

After pt.

Ch. 5, § 8-
p. 10. A for
Socrates et
critique of Plato

p. 101- 106
be silent or -
- estopped
- Barrett

- particularizing -
- § 6.8. (107)

- On a ~~read~~ discussing simultaneity of
self-contradiction, see § 6.9

§ 11.7 (216) "Universalizability"
- quote in art. near
Kloppe quotes

FREEDOM AND REASON

BY

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PREFACE

THE function of moral philosophy—or at any rate the hope with which I study it—is that of helping us to think better about moral questions by exposing the logical structure of the language in which this thought is expressed. When I wrote my first book, which was a study of the chief moral words, I had no more than a dim notion of what account of moral reasoning would develop out of this study—only the conviction that, if it were well done, our understanding of moral questions would be increased. In the years since, this hope has not proved entirely vain; and, although I am still far from clear on many matters, I think it worth while to publish this progress report, if only to enlist the help of others in becoming clearer.

My views have been the subject of a great deal of controversy; but any reader who is looking in this book for a full-scale rebuttal of my critics will be disappointed. I did, indeed, in preparation for writing it, draft about fifty pages of polemical matter in answer to the most widely canvassed objections; but, having thus convinced myself that they could be answered, I came to feel that the answers to them were less exciting than the positive things which I had to say, and possibly of less durable interest; I therefore put them aside, to appear elsewhere. I have profited greatly from these discussions; but I am obstinate enough to believe that, though they have added much to what I thought before, they have not taken much away.

There will be found, therefore, in this book, only passing allusions to these wrangles. Lest they should be thought to be directed at the views of particular people, I must make clear that, in all cases except where names are mentioned, the

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PART I

DESCRIBING AND PRESCRIBING

He to whom thou was sent for ease, being by name *Legality*,
is the son of the Bond-woman . . . how canst thou expect
by them to be made free?

BUNYAN, *The Pilgrim's Progress*

1 · INTRODUCTION

1.1. I ASK the reader to start by supposing that someone (himself perhaps) is faced with a serious moral problem—one that calls forth all the powers of thought, imagination, and feeling that a man possesses. He will have to supply his own example; for I cannot say for any one of my readers what moral question has troubled him most. If he cannot think of an example, he will not understand this book, and may as well postpone the reading of it until he has lived a little longer.

I wish to draw attention to two features which any such serious moral problem will have, the combination of which seems to confront us, as philosophers, with a paradox, or even an antinomy. The first is that a man who is faced with such a problem knows that it is his own problem, and that nobody can answer it for him. He may, it is true, ask the advice of other people; and he may also ascertain more facts about the circumstances and consequences of a proposed action, and other facts of this sort. But there will come a time when he does not hope to find out anything else of relevance by factual inquiry, and when he knows that, whatever others may say about the answer to his problem, *he* has to answer it. If anyone were to suggest that the answer must be such and such, because everybody says so—or that, even, he would be abusing the English language if he gave any other answer—he will, if he understands what moral questions are, feel that to accept

very difficult question of what *would* constitute a misuse of the word 'it'.

Having explained how the class of descriptive *terms* is to be defined, we can now go on to do the same for the class of descriptive *judgements*.¹ A judgement is descriptive if in it the predicate or predicates are descriptive terms and the mood is indicative. The latter restriction is required because imperative sentences also normally contain descriptive terms (for instance in 'Be quiet' the expression 'quiet' is a descriptive term); and we do not want to have to call imperatives descriptive judgements. I am using the word 'predicate' to cover not only what are sometimes called 'one-place' predicates but also predicates (such as relational terms) which can take more than one subject. Thus my account is intended to cover not only subject-predicate propositions in the narrow sense, but also relational ones. For example 'hit' is a two-place predicate, expressing a relation; the sentence 'John hit James' expresses a descriptive judgement because in it this two-place predicate, which is a descriptive term, is predicated, in the indicative, of the ordered pair of subjects John and James.

2.2. We must now notice the connexion between the fact that some judgements are descriptive and another feature which it has become the custom to call, when we are speaking of moral judgements, *universalizability*. It is important to emphasize that moral judgements *share* this feature with descriptive judgements, although the differences between them in other respects are, as we shall see, sufficient to make it misleading to say that moral judgements are descriptive. Nevertheless, in so far as moral judgements do have descriptive meaning, in addition to the other kind of meaning which they have, they share this characteristic, which is common to all judgements which carry descriptive meaning.

¹ I have used the term 'judgement', here and in *LM*, in an artificially general sense, in order to avoid subscribing to the fiction that all indicative sentences express statements, and in order to leave *some* questions unbegged.

If a person says that a thing is red, he is committed to the view that anything which was like it in the relevant respects would likewise be red. The relevant respects are those which, he thought, entitled him to call the first thing red; in this particular case, they amount to one respect only: its red colour. This follows, according to the definitions given above, from the fact that 'This is red' is a descriptive judgement. 'This is red' entails 'Everything like this in the relevant respects is red' simply because to say that something is red while denying that some other thing which resembles it in the relevant respects is red is to misuse the word 'red'; and this is because 'red' is a descriptive term, and because therefore to say that something is red is to say that it is of a certain kind, and so to imply that anything which is of that same kind is red.

The proposition 'Everything like this in the relevant respects is red' is not, indeed, formally and in the strictest sense a universal one; for it contains the singular term 'this'. But, as I have explained elsewhere,¹ when a singular term is governed by the word 'like' or its equivalent, it has the property of being turnable into a universal term by substituting for 'like this' a term which describes the respects in which the thing in question is being said to be like this. If no suitable word exists, it is always possible to invent one. And so if a person who says 'This is red' is committed also to the proposition 'Everything like this in the relevant respects is red', then he is, further, committed to the proposition that there is a property such that this has it and such that everything which has it is red. And the second part of this proposition contains no singular terms, and can therefore be called properly universal.

It may be observed that the proposition 'There is a property such that everything which has it is red' is a very trivial one, since the property in question is redness, and we know that there is such a property, once we know what sort of word

¹ *Aristotelian Society*, lv (1954/5), 397.

'red' is (i.e. a descriptive word). But note that there are in fact other properties such that everything that has them is red (e.g. the properties of being scarlet, or of being a ripe tomato of the commonest variety). We may admit, however, that, since this proposition, even if it were not non-trivially true, would still be trivially true, 'red' being the sort of word that it is, the thesis that descriptive judgements are universalizable is a quite trivial thesis. It is put forward here only because it will help us to shed light on the thesis, which is itself not so trivial, that moral judgements are, in the same sense, universalizable.

2.3. For the moment, however, let us merely observe that in an apparently trivial, but at any rate unobjectionable, sense, any singular descriptive judgement is universalizable: viz. in the sense that it commits the speaker to the further proposition that anything exactly like the subject of the first judgement, or like it in the relevant respects, possesses the property attributed to it in the first judgement. Let us now raise against this thesis some of the objections that are often raised against the corresponding thesis about value-judgements. First (it may be said) if, in the formulation of the thesis, we say 'exactly like', then the thesis becomes trivial and not worth stating. Nothing, it may be said, ever is exactly like anything else—whether this be regarded as analytic or not need not concern us. On the other hand (the objection goes on) if we say 'like in the relevant respects', we have on our hands the problem of how to determine and formulate what are the relevant respects. And if we cannot do this, it is alleged that the thesis is again valueless.

To this it may be replied, first, that it is wrong to take too narrowly utilitarian an attitude towards philosophical theses; let it suffice that they are true, and let it be left to the future to determine whether any useful results follow from them. Secondly, the thesis has indeed an important impact on the theory of meaning, just as the corresponding thesis about

value-judgements has momentous consequences for ethics. The thesis enables us to illuminate the problem of what is meant by 'descriptive meaning'. This is not surprising; for we derived the thesis from a consideration of what it was for a term to be descriptive. One of the features of descriptive meaning, as opposed to other sorts of meaning, is that it relies upon the concept of similarity. We might restate what we noticed above about descriptive meaning by saying that a descriptive meaning-rule is one which lays it down that we may apply an expression to objects which are similar to each other in certain respects. It is a direct consequence of this that we cannot without inconsistency apply a descriptive term to one thing, and refuse to apply it to another similar thing (either exactly similar or similar in the relevant respects). At any rate a person who admitted that two things were exactly similar, but applied some descriptive term to one while refusing to apply it to the other, though he claimed to be using the term unambiguously, would be showing that he either did not understand that the expression was a descriptive term, or did not understand what a descriptive term was.

It thus turns out that the universalizability of singular descriptive judgements is a consequence of the fact that the meaning-rules for the descriptive terms which they have to contain are universal rules, and universal rules of a certain type. The difficulty of formulating precisely the respect in which the two objects have to be similar is simply the difficulty of determining the precise meaning in which the speaker was using the term. For example, suppose that I say that *X* is red; I am committed to holding that anything which is like *X* in the relevant respect is also red. But suppose that I am asked what is the relevant respect. I shall be able to answer this question only by giving an indication, vague or precise, of what it was about *X* that made me call it red; i.e. by explaining what I meant by calling it red. This explanation, if I can give it, will determine in what respect another object has to

resemble *X* before it becomes possible to, and impossible not to, apply to it the descriptive term 'red', in the sense in which I was using that term. In this particular case an ostensive explanation (possibly a very elaborate one) will be required.

I must emphasize again that I am not making language out to be more rigid than it is. It is, of course, true that the concept 'red' is one whose boundaries are ill-defined. One man might call an object red which another said was not red—and that, not because there was a difference in their colour-vision, but because they had learnt to use the word 'red' in slightly different ways. Colour-cards from different manufacturers of paint often vary in this way; one card may, for example, classify as green a shade which is called on the other some sort of yellow. And a person might *change* his use of the word 'red' slightly; he might come to include in red, shades which previously he included in purple. The history of the word 'purple' itself illustrates this sort of change; the dye from whose name the word 'purple' is derived would now be classified by almost everybody as a red. All I am saying is that on any one occasion of the use of the word 'red' the speaker must have *some* feature of an object in mind as that to which he is drawing attention in using the word. He may be very unclear about the precise boundaries of the concept he is employing (we can use 'red' without having decided what we would say about border-line cases); but there must be *something* about the object in question which, if it were repeated in another object, he would (provided that he went on using the word in the same sense) treat as entitling him to call that object red too. If this were not so, what he said would have no descriptive meaning at all. Thus (if I may be allowed to anticipate my future argument) the alleged difficulty of *formulating* the universal rule which is implied in any value-judgement is simply the same sort of difficulty which is encountered when we try to explain the meaning of a descriptive term as used on a particular occasion.

2.4. Let us now consider a further objection, also on grounds of triviality. It might be said that the universal proposition which is generated, in the way described above, by any singular descriptive judgement is merely a matter of the *meaning* of the descriptive term contained in the judgement; that it cannot be a matter of substance. If I say that *X* is red, I am committed to holding that anything which is like *X* in a certain respect is red too. In using the descriptive term 'red' I must be employing *some* universal rule; but, it might be objected, this rule is only that which gives the meaning of 'red'; it is a purely verbal matter of how the word 'red' is used. Now this I do not wish to deny, in the case of purely descriptive terms; as we shall see, evaluative terms differ in this respect. The universal rules which are involved in the use of all descriptive expressions are meaning-rules; and since these are obviously in some sense universal (in what sense, I have tried to make clear), it seems hardly worth saying that singular descriptive propositions commit the speaker to universal propositions. And perhaps in most philosophical contexts it would not be worth saying. But in the present context it is most important; for I am going on to speak about the universalizability of value-judgements (upon which a great deal hangs in ethics), and it is most necessary that it should be understood what I mean by this. The way which I have chosen of explaining what I mean is by saying that the feature of value-judgements which I call universalizability is simply that which they share with descriptive judgements; namely the fact that they both carry descriptive meaning. It thus becomes very important to elucidate accurately this feature of descriptive judgements.

If I call a thing red, I am committed to calling anything else like it red. And if I call a thing a good *X*, I am committed to calling any *X* like it good. But whereas the reason in the former case is that I must be using the word 'red' in accordance with some *meaning*-rule, the reason in the latter case is

much more complicated. For a naturalist, indeed, it would not be any more complicated; for naturalists hold that the rules which determine to what we can apply value-words are simply descriptive meaning-rules, and that these rules determine the meaning of these words completely, just as in the case of descriptive expressions. For him, a value-word is just one kind of descriptive expression. We may go further than this; for a naturalist is not the only sort of 'descriptivist'—if we may use this term for one who holds that value-words are simply one kind of descriptive word. It is true also of non-natural descriptivists such as Moore that for them value-words are descriptive terms whose meanings are completely determined by the sort of descriptive meaning-rules that I have been discussing. The difference between natural and non-natural descriptivists is important for our argument. The non-naturalist holds that the feature which has to be present in a thing before a value-word can be applied to it is something which can be described only by using that or some other value-word; it is *sui generis*. On the other hand, according to the naturalist such a feature is also describable, though perhaps at greater length, in non-evaluative (usually empirical) terms.

2.5. For the sake of a name, let me refer to the type of doctrine which I put forward in *The Language of Morals*, and still hold, as 'universal prescriptivism'—a combination, that is to say, of universalism (the view that moral judgements are universalizable) and prescriptivism (the view that they are, at any rate typically, prescriptive). It will be useful to make clear at this point that it is not easy with consistency to attack both sides of the doctrine at once. For, as we have seen, it follows from the definition of the expression 'descriptive term' that descriptive judgements are universalizable in just the same way as, according to my view, moral judgements are. It is impossible consistently to maintain that moral judgements are descriptive, and that they are not universalizable. To put

the matter even more starkly: a philosopher who rejects universalizability is committed to the view that moral judgements have no descriptive meaning at all. Though there have been, no doubt, philosophers who are willing to go as far as this, they certainly do not include many of those who have declared themselves against universalizability.

The matter can perhaps be made clearer in the following way. Let us call the thesis that moral judgements are universalizable, *u*, and the thesis that they are prescriptive, *p*. Now there are two theses about the descriptive character of moral judgements which require to be carefully distinguished. The first and stronger of these (*d*) is that moral judgements are a kind of descriptive judgements, i.e. that their descriptive meaning exhausts their meaning. This is descriptivism. The second and weaker (*d'*) is that moral judgements, though they may possess other elements in their meaning, do have descriptive meaning. I wish to affirm *p*, *u* and *d'*. These three theses are all mutually consistent. As we have seen, *d'* entails *u*. *p* is consistent with *d'*, because to say that a judgement is prescriptive is not to say that prescriptive meaning is the only meaning that it carries, but merely that it does carry this element in its meaning among others (2.8). Now, as I hope to show, the combination of *p* and *u* (or *d'*) is sufficient to establish the rationality of morals, or the possibility of cogent moral arguments—it is important that *p*, as I shall show, so far from being an obstacle to establishing this, is actually a necessary condition for it (6.3, 9.4, 11.7): But there are those who think that they require for this purpose not merely the weaker theses *u* or *d'* but the stronger thesis *d*. Now *d* is indeed inconsistent with *p*; and therefore these descriptivists think it necessary to deny *p*. But, because *p* has been affirmed by myself and others in conjunction with *u*, and because the connexion between *d'* and *u* has not been noticed, *u* has perhaps acquired, in the minds of some descriptivists, a kind of guilt by association: 'Some wicked prescriptivists have affirmed *u*,'

they seem to be saying, 'therefore it must be attacked.' But since *d*, which the descriptivists affirm, entails the weaker thesis *d'*, and this in turn entails *u*, it is impossible with consistency to affirm *d* and deny *u*. The major task of moral philosophy is to show how *p* and *u* are consistent. This task is not furthered by those who are so convinced that *d* is required as the basis of the rationality of morals that they reject out of hand *p*, because it is inconsistent with *d*; nor is it helped by those others who are so convinced of the truth of *p* that they reject *u* (which they wrongly think to be inconsistent with *p*). The subject will be understood when it is realized how *p* and *u* are both mutually consistent and jointly sufficient for establishing the rationality of morals; and that *d* is not only not necessary for this purpose, but actually prevents its realization, since it entails the abandonment of *p*, which as we shall see, is an essential factor in moral arguments.

I shall argue shortly that a naturalist in particular cannot consistently deny the thesis of universalizability. But the non-natural descriptivist has, it must be allowed, a way of escape from this *argumentum ad hominem*. According to him, a word such as 'good', though descriptive, has meaning-rules which are logically independent of the meaning-rules of other, non-evaluative words. It is thus possible for him, if he wishes, to admit that moral judgements are, like other descriptive judgements, universalizable, but to admit this in such a trivial and innocuous way that he comes to no harm thereby, even if he wants at the same time to be, in substance, a particularist (if I may use that name for the opposite of a universalist). For suppose that we say to him: 'If you call *X* a good *Y*, you are committed to the judgement that anything which is like *X* in the relevant respects is also a good *Y*.' He can reply, 'Certainly; but the relevant respect is simply the possession of the *sui generis* non-natural property of goodness; an object might be like *X* in every other respect, and I could still refuse to call it a good *Y* if it had not got this property.'

Such a philosopher could indeed embrace, at any rate for all practical purposes, the extremest sort of particularism. He would be maintaining a thesis which is obviously false (for the reasons given in *LM* 5.1 ff.); but the argument which I have just put forward would not touch him. He could maintain a view similar in its effects to one attributed (wrongly, as we shall see) to the Existentialists by some of their British admirers: he could say that we have to examine every object in its uniqueness for the property *goodness* and other moral properties; and that by attributing a moral property to one object we are not committed to attributing it to any other object, however similar in other respects. Of course, if we find another object possessing just this property, we shall have to say so; but since this property varies quite independently of the other, non-moral, properties, this commitment is the reverse of onerous. Everything that the particularist wishes to say can be said—in substance—in these old-fashioned terms without denying anything that I have established in this chapter, provided only that he sticks to non-naturalism.

There is, it is hardly necessary to point out, another kind of non-naturalist who thinks (quite correctly) that moral properties do *not* vary quite independently of non-moral properties, but are in some sense consequential or supervenient on them. *This* kind of non-naturalist will be, so far as the present argument goes, in the same position as the naturalists.

For the naturalist, the way of escape which I have just described is not open. For he is wedded to the view that when we apply a moral predicate to an object, we do so in virtue of a meaning-rule which lays it down that this predicate can be applied to objects of a certain kind; and that the question 'What kind?' is answered, not by pointing to a *sui generis* moral property, but by indicating *other, non-moral, properties* of the object (including perhaps *negative properties*—for the *absence* of properties may be as relevant as their presence).

These are the properties which constitute *that* about the object which makes it a suitable subject for the application of this moral predicate. It follows that the kind of universalizability to which the naturalist is committed is not the relatively innocuous kind which, as we saw, the particularistically inclined non-naturalist can safely admit. For let us suppose that we are having the same argument as before, only with a particularist who wishes to be a naturalist. 'If you call *X* a good *Y*', we say to him, 'you are committed to the judgement that anything which is like *X* in the relevant respects is also a good *Y*'. He cannot, like the non-naturalist, while admitting this, claim that 'the relevant respects' are simply the possession of the *sui generis* non-natural property of goodness. They have to be, rather, some set of non-moral properties.

The effects, therefore, for the naturalist of his involvement in universalism are much more awkward for him, if he is inclined towards particularist views. For he is committed to the admission that, if he makes a moral judgement about one object, this must be in virtue of the possession by the object of certain non-moral features (*what* features is determined by the meaning-rule for the moral word in question); and that therefore any other object which possesses these features must also have the same moral judgement made about it. Thus it is quite impossible for a naturalist to be, consistently, any sort of particularist.

In the preceding paragraphs I have confined my attention, for the sake of simplicity, to the word 'good'. To avoid repetition, the reader who is in doubt as to whether the same remarks apply to other moral words is invited to go through the argument again, substituting other moral words for 'good', and confirming that it still carries conviction. For example, if 'right act' or 'wrong act' are substituted throughout for 'good object of a certain kind', all the same things can be said; and, in view of the very close connexion in meaning between

ought and wrong

'ought' and 'right' and 'wrong', it will require only small modifications to carry through the same argument about 'ought'; this is clear from the fact that, for example, 'He ought not to do that' means the same as 'It would be wrong for him to do that'.

2.6. An illuminating way of approaching the thesis which I am maintaining (namely universal prescriptivism) is to look upon it as retaining what is sound in descriptivism (natural and non-natural), and adding to it an account of the other essential element in the meaning of moral judgements, the prescriptive. The truth in naturalism is that moral terms do indeed have descriptive meaning. It is not the only element in their meaning, and it is therefore misleading to refer to it, as do the naturalists, as *the* meaning of a moral term; but in virtue of possessing this descriptive meaning moral judgements are universalizable, and naturalism has the merit of implying this.

Another way of putting the point is this: both naturalism and my own view lay great stress on the fact that, when we make a moral judgement about something, we make it *because* of the possession by it of certain non-moral properties. Thus both views hold that moral judgements about particular things are made for reasons; and the notion of a reason, as always, brings with it the notion of a rule which lays down that something is a reason for something else. Both views, therefore, involve universalizability. The difference is that the naturalist thinks that the rule in question is a descriptive meaning-rule which exhausts the meaning of the moral term used; whereas in my own view the rule, though it is very analogous to a descriptive meaning-rule, and though, therefore, it is quite legitimate to speak of the 'descriptive meaning' of moral terms, does not exhaust their meaning (*LM* 7.1 ff). For a naturalist, therefore, the inference from a non-moral description of something to a moral conclusion about it is an inference whose validity is due solely to the meaning of the words in it.

The rule permitting the inference would be simply the descriptive meaning-rule for the moral term used, and to accept such a rule would be simply to accept a meaning for the moral word. Conversely, if the meaning of the moral word be once understood, there can, for the naturalist, be no departing from the inference-rule; it is impossible to refuse the conclusion of the inference without altering the meaning of the word. But for me the position is different. Since the 'descriptive meaning' of moral terms does not exhaust their meaning, the other element in their meaning can make a difference to the logical behaviour of these terms in inferences. This is the point at issue in the controversy about whether an 'ought' can be derived from an 'is'.

2.7. It is now time, therefore, to ask what effect the introduction of the additional, prescriptive element in their meaning has upon the logical character of moral words.¹ I shall not try at this stage to define the word 'prescriptive'. Its meaning will not become clear until much later. But let us start by supposing that we have a word which carries the descriptive meaning of some value-word, but lacks its prescriptive meaning. Such a word would be, in its logical character, just like an ordinary descriptive word. To know how to use it, we should have to know to what kind of things it was properly applied, and no more. Now let us suppose that we try to *add* prescriptive meaning to such a word, thereby, according to my theory, recreating the original value-word. Let us, to take the same example as I used in *LM* 7.2, coin the word 'doog' to carry the descriptive meaning of the word 'good' as used in the

¹ It must be emphasized that it is not part of my thesis that moral words are used prescriptively *in all contexts*; and it makes sense to call them 'moral' even when they are not so used. But on the prescriptive uses the other uses depend (4.2, 5.6 ff.; *LM* 7.5, 9.3, 11.3). 'Prescriptive' is to be understood here in a wide sense to include permissions (10.5). Thus the statement that an act is morally permissible is in this sense prescriptive. The logical relations between prescriptions and permissions are too complex to be dealt with here.

sentence 'He is a good man', without its prescriptive meaning. Let us first notice, as before, that the statement 'X is a doog man' will be universalizable. Anybody who makes it will be committed to the view that some man who was exactly like X, or like him in the relevant respects, would also be a doog man; and the relevant respects would be simply those which the descriptive meaning-rule for the word 'doog' specified.

Now what happens if we try to add prescriptive meaning to such a word? The inevitable consequence of such an addition is that the descriptive meaning-rule becomes more than a mere meaning-rule. Since our value-word 'good' is to be used with the same descriptive meaning as 'doog' the *content* of the rule will remain the same; but its logical character will change. The rule will still say that it is proper to apply the word 'good' to a certain kind of man; but in saying this (in enunciating the rule) we shall be doing more than specifying the meaning of the word. For in saying that it is proper to call a certain kind of man good (for example a man who feeds his children, does not beat his wife, &c.) we are not just explaining the meaning of a word; it is not mere verbal instruction that we are giving, but something more: moral instruction. In learning that, of all kinds of man, this kind can be called good, our hearer will be learning something synthetic, a moral principle. It will be synthetic because of the added prescriptiveness of the word 'good'; in learning it, he will be learning, not merely to use a word in a certain way, but to commend, or prescribe for imitation, a certain kind of man. A man who wholeheartedly accepts such a rule is likely to *live*, not merely *talk*, differently from one who does not. Our descriptive meaning-rule has thus turned into a synthetic moral principle.

This change brings other consequences with it. To illustrate them, let us consider the context of the words' use in more detail. I have so far been assuming that the society which is using these expressions 'good man' and 'doog man' has very inflexible standards of human excellence, and that

Prescriptive
Q

therefore no question arises of the descriptive meaning of either word changing. But in the real world standards of human excellence change (for example, on the wrongness of wife-beating);¹ and therefore, if the expression 'good man' is to be used (as it is) to express changing standards, its logical character has to be such as to allow for this. This is done by making the prescriptive meaning of the word primary, and its descriptive meaning secondary.

It is not necessary that a value-word should be treated in this way. There are other moral words whose prescriptive meaning is secondary to their descriptive: for example 'industrious' (*LM* 7.5), 'honest', and 'courageous'. Let us imagine a society which places a negative value upon industry; there seem to be such societies in the world, in which the industrious man is regarded as a mere nuisance. Such a society could never (if it spoke English) express its moral standards by using the word 'industrious', like us, for commending people, only with a totally different descriptive meaning—i.e. commending them for totally different qualities, for example that of doing as little work as possible. If they did that, we should say that they had changed *the meaning* of the English word 'industrious'. The descriptive meaning of 'industrious' is much too firmly attached to the word for this sort of thing to be allowed; these people would be much more likely to use the word in its normal descriptive meaning, but neutrally or pejoratively; i.e. to give it no, or an adverse, prescriptive meaning.

But it is not so mandatory, though it is possible, to treat the word 'good', like the word 'industrious', as one whose descriptive meaning is primary (*LM* 7.5). If we came to disapprove of industry, we should not stop calling the industrious man industrious; but, if we had previously called him a good man

¹ See G. M. Trevelyan, *English Social History*, p. 65: 'But the "lordship" was held [in the fifteenth century] to be vested in the husband, and when he asserted it by fist and stick, he was seldom blamed by public opinion.'

because, among other virtues, he was industrious, we should, if we came to disapprove of his industry *very much*, stop calling him good. This is because the commendation which is the prescriptive force of the word 'good' is more firmly attached to it than any part of its descriptive meaning; we should therefore be likely to keep the word 'good' as a prescriptive word (part of our vocabulary of commendation), and alter its descriptive meaning.

It is useful to have in our language both secondarily evaluative words like 'industrious' and primarily evaluative words like 'good'; and we should therefore be suspicious, if any philosopher seeks to persuade us that we ought in the interest of concreteness to neglect the study of words like 'good' and concentrate on words like 'industrious' and 'courageous' (10.1). The object of such a manoeuvre might be to convince us that *all* moral words have their descriptive meaning irremovably attached to them; but, fortunately for the usefulness of moral language in expressing changing standards, this is not so. To take this line would be to give an account of moral language which is, so far as it goes, true, but not sufficiently general (in the sense in which Newtonian mechanics is not sufficiently general). The account would suffice for the moral language of an irrevocably closed society, in which a change in moral standards was unthinkable; but it does not do justice to the moral language of a society like our own, in which some people sometimes think about ultimate moral questions, and in which, therefore, morality changes. Orwell's Newspeak in 1984 was a language so designed that in it dangerous thoughts could not be expressed. Much of Oldspeak is like this too—if we want, in the Southern States, to speak to a negro as an equal, we cannot do so by addressing him as a nigger; the word 'nigger' incapsulates the standards of the society, and, if we were confined to it, we could not break free of those standards. But fortunately we are not so confined; our language, as we have it, *can* be a vehicle for new ideas.

2.8. It must be noticed that the mere fact that the descriptive meanings of moral words can alter does not distinguish them from ordinary descriptive words. All words can alter their meaning; dictionaries are full of sub-headings which begin 'Obs.'. And even in the case of words in current use their meanings vary from occasion to occasion within at times quite wide limits. And there is 'family resemblance' and 'open texture' and all that. Some people have been misled into thinking that, since descriptive words have these features, and since what has caused a lot of the trouble with value-words is their shifting descriptive meanings, the trouble can be cleared up without distinguishing between the two classes of words. The premisses of this inference are perfectly true, but the conclusion misses the point./Value-words *are* indeed like descriptive words, both in that they have descriptive meanings, and in that the descriptive meanings of both are alterable, flexible, and so on. So, if we cared to concentrate on the resemblances between the two classes of words, and ignore their differences, we could call them all 'descriptive words', meaning by this 'words having descriptive meaning'. But to do this would be to neglect an important (indeed essential) part of the meaning of moral and other value-words; and the philosopher who wishes to do justice to this will have to be more careful in choosing his terminology.

The terminology to which I have myself tried to be consistent is the following. An expression which, in a certain context, has descriptive meaning and no other, I call a descriptive term, word, or expression, as used in that context; one which has prescriptive meaning (whether or not it also has descriptive meaning) I call a prescriptive term; and one which has both kinds of meaning I call an evaluative term. A value-judgement or evaluative judgement is a judgement in which such a term is used; on the other hand the mention of an evaluative term inside quotation marks, or similarly 'insulated', does not make a judgement evaluative. Not all moral judgements

are value-judgements (*LM* 11.3). In *The Language of Morals* I used the words 'evaluative meaning' for the prescriptive meaning of evaluative expressions. This had some advantages, as being a less question-begging expression which did not presuppose that what gave these terms their evaluative meaning was their prescriptivity; but in the end it turned out to be in the interests of clarity to make this, in effect, true by definition (*LM* 11.2; 5.7); and so in the present context I feel at liberty to use the words 'prescriptive meaning' which do carry this presupposition, and are somewhat clearer in that they avow it. To give examples of the use of these terms: 'red', in most contexts, is a descriptive term (though not when used of communists by conservatives); 'good' is, as typically used, an evaluative term, and so are 'right' and 'ought'.¹ These terms are primarily evaluative; words like 'industrious', 'honest', and 'courageous' are, as explained above, secondarily evaluative. All words which are evaluative (whether primarily or secondarily) are also prescriptive; but there are expressions which are prescriptive but not evaluative (because they do not carry descriptive meaning as well). The ordinary singular imperative—or rather, to be strictly accurate, its 'neustic' (*LM* 2.1)—is of this kind.

Now the philosophers to whom I referred just now point out (rightly) that value-words are like ordinary descriptive words in that they both have descriptive meanings, which are, moreover, alterable and flexible in both cases. But the purpose of using the term 'evaluative' is not to deny that

¹ Some writers use the words 'evaluative' and 'value-judgement' in a narrower sense than this. They call judgements containing the word 'good' and some similar words 'evaluative' or 'value-judgements', and distinguish these from judgements containing the words 'right', 'wrong', 'ought', and the like, which they call 'normative judgements'. These two classes certainly need to be distinguished for some purposes, as we shall see; and this is a useful way of doing it. But since I have used the word 'evaluative' in its wide sense hitherto, it would be confusing to use it in a different sense from now on; I shall therefore continue to use it to cover 'ought' and 'right' as well as 'good'.

value-words have descriptive meaning; that is readily admitted, and arguments which seek to prove that they have descriptive meaning are not arguments against my position, which allows this. Nor are arguments designed to show that we can use the words 'true' and 'false' of value-judgements, or that we can speak of 'describing' somebody as a good man. We can say these things of any judgement which has descriptive meaning, provided that it is its descriptive meaning that we are adverting to. Nor do I wish to deny that the descriptive meanings of value-words are alterable and flexible; that this is so fits in very well with my thesis. I am not asserting that value-words are in this respect different from descriptive words. What I am asserting is that the character of what happens when the descriptive meaning of a value-word changes is profoundly affected by the fact that it has prescriptive meaning as well as descriptive.

This can be clarified by means of a simple example. Let us suppose (to use an example which is current) that two people differ in where they draw the line between a 'bush' and a 'tree'. It is possible to imagine situations (for example if bushes are to be cut down but trees left standing) in which such a verbal difference might lead to important misunderstandings. But these misunderstandings could be cleared up quite easily by means of an agreement on the use of the word. In agreeing to draw the line in a certain place they would not be settling anything except a question of meaning—a verbal question. Wherever the line is drawn, the same instructions as before can be unambiguously given: e.g. 'Cut down all bushes below 15 ft. high with the lowest branch less than 3 ft. from the ground'. So classifying something as a bush does not *by itself* entail a prescription to cut it down.

I wish to contrast such a case of purely verbal difference with a case of a *moral* difference, thereby showing that typical moral disputes are not purely verbal, as on a naturalist account they would be, provided that the non-moral facts were agreed.

Let us suppose that two people know all about the income-tax laws, and know, specifically, that a certain method of tax avoidance is perfectly legal; and let us suppose that they know all about the precise tax situation of somebody who is proposing to use this means of avoiding tax. One of them may say 'That would be wrong; it would be going too far; there are ways of avoiding tax that are morally perfectly legitimate (for example by claiming deduction on account of a dependent relative, if you have one); but this proposal goes beyond what I can condone'. But the other may say, 'In my view this proposal cannot be condemned on moral grounds; there *are* methods of tax avoidance which, though legal, I would condemn, but this is not one of them; in my view there is nothing wrong about it'. Now it is obvious that these two people cannot clear up their difference, as in the 'red' case, by a verbal agreement to use the word 'wrong' to cover certain cases and not others (*LM* 3.5). It follows that the rules which these two people are using for determining the application of the word 'wrong' cannot be merely descriptive meaning-rules, although they do, among other functions, determine the descriptive meaning of the term. They are rules having moral substance; in accepting one or the other of them the disputants would be committing themselves, not merely to a certain use of a word, but to a matter of moral principle. So when we 'flex' our moral words, we have regard, not merely to matters of mere convenience in communication, but to substantial questions of morality.

