IS GRACEFULNESS A SUPERVENIENT PROPERTY?

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G. E. Moore, R. M. Hare and other recent analysts have contended that good is a supervenient property, i.e. that if one object possesses it and another lacks it, they must differ in some other property as well. As Hare observes, it would be improper to say of two pictures P and Q that “P is exactly like Q in all respects save this one, that P is a good picture and Q not,” for “there must be some further difference between them to make one good and the other not.” ¹ In the present paper, I shall consider whether the same point is true of the aesthetic quality gracefulness. There is, at any rate, a prima-facie case for supposing that gracefulness may be supervenient, namely that if anyone applies the term “graceful” to an object, he can appropriately be asked for a reason.

To say that gracefulness is a supervenient property is to imply at least two things: first, that it is a property, and second, that whenever an object is graceful, some other property of that object is a sufficient condition of the object’s being graceful. If either of these two requirements fails to be met, gracefulness cannot be a supervenient property. Therefore, let us examine them, for the answer to our question depends on their truth-value. In Part I, we shall consider the first, and in Part II, the second. Part III will provide an explanation of the conclusions reached in the earlier sections. It will be framed in terms of a metaphysic drawn from the writings of G. F. Stout and Donald C. Williams.

If we had a sufficient condition for saying that the adjective "graceful" signifies a property, we could infer that the abstract noun "gracefulness," which is formulated from the adjective, designates a property, and that gracefulness therefore is a property. Thus, let us search for such a condition. The first idea that comes to mind is that we may be able to derive one from the familiar phenomenon of true predication. If we assumed that any statement in which an adjective is asserted of an object is true only if the adjective signifies a property that inheres in the object, and that "graceful" can be asserted of some object in a true statement, we could conclude immediately that "graceful" signifies a property and that gracefulness therefore is a property. As it stands, however, this approach seems inadequate. For neither of these assumptions is obviously true, and the first of them is very likely false. Let us therefore try to refine the proposed condition so as to avoid these difficulties.

We may do so by going through a two-step process. The first step is to divide into the following three classes a large collection of singular true utterances that contain predicate adjectives: (1) those in which the adjective clearly stands for a property that inheres in the object to which it is applied, e.g. "Van Gogh's Sunflowers is predominantly yellow"; (2) those in which it clearly does not, e.g. expressions of subjective reaction, such as "This ice cream cone is yummy"; and (3) doubtful cases, e.g. moral judgments, such as "Caligula was wicked," and critical claims, such as "The Apollo of Praxiteles is delicate." Secondly, we must search for a feature that is displayed by many members of the first class and by none of the second. Such a feature probably would be a sufficient condition of property-signification; and if some of the doubtful cases should display it, their predicate adjectives tentatively may be regarded as standing for properties also. Moreover, one could formulate an abstract noun from such an adjective and infer that it designates the property for which the adjective stands.

If we examined a list of the foregoing sort, in our search