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The Use of "Good" in Aesthetic Judgments

I

I INTEND TO SPEAK about "good" in such judgments as "Most of Cézanne's pictures are good," "*Howard's End* is a good novel," "This is a good film." But the main points apply to "beautiful" as much as to "good." It is largely a matter of choosing different illustrations for the same general point, and I have chosen "good" in preference to "beautiful" as I want to speak about works of art, and, in particular, about pictures. On the whole we commend the works of man for their goodness, and the works of nature for their beauty.

I am raising a philosophic question. When we get into philosophic difficulty about the use of "good" we are puzzled by the difference between goodness and its criteria, the reasons for goodness—the difference, for example, between "this is good" and "this object balances that," "this line repeats that," "the placing of this figure brings out the psychological significance of the event." We become interested in what differentiates the use of "good" from the use of expressions for its criteria, we become interested in its generality.

This is the problem, and I shall try to show that we can only get light on it by considering the goodness-criteria relation. But this involves a significant denial. Many people have tried to solve their difficulty by giving a naturalistic analysis of "good" or "beautiful." It is suggested, for example, that when anyone says that a work of art is good he means that he likes it, or that it satisfies a desire, or that it gives him a feeling of "objectified self-affirmation." But analysis throws no light at all on the goodness-criteria relation, and I shall try to show that no analysis will give us what we want. We shall also see that all naturalistic analyses misrepresent the situation in one way or another.

Reprinted from *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Vol. XXXVI (1935-6) by courtesy of the Editor of the Aristotelian Society.

I will introduce my view by asking you to consider two different uses of "good," one of which is also a group of uses. There is the use exemplified by "good tennis player," "good knitter," "good Pekingese," "good piece of steak," etc. We use "good" in these cases for what is good of its kind. The goodness of these things depends on their satisfying the criteria of goodness for things of their kind. So this use embraces a group of *specific* uses. On the other hand, we have the *general* use exemplified in "aesthetic experience is good," "philosophic discussion is good." We can bring out the contrast by comparing "philosophic discussion is good" with "that was a good philosophic discussion," we should use quite different arguments to establish each of these statements.

These uses are different—but in what respects? Certainly not because "good" occupies different positions in the sentence. It makes no difference to our meaning whether we say "that tennis player is good" or "that's a good tennis player." Whereas we do get the difference when we say "that discussion was good" (as ordinarily used) and "discussion is good" (but we might use "that discussion was good" to exemplify the general use). The difference does not lie in the position of "good," nor in another and far more important fact. For in *each* case we show the meaning of "good" by considering its criteria—and by not giving an analysis. There is, however, this difference. Whenever we get a specific "good" we can always use a certain type of expression—"is a good *picture*," "is a good *knitter*," "is a good *Pekingese*," etc.; and the words "picture," "knitter," and "Pekingese" contribute to the meaning of the sentence. But if we try to put the general "good" into this form we can only get "is a good *thing*"; and "is a good thing" means exactly the same as "is good." But I want in particular to notice another (though related) difference. It is highly plausible to suppose that my desire for aesthetic experience or philosophic discussion is the criterion for their goodness in the general sense; and, indeed, that my desire for x is a criterion for the goodness of x in this sense, whatever x may be. But it is not plausible to suppose that any of my mental states is a criterion for the goodness of Helen Wills' tennis. The contrast I am pointing to is this: On the one hand we get my desire as a criterion for the goodness of everything that is good in the general sense. On the other hand we get a number of completely different sets of criteria—criteria for tennis, for knitting, for Pekingese dogs, for pieces of steak, and so on. And this is a point I want to emphasize when I class the "good" of aesthetic judgments among the specific uses.

When we say "Cézanne's 'Green Jar' is good," we are not using "good" in the general, but in one of the specific senses. It belongs to the group exemplified by "good tennis playing" and "good Pekingese." I shall try to show that this is the natural view to take. And I shall try to say as much as I can about what it involves. The main thing to consider is the goodness-criteria relation. This is the central fact, and explains the

generality of "good." On the other hand, we must also consider the criteria specific to aesthetic goodness. I propose to discuss the goodness-criteria relation in a relatively simple case, and conclude this discussion with some general observations about the use of "good." But all this is extremely difficult, and I know that the discussion is most inadequate; I then hope to show that aesthetic goodness involves this relation. But why, it may be asked, has the point been overlooked? This is not surprising. The aesthetic situation is very complicated, and its complications have obscured the main structure of aesthetic reasoning. But if we see the structure in a simple case we may recognize it in a more complicated one. And accordingly I lay great stress on the analogy.

Suppose I am looking at a game of tennis and say "that's a good player." If someone asks me "why?" or "what do you mean?" I answer by pointing out features of his playing. I say, for example, that his strokes are swift, that his placing is accurate, and point to the speed of his footwork. In making these remarks I am showing that he satisfies the criteria. I am indicating features of his playing that are criteria for its goodness. And this is what my questioner expected. It is the only answer that any of us expects in our ordinary conversations. We give our meaning by pointing out criterion-characters.

But suppose that my questioner wants a philosophic discussion, and says that this answer neglects the generality of "good." It is clear that "he's a good player" is not equivalent to any one of the reasons suggested above, nor to a group of such reasons. The mere fact of their being *reasons* shows that they are not equivalent, as no proposition is a reason for itself. But it is also obvious that "he's a good player" says in a sense far less than "his aim is accurate," and "she's a good knitter" says far less than "her knitting is even." But though "he's a good player" says less than *one* reason, yet in a sense it stretches over all.

It is at this point that analysis crops up. Suppose we persist in asking "But what do we mean when we say his playing is good? what are we saying?" We no longer expect the normal answer. We want someone to say: "I mean by 'his playing is good' that so-and-so" where "so-and-so" is a set of words that provides an analysis. But such an answer, if it could be found, would not really satisfy us. For we want to understand the generality of "good," and the key to this lies in the goodness-criteria relation. Thus at this point the question: what do we mean? is misleading. For neither an enumeration of criteria nor an analysis will give us what we want.

But let us consider what analysis might be suggested. We shall find the case of knitting quite instructive, for here I can see no candidate at all. It is plain that there just are different criteria, evenness, speed, capacity to do intricate patterns etc. In the case of tennis, someone might suggest "his winning ability." It would then be natural to retort: "and what about style?" This is of course a criterion of goodness, though

a steady and reliable player would be good without it. In winning ability and style we have simply found two criteria of a very general type. A player is good *because* of his style and *because* he is able to win. Let us suppose we are looking at two stylish players, neither of whom is able to win. One of them, we can see, is unlikely to improve, in spite of his style he is bad. But the other is promising. "Look at his style," we say, "he is good even though he can't win." These cases show us something about the goodness-criteria relation. Style is a criterion, but a player may be good without it; and a knitter may be good without speed. On the other hand, a player may have style and not be good, a knitter may be quick and not be good. And consider this: One player is good because of his smashing service and speed of returns, another because of his careful and unexpected placing of the ball, another because of his smashing service and spectacular backhand strokes, another because he never misses a ball. These variations are typical. We sometimes get one set of criteria, sometimes another; and the sets overlap, providing a number of different combinations. It is through considering such examples, and the more of them the better, that we get to know what the goodness-criteria relation is like. It is not, however, just a matter of collecting facts, but of seeing how elastic the relation is.

I shall now attempt to sum up some general points that I think have emerged about the use of "good," and these contain as much as I can say about its generality. We have seen that the meaning of "good" is determined by criteria. And this is to say: that the truth and falsity of "he is a good so-and-so" depends on whether he possesses criterion-characters or not; and that the natural answer to the question, "What do you mean?" lies in pointing out these characters. But, on the other hand, "he is a good so-and-so" is not equivalent to any proposition which asserts the possession of a criterion-character, nor to a group of such propositions. This lack of equivalence is marked by the use of "because" which introduces the criterion propositions. A clear way of stating the difference would be to give a great many cases in which goodness and criterion propositions are differently used. For example: "he is good, but his placing is not accurate"; "he is not good, but has a smashing service"; "he is good, his service is smashing and his returns are speedy"; "he is good, he is steady and reliable, his service is not smashing, and his returns are not speedy."

On different occasions, as we have seen, we judge by different criteria—"he is good because his service is smashing and his returns are speedy"; "he is good because he is steady and reliable." This is certainly not ambiguity. There are not several meanings of "good" as there are two meanings of "plain" or two meanings of "see" when we distinguish "seeing a physical object" from "seeing a sense-datum." The situation, as I have tried to show, is totally different. But nonetheless I should like to speak about variations in the meaning of "good," to say that its meaning

varies when we use different criteria. Some of the differences, I suggest, are striking enough to merit this description. I shall raise the point later on in connection with aesthetic judgments.

Let us now see how the meaning of "good" in aesthetic judgments is determined by its criteria. It will be useful to look at a word like "piquant." Suppose I say that a certain woman is beautiful, and someone replies "Not beautiful, but piquant." I am quite likely to accept this correction; why? Because I see that her features are piquant as distinct from beautiful. And we might point out the marks of piquancy. We might say that her nose is *retroussé*, her chin pointed, her expression vivacious. But in any case we can see that her piquancy depends on her features or expression. And in distinguishing piquancy from beauty we imply that beauty depends on other features (though there may be overlapping).

This example is useful because "piquant" is the same kind of word as "good." But the range of criteria is narrower, and this makes its dependence on them easier to see. "Good" is exactly the same kind of word as "piquant" and "beautiful," but its use is far wider. It is used with *this* set of criteria and with *that*; and so on through an extremely wide range of overlapping sets. On any *one* occasion it is used with one set only, but on this occasion with this set, on that occasion with that, and so on. This in a way drains it of meaning, it is empty as compared with "piquant." So we see the relation between "piquant" and its criteria more readily, but with a little more attention we can see it just as clearly in the case of "good."

Suppose I say that Cézanne's "Green Jar" is a good picture and someone asks me "why?" or "what do you mean?" I should answer by describing it. I should point out a number of facts about its organization, for example: that apple is placed so that it exactly balances the main mass on the right; the lines of tablecloth, knife, and shadows repeat each other; the diagonal of the knife counteracts the diagonals of the shadows. All these objects, I might continue, are exceedingly solid and the shadows exceedingly deep—each thing "is infallibly in its place." I might point out a number of important problems that Cézanne has solved; for example, that he combines a geometrical scheme with the variety we get in natural appearances. And finally I might allude to the profundity and gravity of the picture. In this description I have pointed out criterion-characters, the "Green Jar" is good because it possesses them.

This is the type of reasoning that runs through critical writings. I shall give a few illustrations. Consider Reynolds' discussion of the principal lights in a picture.[1] He praises the "Bacchus and Ariadne" of Titian. The figure of Ariadne dressed in blue and the sea behind her form a cold contrast to the mellow colours of the principal group. But by giving Ariadne a red scarf and one of the Bacchante some blue drapery Titian prevents a division of the picture into separate sections. On the other hand, Le Brun in "The Tent of Darius" mismanages the light. The picture has a heavy air because the principal light falls on Statira who is dressed in pale blue. Reynolds then gives the "Landscape in Moonlight" by Rubens as an example of modifying natural appearance for the sake of harmony. On the one hand Rubens introduces more colour contrast, and on the other hand modifies the natural brightness of the moon. The natural brightness could only be preserved by making everything else dark. Rembrandt in his "Man in Armour" preserves the natural brightness of the armour, and as a result the picture is too black. We get a similar type of criterion when Berenson praises Giotto for representing just those lines, those lights and shadows which convey solidity,[2] and when Fry points out how Cézanne emphasizes just those aspects of colour which convey plastic form.[3] We get quite another type when Reynolds condemns Bernini's "David" for the meanness of its expression,[4] and Delacroix points out that Millet's peasants are a little too ambitious—this, he explains, is because Millet only reads the Bible.[5]

We find in these cases the same kind of reasoning as in discussions about tennis—he is good because his returns are speedy, it is good because the red scarf and blue drapery preserve the balance. And the question "what do you mean by saying it's good?" provokes the same kind of answer, "I mean that the lines balance each other, that it combines geometric structure with variety, that it is profound."

Let us now consider some cases in which I change my judgment. I decide that a picture is bad. Then someone points out its construction, and I see the picture in a new way. The figures had seemed a mere haphazard collection. I now see a diagonal movement in which the figures participate, and as I follow this movement the space recedes, giving a strong impression of depth. And I reverse my judgment. What determines the change? My perception of how the picture is constructed, my recognition of a criterion-character. Or take these cases. I believe that the "Death of Chatterton" and the "Last Goodbye" are good, the one because of its dramatic presentation, the other because of its pathos. But someone convinces me that the one is theatrical and the other sentimental. And now I decide that these pictures are bad.

It is worth while to notice that my *liking* a picture is never a criterion of its goodness. We never say "this picture is good because I like it." I fully admit that we value aesthetic experience because it includes enjoyment. It is obvious that liking is important, but we must not mistake its role. It is not a criterion. Nor is it true, as we may be inclined to think, that we always like what we judge to be good, and dislike what we judge to be bad. It is common to find indifference combined with approval—"I can't see anything in so-and-so, but I believe it's good." And we also find liking combined with disapproval. I may have a taste for the sentimental, and like *East Lynne*, even if I know that *East Lynne* is

sentimental, and that sentimentality is bad. Or I may like a novel because it deals with a problem that interests me, and because I agree with its views. But I may believe that its treatment of the problem is unsuited to the novel form. And in both these cases I condemn the novels for the very characters I like.

I have tried to show that the goodness of pictures depends on their possession of criterion-characters. We give reasons for goodness by pointing them out. The judgment "this is good" or "this is bad" depends on their presence or absence. And this means that we understand the "good" of aesthetic judgments by understanding the goodness-criteria relation. Its meaning is determined by criterion-characters, but the proposition "this is good" is not equivalent to any criterion proposition. And there are rules which determine the truth of the former in relation to the truth of the latter.

And now a few last words about analysis. It is irrelevant to our problem because it tells us nothing about the goodness-criteria relation. I believe we become increasingly convinced of this the more we consider this relation, and that desire for analysis dwindles away. We have indeed found a third alternative, previously overlooked. Our puzzle started when we became convinced that "good" does not name an indefinable quality, and we tried to remove the puzzle by defining "good" in naturalistic terms. We now see that "good" may be indefinable and yet not stand for an indefinable quality, and that it has significance even though in one sense it stands for nothing.

We also see how naturalistic analyses distort the situation. Most of them select a state of mind such as our liking which is not even a criterion of goodness. In looking for such an analysis we tend to look for a mental state which constantly accompanies the judgment that a work of art is good or beautiful. We are struck by some one or other experience such as liking, satisfaction of desire, increased vitality, and analyse aesthetic judgments in terms of this experience. But let us suppose that we *do* find a mental state that constantly accompanies the judgment that a work of art is good or beautiful. What then? It will only provide us with a psychological generalization: whenever anyone judges a work of art to be good he always likes it or it always satisfies a desire, or it always increases his vitality. It does not solve any philosophic problem about the use of "good."

II

There are many points to notice about the criteria of aesthetic merit, and many problems to consider. I am passing over many of these, but certainly not because I think them of little importance. I shall first give examples to show the diversity of aesthetic criteria, and then consider

variations in the use of "good" to which this diversity leads. If we look at certain cases of disagreement from this point of view we shall be inclined to interpret them as linguistic differences.

One picture is good for one sort of thing, and another for something quite different. We may praise a water colour for its translucency and an oil for the thickness and richness of its impasto. We praise the brightness and clarity of an Impressionist painting, but do not condemn a Rembrandt for lacking these qualities. It is clear that we look for something different in each case. We praise a Botticelli for the poetry of its theme and a Degas for its realism. And how do we praise a realistic picture? We say that the artist has caught the exact pose, the kind of thing one might see at any moment. And the very banality of that pose (in the case of Degas) is a merit. But we do not condemn Botticelli because we fail to meet his goddesses and nymphs as we walk through the street. On the contrary, we praise him for imagination of the ideal. And we praise him for his flowing rhythm, but do not condemn Byzantine art for being rigid, nor Cézanne for being ponderous. Suppose we are considering the work of a colourist, a member, let us say, of the Venetian school. We praise it for subtle nuances of colour and for atmospheric unity, the kind that obscures the contour of things. We praise it for richness of paint, for richness and vitality of effect. And if it fails in these respects we condemn it. But of course we do not condemn a fresco painting of the fifteenth century because it has none of these qualities. In this kind of painting we look for something quite different, for perfection in each part, for unity achieved by the balance of independent wholes, for simplicity in colour and thinness of paint, for its simple and dignified effect.

These examples show that there are a great many alternative standards. To a large extent these are set by the artist or school. An artist tries to produce a certain effect, and his purpose is shaped by a number of factors: the use of a certain medium (oil, tempera etc.), interest in a certain kind of appearance (sunlight, depth etc.), in a certain kind of form (classical, baroque etc.), in a certain kind of subject (the poetic, the commonplace etc.). All these factors provide criteria. I do not say that the artist's aim is our only critical measure, but it is extremely important and mainly responsible for the diversity of standards.

It is natural to suggest that we can classify criteria, or at least a great many of them, under the headings of form and representation. This classification is convenient and enlightening. But it may suggest misleading ideas. We may think, for example, that we class all formal criteria together because of a common property to which "formal" refers. But the class of formal properties is heterogeneous. We praise a picture because the parts balance each other, because the colours are orchestrated, because the figures are solid, because the colours are brilliant. These are all formal criteria, but we do not class them together

because of a common property. Classification is important, but it does not reduce the diversity of criteria.

I now want to discuss the diversity from the linguistic point of view. We have seen that different pictures are good for different reasons. Accordingly when we say "this picture is good" we are often judging by different criteria. We can translate this into a statement about language: when we say "this picture is good" we are often using "good" with different meanings. Only we must remember that "good" is not ambiguous, and that the variations of meaning are distinctive.

These variations occur very frequently. We have already seen one reason for this; namely, that pictures are good by different criteria. But there is another reason, that some people *habitually* judge by certain criteria and not by others. It is a commonplace that some people always praise a picture for its form and others for its subject. Each set habitually selects criteria from another group, and, as we shall see, there are other cases. It may be a matter of ignorance. Without historical and technical training we do not know what artists are aiming at, and accordingly are ignorant of a great many criteria. But there is a far more curious reason. We *refuse* to use criteria of which we are well aware. And this is by no means uncommon. Suppose I say to someone that "After Office Hours" is a good film, and he denies it. I then point out its competent acting, its slickness and smartness. He does not deny that it has these qualities, but answers "that's not goodness." But there are many different criteria of goodness in films and these are among them. His answer amounts to saying "I don't want to accept these criteria of goodness—I don't want to use 'good' in this way." We also get more serious cases of this refusal. Thus Delacroix complains of the "modern schools" who look on colour as an inferior and "earthy" aspect of painting, and exhort artists to reject the technique of the colourist. Again what does this come to? "We don't want to accept these criteria of goodness." Even Reynolds maintains that the highest art requires simplicity, in fact monotony of colour, and must renounce the harmony of subtle nuances. This partly explains his depreciation of Tintoretto, Veronese and Rubens. And what does his criticism come to? "I have *decided* to degrade these criteria, and in consequence these artists only paint 'ornamental' pictures."

The point then is this. Either through ignorance or prejudice many people habitually use "good" with certain meanings and not with others. And when we look at the matter in this light we see that a great deal of aesthetic disagreement is linguistic. It is disagreement in the use of "good." Suppose that two people are looking at a picture by Picasso, the kind in which we get abstract treatment of actual objects. One of them says "this is good" and the other "this is bad." The first is judging by its form, and the other points scornfully to the representation (or lack of it). The appropriate comment is, I suggest, "They are using 'good' with different meanings." And this also applies to the dispute about "After

Office Hours." But we need not only consider such complete disagreement. Delacroix, for example, places Rubens much higher than Reynolds places him, and this is partly because Delacroix is willing, in fact anxious, to accept colour criteria at their full value.

It is important to notice that when people disagree in this way they may completely agree about the nature of what they are discussing. The filmgoers may agree that "After Office Hours" is competent in acting, smart and slick. Reynolds fully agrees with Delacroix that Rubens excels in colour technique. This agreement is significant, and fits in very happily with the linguistic explanation. Suppose, on the other hand, that Reynolds was disputing Rubens' excellence as a colourist. This would be a dispute of quite another kind. It would be a factual dispute about Rubens' technique.

There are two more points I must raise before concluding. I shall treat them both in a very sketchy manner, but cannot leave the subject without indicating the lines along which my answer to them would run.

The first is concerned with comparative judgments, "This picture is better than that." Such judgments are most profitable when we compare pictures that resemble each other pretty closely, two water colours, two Impressionist paintings, two Baroque paintings, etc. In such cases we judge both pictures by the same criteria.

But what about the comparison of pictures which are good for different reasons? I believe that in some cases this would be nonsensical. It is nonsense to ask whether Raphael or Rembrandt is the better artist, whether rugged scenery is better than soft, or Gothic architecture better than Norman. In these cases we can only state a preference for one or the other. But we *do* make comparative judgments where the criteria are different. Raphael's "School of Athens" is better than a water colour by Crome or a cartoon by Max Beerbohm. But Crome and Beerbohm were aiming at completely different ends from Raphael, and their pictures may be perfect of their kind. The explanation of these comparative judgments is, I believe, that some criteria are higher than others. I mean by this simply that when pictures excel by some criteria we say they are better than if they excel by others. The criteria by which Raphael excels, such as space, composition, organization of groups, expressiveness, dignity, are among the very highest.

The second question is closely connected, and has probably been provoked by many of my statements. What is the guarantee of a criterion? What determines the truth of "so-and-so is a criterion for goodness in pictures"? The guarantee, I would answer, lies in its being used as a criterion. Organization of groups, space composition, profundity, etc., are criteria of goodness because they are used as such. But we must face a difficulty. Who is it that uses them? It is true that some are in general use. A large number of people would praise a picture for its profundity. There is also the important fact that we often use criteria without being

able to name or distinguish them. But we must acknowledge that some are only used by critics, and not even by all of them. We must admit that criteria are not firmly fixed, like the points (at any one time) of a Peking-ese. But it completely misrepresents the situation to say they are not fixed at all.

Perhaps I should also point out that the fixing of criteria is one thing, and their use another. When we make aesthetic judgments we are using criteria, and not talking about the circumstances in which they are fixed. They are fixed by certain people who no doubt have their reasons for preferring some to others. But we do not refer to these facts in our aesthetic judgments.

I have been constantly harping in this paper on the judicial office of aesthetic judgments, and feel that I must supply an antidote, for I have no desire to exalt this office. I believe, it is true, that the judgments we make in pointing out criteria are the most profitable judgments to make. But we need not make them with judicial intent. It is far better to say "Cézanne was interested in this and that, we can find so-and-so in his pictures." The great thing is to discover what a work of art is like.

Notes

1. *Discourses*, Seeley & Co., London, 1905, pp. 245-52.
2. *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance*. The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1930, pp. 70-71.
3. *Cézanne*, Hogarth Press, London, 1927, pp. 39-40.
4. *Discourses*, p. 71.
5. *Journal*, Librairie Plon, Paris, 1893, vol. 2, p. 61.

MARGARET MACDONALD

Some Distinctive Features of Arguments Used in Criticism of the Arts

. . . THE LOGICAL TYPE of value judgments affects the question whether critical discussion is argument to prove true and false propositions. I shall assume it to be generally agreed that value judgments are not simply descriptions of physical or psychological fact. For the statement that an object has certain physical qualities or an observer certain states is not an evaluation. "This is good" does not *say* either "This has certain observable qualities" or "I admire this." Nor shall I recapitulate the arguments against the view that judgments of aesthetic value assert the presence in an object of the non-natural quality "aesthetic goodness" or "beauty." Moreover, while those who affirm value judgments take favourable or unfavourable attitudes to what is evaluated, value judgments seem to do more than express personal attitudes. They are "objective" at least to the extent that those who agree or disagree with them do so without necessarily referring to any private feeling or sentiment. "I admit that Raphael is a great painter but I do not like his work; it does not move me." Such a statement is not self-contradictory, and very often true. If so, it is hard to believe that "Raphael is a good painter" expresses a favourable attitude which the speaker denies. To suppose that he is expressing the attitude of no one in particular (if, indeed, this makes sense) is to remove the chief charm of the theory. "This is good" is ostensibly similar to "this is red." If "good" does not name a simple quality like "red" then the sole alternative, it has been supposed, is that it names a simple feeling in the assertor. But "This is good" also has the form of the impersonal verdict "He is guilty" with which it may perhaps be more profitably compared.

Reprinted from *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Vol. XXIII (1949) by courtesy of the Editor of the Aristotelian Society.