear what it shows, if anything at all. I shall argue here that most of this criticism fails.

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J. J. Thomson, though generally positive to Geach's approach, argues that there are other ways of being good than being a good A: there are certainly *good men*, for instance, but there are also those who are *good at singing*; there are apples that are *good to eat*, and there are other kinds of food that are not *good for human beings*, just to mention a few constructions that seem not to fit into Geach's scheme.

Several others have agreed, and, if we take Geach's proposal quite literally, Thomson is clearly right – these locutions are not of the form *a good A*. It seems not very difficult, however, to paraphrase them in a way that makes *good* attributive in a perfectly clear grammatical sense. Somebody seems to be *good at singing* just in case he is *a good singer*, apples are *good to eat* when they are *good things to eat*, and some kinds of food are not *good things for human beings*. Attributes can be fairly complicated. We can say, for instance, that *Geach's paper is a very good paper for defenders of the notion of intrinsic value to read*, and no doubt this *good* is attributive.

Hence it seems that most of the ways of being good that, according to Thomson, do not fit into Geach's scheme, can be slightly reformulated, without changing their meaning, in a way that makes *good* definitely attributive. In fact, in the majority of cases, it seems fairly easy to translate sentences with a non-attributive *good* into sentences with a *good* that is

attributive in the grammatical sense. The crucial question is where it is possible and where it is not possible to go the other way round, that is, without substantially changing the meaning, ‘logically split up’, in Geach’s sense, the sentence with a grammatically attributive *good* into a conjunction with a *good* that is not even implicitly attributive.

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Michael Zimmerman starts his criticism of Geach’s splitting-up test from a Thomsonian multiplication of ways of being good. He argues that ‘once a way of being good has been specified, passing the test seems plain sailing’(page 21). His initial example is somewhat strange, however. The example is *x is an apple that is good to eat* and that is certainly not an example of a grammatically attributive *good* - as it should be for Geach’s splitting-up test to be applicable. This sentence is already on the surface composed of two sentences, though the noun of the second sentence is replaced by the pronoun *that* (that is what pronouns are for). Surely, Geach did not want to deny that every conjunction splits up into conjuncts, in this case *x is an apple* and *this apple is good to eat*.

Perhaps Zimmerman actually is thinking of *x is a good apple to eat*, which is a clear-cut case of a grammatically attributive *good*. (For no doubt the ‘A’ in Geach’s formula *x is a good A* is intended to be a placeholder for a *noun-phrase* - which need not be a single noun. Surely, Geach intended *good* to be grammatically attributive for instance in *this is a good human life*.) Here, *to eat* is an attribute of the single noun *apple*, and *good* is an attribute of the noun-phrase *apple to eat*. But applying Geach’s test here obviously would mean considering the conjunction *x is good and x is*

an apple to eat, and one may certainly doubt that this means the same as the original sentence.

Zimmerman then makes the same move with *x is a painting that is good to look at*, which is no more attributive than the previous one, and to which it hence is not possible to apply the splitting-up test, and so immediately turns to *x is an intrinsically good state of mind* and asks rhetorically if that does not also split up into *x is intrinsically good* and *x is a state of mind*.

Zimmerman obviously takes the two previous examples to be relevant for this question, which indicates that he takes *x is an intrinsically good state of mind* to mean the same as *x is a state of mind that is intrinsically good* and surely *that* splits up into two sentences just as the two previous sentences do, but this just means introducing a third sentence that has nothing to do with Geach's test.

This may be plain sailing, but surely not in the Geach passage. If there is a problem for Geach in Zimmerman's examples, it would rather be this: The predicative *x is good to eat* and *x is good to look at* are easily transformed into the attributive *x is a good thing to eat* and *x is a good thing to look at*, but what about the predicative *x is intrinsically good*?

Geach just dismisses the notion of intrinsic value as a philosophical misconception, and that may be begging the question. But we might instead try to apply his analysis in this case too, and argue that ascriptions of intrinsic goodness, if they make sense, can be reformulated attributively as *x is a good A* for some *A*. And there seems to be no difficulty to find plausible *A* candidates, if we look at what the proponents of intrinsic value have said: *x is a good end* and *x is a good ultimate end* and *x is a good presumptive final end* readily present themselves in the literature as

explications of *x is intrinsically good*. Given the explication of intrinsic value that Zimmerman himself gives later in his book, we could perhaps also consider *x is a good thing to promote*, and from the flourishing ‘buck-passing’ trade in the analysis of *good*, we can construct quite a number of other possibilities, more or less similar to that one. That all these candidates differ in certain respects may just indicate that intrinsic value is a good subject of discussion for moral philosophers.

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Some critics have questioned the general idea behind the splitting-up test. What is actually wrong, after all, with the translation of *this is a good car* into *this is a car and it is good*?

This question is justified, if we just look at the original description of the test in Geach’s paper. But we should look a bit further on. A most important qualification of the test is given - implicitly, but still quite distinctly - one page later. Clearly, Geach wants to say that *x is a good A* logically splits up in the relevant sense into *x is good* and *x is an A* only if *x is good* is independent of *x is an A*. For he says: ‘There is no such possibility of ascertaining that a thing is a good car by pooling *independent* information that it is good and that it is a car’. (page 34, on the notion of a good car, my italics). This case is contrasted with the case of ascertaining that something is a red house.

What kind of dependence between *x is good* and *x is an A* is supposed to be there in the essentially attributive cases? Geach does not say anything about that in the paper, but a plausible assumption is, I think, that the goodness in these cases *presupposes* being an A, in the sense of

presupposing well-known, for instance, from the Frege-Strawson analysis of definite descriptions. Here it would mean that *x is a good A* is true or false only if *x is an A* is true. It makes sense to ascribe goodness in this sense to x only if x is an A.

So the general idea is simply this: every meaningful ascription of goodness to x can be translated into a sentence *x is a good A* (where 'A' is a noun-phrase) which is true or false only if x is an A.

This does not mean that in every ascription of goodness which is already grammatically attributive, the A of which *good* is an attribute, is constitutive for the meaning of this *good*. Somebody may argue, for instance, that *Geach is a very good British philosopher*, but argue that this *good* is in no way dependent on Geach's being a *British* philosopher, the relevant property being just being a *philosopher*. Somebody may even say that *Quine was a good American* in a context where it is obvious that what is meant by the *good* is just *good philosopher* and the intended message hence that Quine was as American and a good philosopher.

But explicitly or not, there is, to every meaningful *good*, according to this reading of Geach, a set of things, or perhaps rather *possible* things one would say, the set of A:s, which is the domain of this *good* and such that making comparisons of this particular kind of value is always making comparisons within this set.

Perhaps it would have been better to start explicitly from comparisons, that is from *better than*, rather than from *good*. If we look at Geach's favourite example of another attributive word, namely *big* - think of big fleas and small elephants - there seems to be no big problem to find a set of A:s, namely physical objects, where fleas, elephants and planets can be ordered according to physical size and such that *bigger than* makes

sense without problems, regardless of whether we are comparing fleas to each other or to planets. We then take *big* to relate to different parts of this ordering, depending upon what special kind of things we for the moment are talking about. The big fleas, which are bigger than the small fleas, are very much smaller than the small elephants, but this way of talking of big and small is just a convenient way of making comparisons in different contexts.

With *good* and *better than* it is another matter, Geach could say. We cannot make the same move here. There is simply no set of A:s such that *is better than* makes sense in all comparisons of A:s to each other, and such that we can look at, for instance, *is a better life than* and *is a better world than* just as the restrictions of this relation *is a better A than* to the subsets *lives* and *worlds*. Not only *good* but also *better than* is essentially attributive.

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The attributivity thesis was just the beginning of Geach's argumentation about *good* in the paper in question, and probably not intended to be a main point, (though it turned out to become the probably most discussed one). He went on to formulate a full-blown naturalistic Aristotelian theory, arguing that we can find out just from our knowledge of what an A is what makes a good A good.

Given this Aristotelian turn, it seems somewhat surprising that Geach suggested that *good* is *attributive*. Why did he not instead say that it is *adverbial*? For clearly the Aristotelian turn is to take *x is a good A* to mean

that *x is an A in a good way of being an A*, which is to take *good* to modify *x's being an A* rather than modifying *A*. Moreover certain comments, to be found in some grammars, on certain adjectives which semantically rather are adverbs, might well have inspired the splitting-up test.

Geach's semantical distinction between essentially predicative and essentially attributive adjectives in recent grammatical terminology corresponds to the distinction between *intersective* and *subsective* adjectives (though Geach also included cases such as *false money* among the attributive; they are now usually given a place of their own). The distinction is often made in the way Geach suggested (with the splitting-up test and moreover a test concerning the validation of certain inferences which I have not discussed here.) Sometimes the distinction is instead made in terms of the extensions of the adjectives: In the case of *red house*, we have the intersection of the set of red things and the set of houses; in the case of a *good car* we have the extension of *good* as a subset of that of *car*. Interestingly enough, it has also been suggested (Larson 2000) that the subsective adjectives should be given an adverbial interpretation, just as seems to be implicitly suggested by Geach's Aristotelian approach.

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Could we not attack Geach from the other side, so to say, and argue that the attributivity thesis is trivial? Does not every predicate, be it one- two- or many-place, need a fairly definite domain to make sense? What is so special about *good* and *better*?

Perhaps we could say that if Geach is right, then what distinguishes these notions from most others is that there is actually no standard domain that can be taken for granted. In order to be understood, we had better explicitly tell what domain we are talking about when we use ‘good’ or ‘better’. In contradistinction to the case of (physically) *bigger than*, there is no standard domain of *better than* in relation to which the meaning of the comparisons is determined. Perhaps those who have protested against Geach’s opinion that colour adjectives, for instance *red*, are essentially predicative, are right to some extent. Perhaps *red* does not mean just the same when we are talking about *red dogs* as when we are talking about *red flowers*. It still seems reasonable to say that *red* has a central meaning independent of these particular contexts and that the particular meanings of *red* in different contexts can be seen as slightly different ways of drawing the line between redness and other colours. There is an uncontroversial way of translating the colour-terminologies from different domains into a common standard. To find out that x has a colour that would be called ‘red’ in the context of dogs (but perhaps ‘light brown’ in other contexts), you need not presuppose that x is a dog. There is very little hope of finding a plausible argument for anything like such a basic standard in the case of *good*.

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Geach anticipated the objection from the defender of an unmodified predicative *good* that there is an attributive reformulation of that *good* which the defender of plain goodness too could accept: instead of saying *x*

is good he could simply say *x is a good thing*. To that Geach answered that *a good thing* is then just a proxy for *good*.

That seems not to be a very satisfactory answer. After all, the defender of plain goodness probably primarily wants to defend the unique status of plain goodness, and one way of doing that may be to find a sufficiently inclusive domain. But Geach could have said instead, quite in line with his argument as a whole, that there is no such domain; *x is a good thing* should instead be taken to mean that *x is a good something*, i.e., that *there is an A such that x is a good A*. To say that this is a good thing is to say that this is a good life or a good character or a good end or a good thing for you or a good something else from a probably very, very long list. For the basic point of Geach's way of looking at these things seems to be that there is no notion of *a good A* which is *the* basic notion of goodness.

This is probably the most important difference between him and the plain goodness philosophers, the defenders of one central notion of intrinsic value. They agree with Geach that there certainly are a number of attributive notions of goodness, but when it comes to morals, those notions are irrelevant, they think. What matters then is what is plainly better than what. The alternative Geachean view seems to be that there are moral questions of goodness of several irreducibly attributive kinds. Is this a good life? Is this a good character? Is this a good society? Is this a good thing for these people? If you do not share Geach's conviction that if you really know what an *A* is, then you know what a good *A* is, this multiplication makes morality a basically more complicated matter, but it probably also makes a better philosophy.

References

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