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DESCRIPTION AND EVALUATION

An Examination of Julius Kovesi's
Philosophy of Language

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Kovesi maintains (1) that the key to understanding a term is to be found not in empirical similarities among observable things and events but in the human needs and interests incorporated in what he calls the formal elements of our notions, (2) that these formal elements also provide, where appropriate, standards for evaluation, (3) that this is true of moral and non-moral notions alike, the differences between moral and other notions, between moral and other judgements and between practical and theoretical reasoning being differences in ingredients or subject matter rather than in logic, and (4) that the distinction between description and evaluation has, traditionally, been incorrectly drawn.

In this essay I examine these theses and the arguments used to support them, and conclude that, if extended more widely than Kovesi envisages and interpreted with care, they are inherently plausible and are more attractive than some obvious rivals.

The first chapter is devoted mainly to elucidating the technical terms 'form' and 'matter', comparing them with the more familiar 'necessary' and 'contingent', with Aristotle's 'form' and 'matter' and with Plato's 'form'. Chapter two concentrates on Kovesi's theses (1) and (2), with particular emphasis on the requirement that language be public and on the notion of following a rule, finding that (1) applies not only to terms but also to a variety of speech acts. In chapters three and four I examine thesis (3), finding it adequately supported, but disagreeing with two consequences Kovesi draws from his view of moral notions. I also consider whether he is committed to the view that we create the world through the notions

we form, arguing that despite appearances he is not committed to such a view, and that the question whether we do so create the world lacks sense. Chapter five is concerned primarily with theses (4) and (2), with particular attention to the question whether we must all have the same notions in order to understand each other, and to just how the differences in ingredients or subject matter mentioned in (3) are to be specified. I conclude that a public language is possible without our all having, in the appropriate sense, exactly the same notions, and suggest that the difference between moral and other notions lies not in some single moral point of view but in what is regarded as central to the notion of a person.

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