



Thick Evaluation

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Understanding Others and Having Confidence

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter considers the other two worries for nonseparationism listed in Chapter Two. First, nonseparationists routinely say that in order to understand and fully master a concept one has to 'latch onto' the point of it and why people use it. But what does 'latch onto' mean and does it commit nonseparationists to an outlandish view of how people, particularly anthropologists, understand other people and their evaluative concepts? Second, do nonseparationists have the resources to explain how one can criticize other people's evaluative practices legitimately and engage in normative criticism of others? I argue that nonseparationism emerges strongly after consideration of both worries.

Keywords: anthropology, concept mastery, evaluative practice, legitimate criticism, normative criticism, understanding others

8.1 Introduction

In Chapter Two, §2.6(d), I indicated two worries for nonseparationists, among four.¹ In this chapter I address them.

First, nonseparationists routinely say that in order to understand and fully master a concept one has to 'latch onto' the point of it and why people use it. It is a claim that has been prominent in the literature. But what does 'latch onto' mean? Does it mean sharing the evaluation involved in the concept and the entire point of it? If it does, that seems strange because it appears we can easily understand other people's evaluative concepts without sharing such concepts and sincerely agreeing with their point and use.² If such 'latching onto' is interpreted strongly and if it is further viewed as a necessary condition for

understanding, then it would seem to make the understanding of others' concepts and points of view impossible.

Second, we saw that nonseparationists are accused of not having the resources to explain how normative criticism of others is possible. (Blackburn used the example of CUTE to make the point.) Apparently, if nonseparationism is correct, people can merely describe the fact that other people hold concepts different from theirs, and they must uncritically accept that there are just different ways of valuing the world, different 'organic whirls'.

(p.166) These are more or less the worries, but I articulate them further below. I begin with the first criticism, in §8.2, and explain why it is supposed to be a worry for nonseparationists. In §8.3 I show how we can solve it or, rather, show why it is not so much a problem at all. I do not have the space to pursue all of the details of a solution, but all that is needed here is an indication of how the problem is resolved. The real value, I think, is not in solving a potential problem, but in making explicit how understanding others' evaluations works from a nonseparationist point of view. Along the way I contrast nonseparationism with separationism again. This allows me to accommodate one of the desiderata mentioned in Chapter Two, namely an explanation of how disputes work. (The other desideratum mentioned was evaluative flexibility.) I also highlight a problem for separationism. I take this problem to be an echo of the problems discussed in Chapters Five and Six rather than a substantially new and different point. But it is worth highlighting all the same since it contributes to the narrative that separationism ends up looking odd.

In §8.4 I address the second concern. In §8.5 I move the discussion on a little, while staying within the general topic of encountering and trying to understand others. I discuss Williams' view of what is likely to happen when we meet other societies and consider how their members categorize matters evaluatively. I use this to provide perspective on the previous discussion. I do not have much to say about Williams' own account, aside from the fact that I believe he is slightly too pessimistic. At the end I introduce a criticism of separationism based on Williams' ideas due to A. W. Moore. This again echoes comments of mine from Chapter Six. In §8.6 I also offer a note on the thin in the light of Williams' views, as promised. In §8.7 I conclude.

8.2 The Problem of Understanding Others

Recall that Williams, in referencing the idea of a thick concept, cites Foot and Murdoch. His full words are:

The idea that it might be impossible to pick up an evaluative concept unless one shared its evaluative interest is basically a Wittgensteinian idea. I first heard it expressed by Philippa Foot and Iris Murdoch in a seminar in the 1950s.³

This is ambiguous as we will see. (We will also see that Williams clarifies what he means.) But one way of reading this—perhaps the natural way of reading this—is to think that if an anthropologist, say, is to understand the evaluative concepts of some group she is investigating, then we must assume that she holds and applies such concepts sincerely. That is, she is in agreement with the group's evaluations. If she is not in agreement, then she will fail to understand how their concepts should typically be withheld and applied.

(p.167) We normally think that anthropologists can easily understand other people and their concepts without sincerely holding the evaluations associated with such a concept. McDowell, in a throwaway line, assumes this is the case and the possible worry no worry at all.⁴ Why, then, is this supposed to be a problem for nonseparationism? Recall that nonseparationists say that evaluative concepts are shapeless with respect to the descriptive because they are human tools and lying behind such things are highly complex human interests and motivations. The suspicion is that nonseparationists then have to say that unless you share the interests and motivations that shape, and are reflected by, an evaluative concept you will fail to judge what falls under it correctly. And if you fail to do that, then it (supposedly) shows you have not understood the concept. So it seems as if nonseparationists are committed to an implausible view of how people come to understand other people's evaluative concepts and outlooks.

Separationists are seemingly on firmer ground. (I mentioned this in Chapter Two §2.6(d) also.) If we assume that there is a division between descriptive and evaluative stuff, then we can easily conceptualize the success of anthropological investigation along separationist lines: an anthropologist follows and transcribes all of the situations to which a concept applies in descriptive terms, and then she can choose to apply or withhold some pro or con evaluation afterwards, in accordance with the group she is investigating or otherwise. Some separationist positions may complicate that story, but the core idea remains intact.

Furthermore, despite my use of anthropology and of 'seemingly alien groups', this is a worry for any sort of situation where we are called upon to try to understand those who evaluate differently from how we do. That includes understanding your neighbours and your close loved ones, as well as understanding societies that are quite different from you such as those on the other side of the world or on Mars.

8.3 Soothing the Worry

I introduce two examples so as to make some ideas clear. These pick up the final thought of the previous section. It may be that members of a group have a concept TABOO that is just like ours, and thus are somewhat close to us. However, they apply it to actions, people, and other things that an anthropologist would not normally think of as taboo. Second, and more radically, in a second case a group has a concept SCHMABOO. This is like TABOO but

which incorporates interesting twists and grave departures; for example, 'it does not apply after dark', 'it applies only to the activities of physically disabled people', and 'is punishable by death'. They are a group that are, in conceptual terms, a lot further away from our anthropologist. Of course, an **(p.168)** anthropologist and her team will need to exercise skill and judgement in working out the differences between these two cases.

How do we solve the problem or, better, soothe the worry and show that this is not such a problem after all? The key thing to note is that there is a shift across a vague and grey area. Nonseparationists are committed to thick evaluative concepts being evaluative, and therefore that in order to understand others' evaluative concepts you have to take that into account. Indeed, it is often said that non-users of the concept have to 'appreciate' its point. (I made much of this idea in Chapters Five and Six.) But to appreciate the point is one thing; to sincerely hold the evaluation expressed using the concept is another. It is this last possibility that creates the problem, and so nonseparationists need to make sure they can resist it and remain true to their position.

In order to show how they can easily do this, let us begin by returning to Williams. His wording of "shared its evaluative interest..." may suggest 'holding sincerely' the specific evaluation expressed by the concept, and even the reason or reasons behind it being used in the first place. Yet one can also read this remark as suggesting something else, namely that what must be held is some *more general* interest or set of interests that are given voice by the concept. (Indeed, in the main text, Williams voices this.⁵) Even if our anthropologist does not hold sincerely the specific evaluation expressed by SCHMABOO (that is, some con evaluation towards particular activities done by particular types of person on particular days), she has some general evaluative interests that the concept taps into, namely taking some negative evaluative stances to (non-specified) certain people in certain circumstances. After all, there will be concepts in her repertoire, such as TABOO as well as (perhaps) BLAME, APPROPRIATE, LIMIT, and REASONABLE (and LEWD, GRUESOME, and BARBARIC), that will have clear links and import. Indeed, TABOO is a thick concept. 'Taboo' means more than just 'impermissible'. It means that in certain, many, or all contexts a certain sort of behaviour is unacceptable because it contravenes serious rules and norms, with significant consequences to follow if certain actions are done. Taboo activities are 'beyond the pale'. With that in mind, our anthropologist will be able to make finer discriminations and interpretations of what the group does and how it categorizes. There is a keen interest among humans to conceptualize some matters in this fashion: to indicate things that are seriously wrong in a certain manner.

Indeed, this now shows us how the nonseparationist can resist the problem. When we compare the two concept examples I presume that attention focuses immediately on the radical SCHMABOO. But let us instead start with the case of

TABOO. We imagine, indeed stipulate, that our anthropologist has TABOO. Part of her task is to work out whether the group has any concepts that map onto hers. After a while she is able to conclude that, although it maps onto different things—perhaps different foodstuffs, play activities, and sexual orientations—the concept is the same. She concludes there **(p.169)** is just a difference in application. Part of the skill of being an anthropologist, at least through a philosopher's eyes, is being able to distinguish a situation where there is a difference in applications of the same concept and different conceptions of the same concept from a situation where there are just different concepts at issue. (And the criteria for this will be complicated and possibly difficult or impossible to articulate in a highly specific way.) The former sort of case places the anthropologist closer to the group, and we can use that to understand the latter sort of case.

In the former case she may employ the same concept, but she does not apply it to the same items. This may mean that there is a difference in conception of the concept.⁶ Yet, despite this, it is easy to see how she could understand the different conception. Why? She holds the general evaluative interest of the concept—as we just saw when discussing the Williams' quotation—and, because of this, she is able to appreciate why the concept is applied to the items it is applied to, even if she is slightly surprised every so often with how the concept is used.

It is a short stretch from here to the more radical sort of case of SCHMABOO. For then she begins to note that not all is at it is in her social world. She finds that the word applies to types of thing she does not normally think it should apply to at all, and she finds that certain limits are put on the concept that, in her normative view, make little sense. This could be a long, frustrating process as she tries to make sense of what exactly is going on. Part of this process will be questioning whether she is dealing with TABOO or whether she is justified in describing the tribe as using a different, but related, concept altogether.

This is still all perfectly fine on the nonseparationist reading. As I have tried to draw out, understanding can occur while keeping fast to the chief nonseparationist idea, that evaluation is essentially what a thick concept is all about. So long as our anthropologist shows an appreciation of the evaluation involved in the concept, she **(p.170)** will be able to understand it. We can see how she is able to do this by linking it to what she does know and how she does evaluate.

Two further points emerge. First, in this book I have often talked of the 'evaluative point' of the concept, or similar, something that we must appreciate. This is normally in the context of appreciation of the point of the concept, one's reason or reasons for holding it and applying it. Such a matter will be quite a complex affair, and mastery of a concept may sometimes not be easy. This

connects with other times I have used the phrase 'evaluative point', to indicate some specific pro, con or neutral evaluation (of some strength) of some item. These two uses come together, of course: in appreciating what a concept is and how it should be used, one has to appreciate when and why one should take some pro or con stance towards something. What an anthropologist has to do is appreciate this range of specific evaluations, and understanding why it is that they apply and when.

This complicates our question, for we should strictly ask whether an anthropologist has to hold sincerely all of the specific evaluative points that a concept is used to convey across many contexts. But that is no real problem. And, all of this fits nicely with the above train of thought. For there is a general evaluative interest in using a concept and using it to express a range of ideas and seeing it function.

Second, I have set things up so that we have a difference between appreciation and sincere holding, and tried to articulate how 'appreciation' is consistent with nonseparationism. As we see when we read anthropological accounts, and as we can easily suppose anyway, when understanding others and their concepts, certain states of mind, such as imagination, pretence and role-play will be used. We can understand other people's concepts only if we can draw on our own. Part of that process involves imagining what we would do in this situation and seeing how that possibility compares with what happens. Further, we might pretend to be the sort of person we are investigating: drawing on our concepts as a way to think our way into their mind. So in our imagined scenario, our anthropologist looks at the types of thing that the group is averse to, and plays around with her concepts that express types of impermissibility. She notes that *that* sort of impermissibility seems very similar to what she thinks of as being taboo, even if there are a few differences in some cases. All the time she has to have some general appreciation of the type of thing going on and what the concept is used for, and she can do that only if she has in mind her concepts.

This whole section is simply a sketch of what a nonseparationist can say. One question worth pursuing is how the different stances and states of mind, such as imagination and pretence, work in this context and how we can finely distinguish them. This would be interesting work in philosophy of mind, say. For reasons for space I do not do that work here.

So even if the details require more work, I think we can safely put the first worry of this chapter aside. Two last topics are required, however.

(p.171) First, I have made out that we would expect that an anthropologist would draw on her concepts to understand others. But does she *have* to? Or, to ask this question in another way, where does separationism stand? Could an

anthropologist understand others' concepts by thinking only in purely descriptive concepts?

What seemed to be a good position now looks odd, and its oddity underscores some of the points from Chapter Five. Is it really possible to note down all of the descriptive information in order to form the concept? We might be able to do that with a friendly insider's help, but after she leaves us would we be able to go on with confidence that we had mastered or captured the concept? It is only by appreciating the contours of our own concepts, and thinking about why they group certain events and situations together, that we can even hope to map the contours of other people's concepts and, at a second-order level, judge how alien or close to our own concepts they are. Separating the evaluative from the descriptive does not seem the best way to understand, simply because we are trying to understand other human's evaluations. Putting our evaluations aside and focusing just on the descriptive when understanding other evaluative concepts (or potentially evaluative concepts)—when put plainly like that—seems a recipe for disaster.

Furthermore, there is an oddity to be repeated from Chapter Six. There I cast strong doubt on there being a clear split between evaluative and descriptive concepts anyway. Trying to understand the contours of how a tribe uses a concept, which seems like a good candidate for our concept TABOO, and then deciding whether it is TABOO or perhaps even SCHMABOO, will require use of many concepts and ideas in the anthropologist's repertoire. What types of concept will be off-limits, according to separationists? Presumably INAPPROPRIATE, ILLICIT, and IMPERMISSIBLE. But what also of FORBIDDEN, PROHIBITION, VETO, and the like? The separationist response is obvious. With all of these we can supposedly offer some sort of separationist analysis: something descriptive combined with some negative element. The points I raise now are twofold. First, it is unclear to me whether these concepts are free from evaluation, or are simply nonevaluative, in the way separationists think. Second, even assuming that there exist some clear descriptive concepts (and I have allowed that), then this group may not be an adequate basis for an anthropologist to do her work effectively. CHAIR, TABLE, and their ilk will be in the group of kosher concepts, but they hardly make for a good basis for anthropological understanding. I have raised doubts about concepts such as JUSTIFIED, SIMILAR, and many more such concepts in Chapter Six. (This is just restating the first worry above, again.) I think it highly doubtful that unarguably nonevaluative concepts such as LEFT, RIGHT, TABLE, CHAIR, and their ilk, plus some separable and separated PRO and CON, will be enough basis on which to understand other societies, let alone allow one to achieve mastery of alien concepts.

A second topic needs to be cleared up. Recall that in Chapter Two I said that any account of thick concepts should explain how disputes work. I indicated that there **(p.172)** was a tension between the two broad types of separationism. Simple separationists seemed better at accommodating (a type of) evaluative flexibility while complex separationists seemed better able to accommodate disputes and to ensure that people could understand one another and not talk past one another.

I have already shown how nonseparationism can accommodate evaluative flexibility. Everything is already in place to show how disputes work. The key, put simply, is that right at the heart of any nonseparationism is a focus on mastery of concepts and an appreciation of the point of their use, including the evaluative aspect. When one turns one's attention to others' concepts, one does so through the language of understanding their concepts. Right at the start the theorist states that one can understand others only by understanding their concepts. From here one can get easily to a point to explaining how disputes work, because unless one understands the concepts at issue, one will not be able to criticize.

So we have here a tightly drawn circle. But this is still an improvement on anything in separationism. In complex separationism, people were assumed to be speaking roughly about the same terms and using roughly the same concepts because there were general ideas that were *exactly* the same, with any differences (which are necessary for there to be a dispute) characterized with separable Xs, Ys, and Zs. The problems here are manifold, most of which I have just given above. Although this complex separationist analysis may seem neat and tidy on the page, it does not survive sustained thought. Communication, agreement, and disagreement are far more complex phenomena than such a separationist analysis can capture.

Here end my comments on this supposed problem of how we can understand others. In ending, we should notice one thing. When imagining our anthropologist encountering and interpreting groups and their concepts, we have not commented on any evaluative judgement she makes *about* them. Are they decent concepts? Illuminating? Awful? Evil? Silly? What do they tell her of her own concepts? These are questions that I now think about.

8.4 Criticism of Others

Recall that Blackburn thinks that nonseparationists cannot make room for normative criticism, and uses CUTE to support his claim. We can add to the examples. We are discussing disagreements and criticism that relate both to different and controversial applications of a shared concept (such as TABOO and CUTE) and the application and embracing of concepts that one would never use (such as SCHMABOO and also various common-or-garden racist and sexist epithets and slurs).

There are two parts to Blackburn's criticism. First, when explaining the situation of those that encounter others with whom they disagree, nonseparationists are supposedly committed to an overly conservative acceptance of anyone's use of thick concepts, such as CUTE. They cannot say more than the fact that people are so committed to seeing the world a certain way. Second, Blackburn thinks that (p.173) separationists can explain how we can criticize normatively and, by implication, indicates that this is the best if not only way to criticize: namely to separate description of the world (a certain way of dressing, speaking, walking, and acting, for example) from one's evaluative stance towards it (seeing it as something to be encouraged in and emulated by women, for example).

I think that both of these claims are wrong.⁷ I see no reason to think that separationism—and the sort of noncognitivist, quasi-realism that Blackburn has long advocated—is better able to explain how we can criticize others. I have already worried about whether we can split evaluation from nonevaluative, descriptive content as cleanly as he may think. But we can put that aside and see that the criticism falls short anyway. First of all, it is not quite true that nonseparationists can literally say nothing. I see no reason to think that nonseparationists who encounter others (or who are explaining what people do when they encounter others) are stuck with merely describing the fact that others have different concepts. Nonseparationists can easily say that different way of viewing the world is an unjustified one, one that expresses unkindness, cruelty, or whatever else. Indeed, if we think through the more different types of concept, such as SCHMABOO and controversial slurs, when one is working out that they are different and how different they will be, one will realize that one would not adopt them oneself. It is but a short step from there to wish to criticize, if any step is required at all. The key question that Blackburn should raise, and which he may have in mind anyway, is whether one can criticize with any hope of one's judgement acquiring legitimacy. By this I mean that one hopes that one's judgement is more than just a disguised description of the fact that someone else's use of some concept is something that one would not adopt. One wishes to say that this other view is bad and hopes to at least have a chance of convincing others of this. One's view has to seem and be justifiable outside of one's own viewpoint and society. Again, I see no reason to think that nonseparationists cannot hope for this. They can point to how the use of the concept may create upset and hurt, may lead to certain lives going less well than they might, and so on. They reason and attempt to justify using their own concepts and, if they do seek to convince, attempt to find ideas and notions that provide bridges between their views and others'.

So I think that nonseparationists can explain how criticism of others is possible. It is just that they do it by using other thin and thick evaluative concepts. This takes me to the second part of Blackburn's worry. I do not see that assuming some sharp split between the evaluative and the descriptive helps in any way, even if we assume that this can be achieved. Imagine that *us* and *them* agree on

a set of some evaluatively neutral descriptions of actions, styles of dress, and all the rest, and that while *we* take a negative view towards such actions, *they* take a positive view. *We* are then left with saying to them, and to any third parties who can hear us, that *they* **(p.174)** should not take such a positive view. And why not? 'Because doing so is wrong', *we* will say. What is there left to defend such a position? Perhaps we can point to the upset, harm, and the like, all of the matters that nonseparationists will point to as well. There is as much chance of separationists convincing *them* and neutrals as there is of nonseparationists doing so.

As far as I can see, this supposed advantage of separationism over nonseparationism is nothing of the sort, but is instead a red herring. The result applies not only to CUTE but, as I have indicated, it covers many concepts and their applications where we might not only differ but disagree. Nothing within nonseparationism says that we must accept what there is without challenge. Nonseparationists have as many, or as few, resources to criticize and do so legitimately. The difficulty lies not with the adoption of nonseparationism, or even separationism. The difficulty lies with trying to justify one's own view and being able to convince others to act differently. These are everyone's problems in philosophy, and are as old as the subject itself.⁸

8.5 Williams on Evaluative Knowledge

Some of Williams' most famous ideas in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* concern the encounters we have with societies who categorize differently from how we do.⁹ Some of it has a decidedly pessimistic flavour, although there are points of optimistic relief. I summarize what he says below, before linking it to what we have just discussed.

Williams imagines a 'hypertraditional' society, a society which is maximally homogenous and is given to minimal reflection about its practices. Williams asks whether such a society (or its members) can possess evaluative knowledge, specifically expressed using thick concepts. He uses this question to introduce a key distinction. If we think completely in terms of 'objective knowledge', that is (roughly) how the world is and exists outside of any human perspective, he thinks it is unlikely (to say the least) that the members of such a society possess evaluative knowledge. We can talk of scientific claims being claims of knowledge in this sense, but not evaluative ones. However, we can instead think in terms of 'nonobjective knowledge', and see evaluative claims as being both cultural artefacts and embodying ideas about how to live. In this sense members of the society could possess evaluative knowledge.

(p.175) Yet, Williams then compares members of this hypertraditional society with members of a society that is not immune to reflection at some higher level, as the hypertraditional society is really introduced so we can think harder about ourselves. What happens at this level is that members of the group consider

whether they really are categorizing as they should, whether the world is as they depict it with their thick concepts, and so on. In brief, Williams thinks that once we or any members of a group think at the reflective level we will see our thick concepts for what they are: local attempts to capture what we think the world is like. For Williams, reflection “characteristically disturbs, unseats or replaces... traditional concepts” and it leads him to say “if we agree that, at least as things are, the reflective level is not in a position to give us knowledge we did not have before—then we reach the decidedly un-Socratic conclusion that, in ethics, *reflection can destroy knowledge*”.¹⁰

As A. W. Moore points out in a nice discussion, this sort of reflection is interesting because it undermines some of the concepts (perhaps all of the concepts) that are required to think in the relevant terms to justify our concepts. (This sort of role Moore labels ‘constitutional’.) Some of the justification for ethical concepts may itself be ethical. Someone might ask, ‘Should we really continue to justify our actions in this way?’ The worry here is obvious. Moore continues from this point and says:

The people engaged in reflection can no longer make judgements of the relevant kind that constitute the knowledge, although they can still have enough grasp on concepts of that kind, from without, to see that they constitute knowledge. They may eventually recover the knowledge: various social forces may bring this about. But such forces may also prevent them from thinking, at the relevant level, about what they are up to. They will never recover the knowledge in the full light of reflection.¹¹

We can pick up on the last comment. Once we are in the grip of reflective thinking it is very hard, if not impossible, for us to see our ethical justifications of our ethical concepts, say, in a genuine way: we will always be drawn to the thought that this is all local. In addition, we will no longer see such judgements as embodying any sort of knowledge.

Some claims may survive such reflection, however; Williams’ example is ‘one has to have a special reason to kill someone’. But he remarks that this and similar beliefs fall short of what will be required by an extensive and practical body of evaluative knowledge. Furthermore, as I have mentioned in other parts of this book, he has little time for thin concepts, given that they are, in effect, pale abstractions from the evaluative concepts that do some real justificatory and categorizing work. Assuming that we can have a system of evaluative knowledge based around some network of thin concepts is, for Williams, a rose-tinted view and shows the false ambitions of much of modern philosophy. Thin concepts are simply not world-guided in the right sort of way.

(p.176) I have so far not pointed out something obvious, but very important. Clearly societies and their individual members will be shaken to think

reflectively about how they justify and categorize if there is some encounter with a society that thinks in different ways. Not every society will matter. On reflection, we may think there are some societies that are so different from ours that any comparison with them—certainly an evaluative comparison—will make no sense. There is a certain ‘relativism of distance’, whereby it is only if a society is close to ours, if it thinks and justifies in ways we judge to be similar to our own, that we can talk of one or other of us being correct and incorrect. Williams uses these thoughts to distinguish between ‘real’ and ‘notional’ confrontations: those ways of thinking and living which could be possible for us and those which are not.

Within these thoughts he makes an optimistic claim.¹² He admits that some thick concepts can be seen to be the best and most appropriate ones to use. But this optimism is couched in a pessimistic general discussion that compares science with ethics. The former can aspire to objectivity, and even societies that are conceptually distant from our own can be correct or incorrect, for science aims to depict the world as it really is, free from human perspective. Ethics (and evaluative knowledge) can never aspire to this sort of objectivity, but it can try to ape some of it, simply by thinking through what sort of society is best. Williams entertains the idea that we could try to base the best sort of society on ideas of human nature.¹³ Although he admits that this is a “comprehensible” project, he is pessimistic about it, for he thinks, chiefly, that any theory of human nature will radically underdetermine what ethical options there will be in particular situations and in societies as a whole.

So, in short, the particular ideas of Williams add up to a general idea: that when we come into contact with people from a society who think differently from how we think, be they fairly close or somewhat distant, we may well reflect on how we categorize and justify using our thick concepts. What we will see is that our way is one way among others, and that is likely to unseat our concepts and, probably, destroy our use of them. We could try to get back to a more innocent and pre-reflective time but, as Williams points out, we cannot do that consciously, and it may be hard to do that as a society.¹⁴

For those who find this discussion too pessimistic there are two bright spots. The first I find curious. Williams accords a special place to JUST or JUSTICE, particularly related to social organization.¹⁵ He makes a case for thinking that we can usefully apply this notion to past societies, while acknowledging that it need not apply to every society. We can put the thought thus: the idea of justice may transcend the phenomenon of the relativism of distance more than other ethical notions. He speculates as to why this is. One reason is that many older societies had notions of justice. Another is that we find echoes of these notions in our notions, and hence they **(p.177)** may not be as far away from us with regards to justice as they are when it comes to other evaluative ideas. Other considerations may apply, such as the fact that many medieval societies, for

example, had knowledge of different social organizations and could not excuse their arrangements on the basis of ignorance.

Why do I find this curious? Quite simply because these considerations seem to apply to more than JUST or SOCIAL JUSTICE. They apply to KIND and BRAVE, I think. They may not apply to more specific and related concepts, such as COMPASSIONATE and VALOUR. But the change in these concepts is itself something that shows how we have different conceptions of KIND and BRAVE from many medieval Europeans, just as Williams claims about JUST. And, there may be rival conceptions of KIND and BRAVE in today's society (and philosophy), and these find echoes in conceptions from the past. Also, many of his other points repeat, as far as I can see. Furthermore, they seem to repeat for evaluative concepts other than ethical ones, such as BEAUTY and WISDOM. Perhaps there is something special about these thinnish sorts of thick concept. Although, to pick up on an example from earlier in this book, perhaps the same can be said for a specific concept such as VOCATION, and if we want to make out that JUST is special, I am pretty confident that DUTY will get in as well, and if it does it raises the question of what we say about thin concepts.

Of course, in one sense Williams keeps to his ideas regarding the relativism of distance. Recall that he thinks that JUST is special because more meaningful comparisons can be made, not that there is some sharp cut-off point indicating some difference in kind between it and other concepts. My comment is that he should be more optimistic—if that is the right word—here, and see that his thoughts apply to many evaluative concepts.¹⁶

For those who find Williams' ideas too pessimistic, the second bright spot opens up things quite generally. After articulating his worries about knowledge, Williams introduces the notion of confidence. In short, he thinks that when we lose knowledge we still go on living. We go on making ethical judgements and using ethical and evaluative concepts. We do not forget completely the fact that we no longer have knowledge. And, we may well not have conviction that we have the correct cognitive capacities and ideas. But there is *something* to support and underpin our use and this something is a confidence in how we think and act. Although he does not use the word, I suspect Williams is not talking about 'blithe' confidence: it is a certain doubting confidence, constantly on the watch for worries and challenges. (At one stage he contrasts this state of mind with optimism, citing Nietzsche's 'pessimism of strength', and also contrasts confidence with dogmatism.¹⁷) Williams thinks it is a social and psychological matter which concepts are retained and which we have confidence in, and this may be one of the ways in which his book's title is justified: **(p.178)** philosophy's limits are shown because which concepts survive and thrive is not strictly or mainly a matter of philosophers arguing which concepts are better.

There ends my whistle-stop summary of Williams. I offer one point of criticism and draw out one idea about separationism. Both relate to our earlier discussion.¹⁸

First, as indicated, I find Williams slightly too pessimistic, as do some other commentators.¹⁹ We need not doubt that when someone comes into contact with other societies who think differently from her, she will reflect on the fact that hers is not the only way to think. (Presumably this does not describe our anthropologist, for she would be poor at her subject if she had not realized this already!) But, having had this thought and lived with it for a while, why assume that the eventual outcome has to be something negative? There may be some unseating and unsettling, but only in the sense that further thought is required. If our imagined person is of a certain cast of mind she may realize that what she is making claims about are of a practical nature, in the way Williams discusses. And, from that, she may conclude that her way is at least as good as any other way, if not better. She may trace in a tight fashion which set of concepts is illuminating and allow for neat expressions, but she may also think more broadly and compare how much pain is generated in a society, whether certain groups are marginalized, what art and medicines have been produced, and which society has the better average life expectancy. In short, she may have the confidence both to justify her way of living and set of concepts as good ones, and also criticize others. There need be no reason to think that an initial unsettling will lead to a pessimistic conclusion.

I detect in Williams the idea that the pre-reflective state comprises much false knowledge, and people will be in an optimistic state of ignorance. After the Fall, as it were, we can get along, but we will be pessimistic at best. (This is *crude*, but not a hopelessly false reading.) Yet, why not assume a different mythology: the scales fall from our eyes, and in treating our evaluative concepts as they really are we can be more optimistic about us and how we judge, even if we constantly question whether we are judging correctly. When we look to other societies we can be confident about what we do as well as learn from them. Comparison can lead to a loss of knowledge, and a loss of confidence. But there is no reason to think it cannot lead to an increase as well.

This is just a claim about those cases where we feel confident in our judgements. But beyond that we have seen that Williams can be challenged about the number of times such comparisons can be made. This was the curiosity involved in his treatment of JUST. Williams makes an exception of it, but it is less exceptional than he thinks.

(p.179) Second, despite what I have just said, I find much of Williams' discussion healthily refreshing. Evaluative concepts *do* fade away or are abruptly dropped, and often there is no way to think in those terms again. Such change is often caused by reflection. (So the best way to read my first criticism is that

while Williams is correct in claiming that reflection can destroy knowledge, he may overstate the case.) This raises an issue for separationists. Here is Moore again. He imagines what separationists have to say about reflection destroying knowledge in the way Williams sketches:

If [separationism] were right, and if what reflection did were simply to undermine the evaluative component in thick ethical concepts, then there would be a clear sense in which what had *strictly speaking* been known, in a way that had found expression through judgements involving the concepts, was still available to be known, in a way that could find expression through judgements involving purely factual counterparts of the concepts. The claim that reflection can destroy knowledge, in the sense intended by Williams, *would* then be a needlessly paradoxical way of putting something innocuous.²⁰

Moore's point is that separationism does not seem to respect the phenomenon of reflection destroying knowledge in the right way. After a concept is dropped we should, if separationism is correct, be able simply to pick up similar, nonevaluative categorizations with the only difference being that now there is no attachment of some pro or con evaluation. Yet, for Moore, Williams' point is that this fails to capture the phenomenon adequately. For using such categorizations is also a matter of caring about our use of them. What seems pertinent is not that we would be unable to adopt a purely descriptive version of a concept (although that may be the case), but the very fact that we do not adopt such a version and do not attempt to.²¹

The fading of the concept is primarily caused by us not wanting to evaluate this group of things in a certain way, and our evaluation of them is precisely what makes them a group. Or, to put it another way, we could continue to group these things using a different descriptive concept, but there would be no point because we have lost the evaluative reason for doing so. For Moore, Williams is not simply saying that after reflection we no longer want to group together, it is that we now judge the evaluative point of such a grouping as being silly, unjustified, hopelessly biased, or something else. And that is why such knowledge is destroyed. Why bother grouping these things after that revelation?

All of this second point echoes Foot's point outlined in Chapter Six. There is some internal relation between a thing as categorized and our attitude towards the thing. We cannot just attach and drop evaluations at will. There has to be some point and justification to our doing so, which will in some inevitable way call **(p.180)** forth more evaluative concepts, and thick ones at that. Importantly, we work within a tradition and social context, so any justifications have to make sense within certain confines.

8.6 A Note on the Thin

I think Williams is wrong about many things he says about thin concepts. He may be correct to think that philosophers, or at least some of them, concentrate too much on thin concepts and try to magic too much out of them. But he goes wrong in claiming that thin concepts are just pale abstractions of the thick and that they can do little justificatory work of importance.

Throughout this book I have indicated that thick concepts are best seen as doing certain sorts of job. We have a need for evaluative concepts and, at least for a society at a certain point in its history, we have a need for *these* concepts. The same is true, I think, of thin concepts. They may be less specific, but they can justify as much as thick ones. As I said in Chapter Four, sometimes we need a clear and direct 'right' or 'wrong' to tell us whether to do something. There is a clear need for them to fulfil and a role for them to play.

I certainly appreciate why Williams was led to say what he said. In some ways thick concepts are closer to everyday concerns. But I cannot see that thin ones have no purchase either. I have earlier captured Williams' thinking in this book with reference to the idea of an 'abstraction tree'. One may suggest the following: thin concepts *can be* seen as abstractions from thick concepts, so that *is* the best and only way of viewing them. But that latter claim does not follow. Just because thin concepts can be seen as linked in this way to thick concepts, this does not mean that they are lesser sorts of concept, just as one should not conclude that thick concepts are lesser than thin ones because they can seemingly be created from thin evaluation and something else.

There may be some genetic aspect to Williams' view. Perhaps humans use thick concepts and then thin ones come later only because we notice points of comparison among the thick and want to record such comparisons. This story can be told at the level of individual families of concepts, or it can be told as part of some evolutionary story about how humans and our concepts arose, or it can be told with reference to how societies meet and share points of comparison among how they compare. Even if—*if*—there is some truth in these just-so stories, why assume that these histories should determine our view of thin *or* thick concepts? What matters, I think, is that we can easily understand the idea of a thin evaluation, see how it justifies, and see how it can have and does have a life of its own apart from the thick. Surely it is this set of thoughts that is key. To put the point provocatively, one person's justification trading on the (true or mythical) genealogy of a concept or idea is another person's genetic fallacy.

(p.181) 8.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have dismissed two problems for nonseparationsism. Nonseparationists can explain how it is that we can understand others' evaluative concepts without sharing them, and they can explain normative

criticism as well as separationists. In contrast, we have found echoes of my previous criticisms of separationism when we dig deeper into these worries.

Chapter Eight has tied a few ends together. The final chapter, Chapter Nine seeks to face up to a challenge that has been lurking in the background throughout much of my discussion. If thick concepts are nonseparable concepts, what does this mean for how we conceive the world to be? Or, in other words, if we have thick concepts, do we also have thick properties? Despite my criticism of Williams in this chapter, his thoughts show us a plausible and mature response to this question.

Notes:

(¹) They were listed as the third and fourth concerns.

(²) For a detailed discussion of this and other issues, see Sreenivasan (2001). I do not have the space to discuss Sreenivasan's argument in detail, but it is worth sketching. His target is a combination of ideas, due to Hurley and Donald Davidson, such that if we assume an anthropologist has understood (supposedly) alien ethical evaluations and conceptual schemes then we must assume both that such evaluations and schemes are not so alien and, crucially, that our anthropologist must sincerely accept those evaluations. Sreenivasan argues that we can understand others (and treat them still as alien) without acceptance. I agree, although I believe he is too hard on the 'Hurley-Davidson' position and, unlike him, I do not believe at all that this position is committed to what he calls the 'descriptive equivalence thesis', which is the claim we met in Chapter Five: for every thick concept there is some nonevaluative equivalent concept that matches the thick concept extension perfectly.

For a standard-defining discussion about this issue from an anthropologist's point of view see Geertz (1973).

(³) Williams (1985), note 7, pp. 217-18.

(⁴) McDowell (1981), p. 144.

(⁵) Williams (1985), pp. 141-2. See also Williams (1995), p. 206.

(⁶) I think that there can be a difference between these two cases: two people having the same concept and applying it differently, and two people having different conceptions of the same concept. But articulating clearly what that difference amounts to at a more specific level of detail than these two general descriptions will be hard if not impossible for many concepts. One may have to fall back to judging and commenting on any differences on a case-by-case basis. It will be hard because presumably any difference in conception will be shown mainly by the same term and concept being applied differently anyway. I do not attempt to say more about this topic here. However, I am merely indicating that

in the scenario I envisage we should make space for there being these possible differences. As well as some radical tribe using SCHMABOO, our anthropologist may come across a people that she can justifiably say are using TABOO, but just with a different sharpening of that concept from her. This latter case is different again from a case where she disagrees with a colleague in her anthropology department who has similar cultural beliefs to hers. In that case the two of them differ merely on a few applications of TABOO, but where there are so few differences, or ones of such little significance, that it does not seem justifiable to label this difference between them as a difference in conception of the same concept. At this point it seems better to conceptualize this as a difference in application of the same concept. I say all of this while acknowledging that there may well be no difference in kind between these cases, certainly no stark ones, and much will depend on the narrative and reasons we can give for these summarizing labels in the cases we encounter.

(⁷) I first considered this issue in Kirchin (2000).

(⁸) An aside. Väyrynen mentions racist and sexist epithets and slurs more often than I do in Väyrynen (2013). But he does not discuss this worry of normative criticism, let alone argue that his pragmatic view has some advantage over a semantic view regarding it.

(⁹) This is drawn from across Williams (1985), although chapters 8 and 9 are particularly important. There are a number of good discussions about Williams' ideas. See in particular Altham (1995); Chappell (2010); Fricker (2001); Moore (2003); Thomas (2006), pp. 153–7; and Thomas (2007). Williams asks his question with regards to ethical knowledge alone because he thinks that the aesthetic, say, raises issues of its own (1985), p. 135. (Which is itself interesting in the light of my discussion in Chapter Six.) I run things in terms of evaluative knowledge since I see no reason why Williams' comments about ethics do not apply broadly to other forms of evaluation.

(¹⁰) Williams (1985), p. 158.

(¹¹) Moore (2003), p. 344.

(¹²) Williams (1985), p. 155.

(¹³) Williams (1985), pp. 153–4.

(¹⁴) Williams (1985), pp. 163–4.

(¹⁵) Williams (1985), pp. 164–7.

(¹⁶) For an excellent discussion and continuation of Williams' thoughts on justice, see the exchange between Brady (2010) and Fricker (2010).

(¹⁷) Williams (1985), p. 171.

(¹⁸) There are many other things to comment on, but I restrict myself. One interesting idea is whether the existence in a society of claims that are treated as knowledge (such as the earlier example about killing) will itself effect how much confidence (rather than knowledge) we have in other claims. Categorizing them in this way seems to involve an explicit acknowledgement that they are of a lesser sort, and this in turn may lead us to have even less confidence in them. See Altham (1995), p. 157.

(¹⁹) For example, of those mentioned in an earlier footnote, Altham and Fricker stand out.

(²⁰) Moore (2003), p. 345.

(²¹) We very often speak of medieval Europeans' concept of VALOUR, but that is a different thing: that is a reference to some others' concept, not the sincere use of a different, wholly descriptive replacement concept.

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