



Thick Evaluation

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Introduction

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter introduces the distinction between thin and thick concepts and then performs a number of functions. First, two major accounts of thick concepts—separationism and nonseparationism—are introduced and, in doing so, a novel account of evaluation is indicated. Second, each chapter is outlined as is the general methodology, followed, third, by a brief history of the discussion of thick concepts, referencing Philippa Foot, Hilary Putnam, Gilbert Ryle, and Bernard Williams among others. Fourth, a number of relevant contrasts are introduced, such as the fact-value distinction and the difference between concepts, properties, and terms. Lastly, some interesting and relevant questions are raised that, unfortunately, have to be left aside.

Keywords: fact-value distinction, Philippa Foot, methodology, nonseparationism, Hilary Putnam, Gilbert Ryle, separationism, Bernard Williams

Imagine I tell you that Maddy is bad. Perhaps you infer from my intonation, or the context in which we are talking, that I mean morally bad. Additionally, you will probably infer that I am disapproving of Maddy, or saying that I think you should disapprove of her, or similar, given typical linguistic conventions and assuming I am sincere. However, you might not get a more detailed sense of the particular sorts of way in which Maddy is bad, her typical character traits, and the like, since people can be bad in many ways. In contrast, if I say that Maddy is wicked, then you get more of a sense of her typical actions and attitudes to others. The word 'wicked' is more specific than 'bad'. I have still not exactly pinpointed Maddy's character since wickedness takes many forms. But there is more detail nevertheless, perhaps a stronger connotation of the sort of person

Maddy is. In addition, and again assuming typical linguistic conventions, you should also get a sense that I am disapproving of Maddy, or saying that you should disapprove of her, or similar, assuming that we are still discussing her moral character.

This imaginary and somewhat stilted scenario introduces the topic of this study. Concepts such as BAD and GOOD are normally referred to as thin evaluative concepts (hereafter just *thin concepts*), whereas WICKED, SELFISH, KIND, BRAVE, DECEITFUL and many more examples in ethics, are said to be thick evaluative concepts (hereafter, *thick concepts*).¹ There are many, many examples of thick concepts beyond the ethical realm. Artworks can be elegant and jejune, teachers can be wise and ignorant, children can be angelic and cheeky, adults can be childlike and childish, gardens can be delicate and cluttered, academics can be modest and pompous, and so on, and so on, and so on.

The supposed difference between thin and thick concepts is a phenomenon that is relatively easy to spot: we are picking out evaluative concepts that are more or less specific. Matters become harder when we try to capture exactly what is going on. Here is a rough and ready distinction to get us started. Often the distinction is put so that whereas thin concepts are primarily or wholly evaluative (in whatever sense is given to 'evaluative'), thick concepts mix evaluation, or evaluative conceptual content, with something that might be called nonevaluative, descriptive conceptual **(p.2)** content, or mix with it to a more significant degree than happens with thin concepts. In other words, the application of a thin concept is primarily or wholly concerned with giving a sense of approval or disapproval. In contrast, a thick concept will do that *and* give a sense, or more of a sense, of what the thing is like that is so categorized, a sense beyond the fact that it is to be liked or disliked. Often commentators refer to 'normativity'—either in addition to evaluative content or as a substitute for it—and thus make reference to the fact that both thin and thick concepts can provide guidance and reasons for action, even if only defeasibly. Within this framework, thin concepts' prime or whole function is typically thought to be to provide such guidance and reasons, while thick concepts do this and additionally reflect the world somehow. So, for example, we could say that it would be (prudentially) wrong to walk along the cliff edge, and we could also say that the edge is dangerous. The 'wrong' is simply an expression of a reason not to do something, while the 'dangerous' will indicate such a reason and also indicate something about what the edge is like, such as the fact that it is crumbling, craggy, and high up.

From this rough and ready discussion much philosophical intrigue follows. For example, how is evaluative content and descriptive content supposed to relate in a thick concept? What do we mean by these two labels anyway? Is talk of evaluative and descriptive content the best way of capturing the phenomenon? Perhaps the evaluative element should be seen as functioning in a different way,

not as some conceptual content that aims to capture or map onto the world, but as an attitude that we express towards that world, for instance. Is there a difference in kind between thin and thick concepts, or is the difference only one of degree? Do the differences between evaluative concepts from different domains (ethical, aesthetic, prudential, etc.) affect what story we tell about the thin and the thick? Why think there are different evaluative domains anyway?

Some of these questions and others will be raised and answered in this book. My chief concern is the nature of evaluative concepts: can we always separate them into different conceptual contents, and what is the character and function of those supposed different contents in the first place?

In the rest of this Introduction I do five things. First, I lay out what I discuss and argue for in this study. Second, I outline each chapter. Third, I offer a brief history of the distinction between thin and thick concepts that alights on some of the thoughts mentioned. Fourth, I pick out a few contrasts that are at work in my discussion. Lastly, I briefly indicate some interesting and relevant questions that, unfortunately, have to be left aside. In Chapter Two I begin my discussion in earnest.

(a) In this book battle lines are drawn between separationists and nonseparationists. I argue for a version of nonseparationism.

Separationists believe that all putative thick concepts can be divided into different elements. Many separationists divide thick concepts into some very thin evaluative element and some descriptive, nonevaluative element or elements. It is part of their **(p.3)** picture that not only should we so separate, but also that evaluation and description are radically different kinds of thing or different kinds of conceptual content. Just now I wrote of some 'descriptive, nonevaluative element'. In this debate this phrasing is strictly a redundancy: descriptive conceptual content *just is* nonevaluative conceptual content.² But this point is worth making and drawing our attention to. It is also worth dwelling a little on the English involved. Separationists should typically speak of evaluative and descriptive *elements* or *parts* or *components* because these words imply that what are primary are the separable, independently intelligible factors that make up the thick concept, not the thick concept itself.

Separationists, although united in their core belief, differ on many matters. They disagree about what the evaluative and descriptive elements are and how thin the evaluative element needs to be. They also disagree about how many elements are typically part of a thick concept and about how they are related to each other. Further, they also disagree as to how to treat the evaluative element. To elaborate, the most famous types of separationist are noncognitivist. They typically characterize the evaluative element as an evinced attitude or command. However, cognitivist treatments are also possible. Cognitivist-separationists

treat some thin evaluative element, such as GOOD, as a free-standing, independently intelligible concept that is separable from any nonevaluative concept.³

As mentioned, I argue for a *nonseparationist* account of thick concepts, and argue further for a particular understanding of this broad view. All nonseparationists believe that thick concepts unite in some way both evaluative and descriptive conceptual content: such content cannot be separated. As such, they may well refer to evaluative and descriptive *aspects* (rather than *elements* or *parts*), as such phrasing implies the primacy of the thick concept not its features. However, I am particularly keen to stress that we should go beyond merely thinking that thick concepts unite evaluative and descriptive content.⁴ Why? Expressing matters in this way could be taken to assume that there is some separation between two things or parts, albeit a separation that is then overcome. I emphasize strongly and positively that thick concepts are evaluative concepts, plain and simple; they are as evaluative as thin concepts are, just that they are more specific. This theme gives this book its title, *Thick Evaluation*. The simple—perhaps seemingly simplistic—way in which I introduced matters at the start, by saying that thick concepts are more specific and that thin concepts are more general, turns out to be the key way of thinking about thick concepts and their relation to thin ones. So, to put this another way, I worry whenever I hear other commentators saying that thin concepts are purely evaluative **(p.4)** whereas in contrast thick concepts mix evaluative and descriptive conceptual content. I think that thick concepts are also ‘purely’ or ‘wholly’ evaluative, simply because I have a certain view of what it is for something to be evaluative. This idea will be elaborated and defended throughout my study.⁵

All nonseparationists are cognitivists. They all think that thick and thin concepts can be used to describe the world by picking out parts of it—the parts of it that are good, just, unfair, elegant, and the like—and that in some sense knowledge of the world might be conveyed by their use. Note that we should not confuse the two uses of ‘descriptive’ I have introduced. I have just used ‘describe’ to indicate how any word or idea might function: used in a suitable fashion in a language, any word, evaluative or not, can be used to try to pick out some aspect of the world. Earlier, when I wrote of ‘descriptive content’, I meant something different: a type of conceptual content that does not capture or convey any value judgement. We should be alive to this difference throughout.

Despite being united in their cognitivism, nonseparationists also come in several varieties. To explain how my nonseparationism differs from other types, here are three further points I argue for. First, and carrying on from the main theme of thick concepts being purely evaluative, I argue that while there are clearly some nonevaluative concepts, there is a huge grey area of concepts that cannot be clearly categorized as either evaluative or descriptive by the lights of a more traditional, separationist understanding of ‘evaluative’. And, I do stick my neck

out: I suggest strongly that there is this grey area, as opposed to there being a sharp distinction between the evaluative and the nonevaluative or descriptive. This follows from the view I develop about thick concepts and the way in which many real-life examples work. I do not regard the lack of a sharp distinction as a flaw, for to so assume is partly to buy into the view of evaluation propagated by separationists. Indeed, the fact that real-life examples threaten such a sharp distinction should indicate the implausibility of separationism.

The second point elaborates the first. I think that there are some concepts that can be counted as evaluative (on a certain understanding of that notion) that some theories and theorists think should not be. Some of the most radical contenders that I suggest are SIMILAR and RELEVANT, but there are far less radical examples such as MACABRE, CONTORTED, and GROTESQUE. Such examples raise this question: do such concepts, whenever legitimately applied, have to have either a positive or negative point to them in order to count as evaluative concepts? My answer to this question is a clear 'no'. I set up a disagreement between two broad views. The *conservative* view of evaluation restricts evaluation to clear positive and negative judgements alone. In **(p.5)** more detail, it is the view that a concept can be counted as an evaluative concept only if in every instance of its use there is a clear and obvious positive or negative stance or view being expressed. The *liberal* view—which is the view I favour—claims that a concept can be evaluative overall and in any particular instance of its use even if in some instances there is no positive or negative stance being expressed when it is employed.⁶ Much of this book is an attempt to move us away from thinking of evaluation as simply exhausted by the bare, minimal notions of good and bad, right and wrong, a yes and a no, and, as I frequently put it, the concepts of PRO and CON or of pro and con evaluation. This last pair of options I use as my barest thin concepts. As such, this whole work is a meditation on the notion of evaluation and an argument for a particular conception of what evaluation is.

Third, I argue for 'evaluative flexibility'. A thick concept can be used to indicate some pro stance in one case, and a con stance in another, and yet we can still be talking of the very same concept. (For example, the dangerous nature of a cliff can be a reason not to walk along it, but it can also, in some contexts, be a reason to do so.) My view is opposed to the idea that we have two different yet similar concepts being applied in these two instances, one that is a pro version and one that is a con version. In my view thick concepts hold together a range of pointed evaluations—basically pro, con and neither—of various strengths. I suggest that evaluative flexibility fits very nicely with the nonseparationism I argue for, and nonseparationism in general. Note that it does not cut against the idea expressed in the previous paragraph. Positive and negative stances are essential to a thick concept being a thick concept, that is they are a necessary part of the range. It is just that I do not think they have to be present and

apparent in every single use for a concept to be treated as an evaluative concept.

With these three points introduced we can contrast my nonseparationism with other sorts. First, a nonseparationist might say that any and every thick concept only ever has one type of pointed evaluation, be it pro or con. Second, a nonseparationist might say that while thick concepts have both evaluative and descriptive aspects, such concepts are different from, and perhaps clearly and sharply different from, nonevaluative, descriptive concepts. (And, almost certainly, also different from thin concepts.) This second, different sort of nonseparationism shows up clearly the importance and value of the overall position I advocate. Someone may be swept along with the idea I have already mentioned about evaluative and descriptive conceptual content being nonseparably intertwined. However, as I have already said, if we accept this at face value and think that this is the key idea to argue for, then we seem to be implicitly buying the idea that there are always two sorts of conceptual content, albeit two sorts that when they come together cannot then be **(p.6)** pulled apart. In my view that gives too much to separationism in the first place, for this view essentially relies on there being two sorts of conceptual content and, indeed, of treating evaluative content as being uniform. The more interesting and better opposition to separationism is the sort of nonseparationism I favour, one that says explicitly that thick concepts are just evaluative concepts that are as evaluative as thin concepts, and that there is a variety of types of evaluation. In addition, I think that my view makes very good sense of everyday thick concepts. In case it needs underlining, I think there are thin concepts and nonevaluative concepts as well. It is just that I believe that thick concepts are not simply products of their combination, nonseparable or otherwise.

I have thought hard about labels. 'Nonseparationism' may suggest the type of position that I have indicated a worry about: two or more parts that cannot be separated instead of a position that casts doubt on thick concepts being made up of parts in any fashion. However, I do not want to proliferate labels and my attention is for the most part focused on arguing against separationism. It is enough for us to be alive to the difference I have drawn between types of nonseparationism and be aware that *all* nonseparationists think of thick concepts as being 'unitary concepts'.⁷ It is just that I wish to emphasize something that others do not, that there are dangers in being swept along by the phrase 'nonseparable intertwining of evaluative and descriptive content'.

(b) Before I summarize each chapter, I should say something about the underlying currents at work in my writing. I believe strongly that when arguing for a positive philosophical view it is often vital to understand the whole terrain and begin by getting under the skin of one's (seeming) opponents. So it is with this debate. The whole discussion of thin and thick concepts draws upon a number of ideas and questions—the distinction between evaluation and

description, the nature of their relation, what it is to be ‘thin’—that are foundational and that can be asked and answered in a variety of ways. Getting a handle on the terrain itself, and framing things correctly, is crucial in shaping a decent final view. Further, I believe strongly in this case that one can see the merits of the nonseparationist view I argue for only by thinking in detail about separationism first: what separationists have argued for, and what they could possibly argue for.

In this spirit, then, the first half of the book is devoted wholly to understanding the terrain. Nonseparationism will emerge as we go through this first half, but the focus is on separationism.

Note also that although I say something about the nature of evaluation at the start of the next chapter so as to start us off—in effect outlining something of the conservative view introduced above—I do not begin with a lengthy meditation on **(p.7)** the character and conception of the evaluative and then plunge into debates between separationism and nonseparationism. That would be to put the cart before the horse. A mature understanding of evaluation has to come later, once other matters are in place.

This book presents three argumentative strategies by which nonseparationists can defend their view against separationism: (i) a focus on the (supposed) evaluative element, arguing that separationists cannot think of thin concepts being prior to thick concepts; (ii) a focus on the (supposed) descriptive element, arguing that it cannot be identified so as to give us a fully formed concept that, when joined with some thin evaluative element, is enough to mimic a thick concept; and (iii) a focus on the nature of the evaluative in the first place. Strategies (i) and (ii) are not mutually exclusive and, in fact, they are best viewed as working together. I think they are important but that they ultimately do not wholly convince. I think that it is (iii) that is the most important and fertile idea to raise against separationism. Along with detailing the terrain, I regard my development of (iii) as my main contribution in this work. As an argumentative strategy it sits on its own, although one can understand it and how it is supposed to work *only if* one understands the first two and their limitations, which is why I spend time detailing them. The broad negative thought that emerges against separationism is that when one reflects on the nature of the evaluative and thinks through examples, separationism is shown to be a very curious and strange way to understand thick concepts.

That last point is important to understand. This book does not contain *any* knock-down arguments against separationism or for nonseparationism. I do not believe that separationism is incoherent or that it can be revealed as fundamentally inconsistent with something we all take to be basic and important in our everyday lives, for example. Instead, by thinking through various aspects of our everyday evaluative lives I think that the nonseparationist picture I paint makes

better sense of these aspects, and the separationist picture less sense, indeed that it is a strange way to view evaluation.

Talk of different pictures may sound pleasant, but it can result in a depressing end point. A clash between two fundamentally different philosophical views can result in argumentative moves being made by both sides that simply beg the question. That can make the heart sink. I think there is no point in denying that there may be something of that in this debate, however I do prefer to emphasize the positive. I believe that a deepening of the account provided by nonseparationism proves to be instructive. Even if no knock-down argument can be given against separationism, I think that neutrals should be persuaded to my side. That is the task I set myself. If I am lucky, some separationists will question their affiliation in addition.

I begin, in **Chapter Two**, by thinking about separationism. Separationists believe that supposed thick concepts can be analysed as containing different elements and aspects, normally some value-free descriptive conceptual content, and some evaluative content, which is normally very thin. This itself brings with it the idea that to **(p.8)** evaluate is in some way either simply to approve or to disapprove, and that this is what marks the difference between evaluative content and descriptive content. Despite a broad sweep of agreement, separationists disagree about many things, some of which I have listed earlier. In Chapter Two I discuss two broad types of separationism and present their advantages and disadvantages. I also think about the strengths of the position overall while drawing attention to its likely weaknesses.

In **Chapter Three** I extend our understanding of the terrain by thinking about two important models of conceptual relations, models that attempt to capture the relation between families of general and specific concepts. The two models are the *genus-species* model and the determinable-determinate model. In short I argue that separationists are committed to the former. Indeed, I argue that the *genus-species* model when applied to thin and thick concepts *just is* an expression of separationism. Integral to this model is that each individual *species* concept is created from the combination of the overall *genus* concept and some unique *differentia*.⁸ In the case of separationism, some thin evaluative content is the *genus* concept, while the *differentia* is the descriptive content seen as unique to each thick concept.

As well as detailing both conceptual models, I suggest that neither is appropriate for understanding thin and thick concepts. (Although separationism appears to be the *genus-species* model in another guise, that does not mean that nonseparationists should adopt the determinable-determinate model.) Why draw suspicion on both models? The reason is that both sit badly with evaluative flexibility, the idea I introduced above. I detail this idea in Chapter Three, cast it in a positive light, and show why it does not combine well with separationism.

Here we have only 'suggestion', not 'conclusive argument'. Evaluative flexibility returns in Chapter Six because other elements of my view will enrich it and be enriched in turn by it. Progress is made in Chapter Three, however, because we are beginning to understand the terrain more and we can see the limitations of the *genus-species* model and separationism. At the end of Chapter Three I briefly diagnose where a different way of understanding thick and thin conceptual relations can enter.

At this point in the book I will have introduced and examined separationism, and detailed the terrain of the debate. I am then in a position, in **Chapter Four**, to introduce and consider the first anti-separationist strategy, that which focuses on the evaluative aspect of thick concepts.

I first argue that there is a difference in kind between the thin and the thick; both our conceptual models depend on that. (I also note, in passing, that the way in which the boundary should be drawn should in turn make us query whether the separationist enterprise is as plausible as it initially appears.⁹ I pick this up again in **(p.9)** Chapter Six.) I use the barest thin concepts, PRO and CON, a lot here. I argue, through consideration of the work of Allan Gibbard, that separationists are better off working with a very thin sort of evaluative element in their analyses of thick concepts.

This builds to the main part of Chapter Four. In order for the *genus-species* model to apply to thin and thick concepts, thin *genus* concepts have to be thought to be conceptually prior to thick *species* concepts, thick concepts being the creation of '*genus* plus some *differentia*'. I consider what 'conceptual priority' might amount to in this debate, and argue that there is no convincing argument for the conceptual priority of the thin. But, in addition, I argue that 'thick prioritarianism' is not a good idea either.¹⁰ If anything emerges with some plausibility, it is a third position I label 'no prioritarianism'. This is the assertion that neither thin nor thick concepts have conceptual priority over the other when considering how these two broad types of concept relate. That said, although I think that this discussion is instructive and that it shows the weaknesses of separationism, I also say that *at most* it stands as a set of weighty considerations with which separationists have to deal. A neutral may not be wholly convinced by the best arguments I lay out against 'thin prioritarianism', let alone a separationist.

This is all to the good in my overall discussion, because this first argumentative strategy, while helping to understand the debate more clearly, also shows that more is required for nonseparationists to challenge separationists successfully.

This takes us to **Chapter Five**. While the first argumentative strategy concentrates on the *genus* part of the model, the second concentrates on the *differentia* that is supposedly unique to each and every thick concept. This

brings in the so-called *disentangling argument* and the *shapelessness hypothesis*. The disentangling argument is an argument to the effect that we cannot separate evaluative from descriptive content in the way that separationists envisage for thick concepts. This is because evaluative concepts are shapeless with respect to descriptive concepts: we cannot mimic the extension of evaluative concepts by descriptive conceptual content alone. There is a lot to say about the argument and hypothesis and they have undoubtedly been influential. I claim that the argument is not wholly successful, although that does not mean that separationism walks away unscathed. I suggest a possible different conclusion from the one often reached. However—and again this chimes with my overall narrative—this is weaker than ideal for nonseparationists. In short, they need something more than the first two argumentative strategies discussed in the first half of this book.

One idea that emerges from my treatment of the second argumentative strategy is that it meets separationism on its own terms, something mentioned above. This sets the scene for **Chapter Six**. Separationists believe that evaluative and descriptive conceptual content are not just separate but different. The second strategy, if **(p.10)** adopted, is an attempt by nonseparationists to show that evaluative and descriptive content can intertwine in some nonseparable fashion. But, as I have already indicated, taken at face value and alone, this phrasing gives away too much to separationists. It assumes implicitly that one can divide evaluative from descriptive content in the first place. Further, it fails to question explicitly the narrow and conservative view of the evaluative that is being assumed. It is in Chapter Six where I make good on the various positive ideas I hold. Much of this chapter concerns how thick concepts threaten the supposedly clear and obvious distinction between the evaluative and the nonevaluative in part by showing as plausible the liberal view of evaluation. I also conclude my argument for evaluative flexibility.

As should be apparent, a lot of my discussion comes together in Chapter Six. Readers will have to forgive me as every so often I say that I will elaborate or discuss something further in Chapter Six. As also may be apparent as we go through, Chapters Two to Six are the core of the book. The final three chapters are briefer, and designed to be so, but discuss important topics all the same.

In **Chapter Seven** I continue my motivation for and defence of the liberal view of evaluation specifically by focusing on recent arguments from Pekka Väyrynen. He argues that thick terms—for he focuses on these rather than concepts—can convey pro and con evaluations, but it is best to assume that they typically do so only because of context, tone of voice, and other factors. In effect, he denies the claim that they are, in his words, ‘inherently evaluative’. What evaluations such terms carry or convey is a matter of pragmatics, not semantics, and are therefore only accidental or nonessential to them. This cuts against my view of thick concepts and my view of evaluation in general, for I do think that pro and

con evaluations, and the more general evaluative conceptual content that thick concepts have (that which reaches beyond pointed pro and con points) is part of what they essentially are and marks them as a special part of our everyday thought. Väyrynen lays bare his view of evaluation that is clearly conservative. Having outlined my positive view in the previous chapter, in this chapter I deepen it by showing that Väyrynen's arguments are questionable.

In **Chapter Eight** I discuss two more topics, both of which relate to the social aspect of thick concepts. The first is a potential worry for nonseparationists. One reason people have for believing in the shapelessness hypothesis—and one I accept to some extent—is that one cannot fully appreciate a thick concept (what it is, how it is used), unless one somehow appreciates the evaluative point of the concept. But this raises an interesting question: to what extent does one have to accept and hold sincerely the evaluative point of the concept? If one answers that an anthropologist has to hold sincerely the views of the people she is studying, for example, then it might make many if not all such investigations impossible. I map a way out of this problem for nonseparationism and this leads me to extend my conclusion of Chapter Six, that the real problem faces separationism: it makes anthropological understanding look difficult to achieve because it has a curious way of understanding thick concepts.

(p.11) This leads me to a second topic. Bernard Williams argues, quite famously, that thick concepts form more of our social world than thin ones, and that they offer a better hope for us maintaining confidence that our evaluative practices are justified. This role for thick concepts is contextualized by us imagining how we might treat our evaluative practices when we confront other groups that think and conceptualize differently from how we do. I argue that Williams is wrong to think that thick concepts offer better hope than thin concepts on this point. Overall Williams presents a fairly pessimistic view of our evaluative practices. I offer something that is more optimistic.

In **Chapter Nine** I draw things to a conclusion. Although this is a study of a topic in the philosophy of value that is quite specific, it has implications for metaethics generally. One issue that requires discussion is how we conceive of thick concepts and terms in relation to (supposed) thick features or properties. That is, how do the ways in which humans think and communicate relate to the stuff that may exist and to which we may be trying to refer? In this final chapter I consider what my previous discussion means for evaluative cognitivism and evaluative realism. My aim here is to set debates about thin and thick concepts in some context and to show what is at stake when it comes to discussions of realism. My aim is not to argue for the brand of cognitivism that I favour. That is a topic for another time.

(c) Although I draw upon a number of writers in this study, this is not a historical treatment of how thick concepts have become a focus of philosophical debate. In this section, however, I situate my debate in the recent history.

As far as I am aware, Williams coined the term ‘thick concept’, in his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (abbreviated as *ELP*). Interestingly, in this work the term ‘thin concept’ never appears. Instead, Williams uses phrases such as ‘the most abstract concepts’.¹¹ It is worth noting, first, that he explicitly defines thin and thick concepts differently from how I have done, and instead uses a frame that suggests ‘normativity’ and the possibility of concepts encoding reasons. The slogan often used when discussing Williams’ view is thus: thin concepts are ‘action-guiding’ while thick concepts are both ‘action-guiding’ and ‘world-guided’. Despite this difference between us, we can see that Williams’ chief concern is to argue against the supposed separation of thick concepts into component parts, no matter how those parts are captured. He also thinks, as I have said, that thick concepts are more important than thin ones when it comes to the possibility of evaluative knowledge and understanding our social world.

Although Williams is famous for exciting interest in thin and thick concepts, to start our story about thick concepts here would be unwise. Many intellectual histories (**p.12**) are themselves aimed at telling a particular view.¹² Here is my brief, impressionistic version that notes two other sources.

First, during the late 1950s Philippa Foot and Iris Murdoch ran an Oxford seminar in which they began to question recent work in noncognitivism, specifically the prescriptivism of R. M. Hare.¹³ They also had in their sights the fact-value distinction more generally. For many prominent thinkers during the twentieth century, the separation of and clear distinction between facts and values was an article of faith. When Maddy says that Paddy is wearing brown trousers or that today is Sunday, she is trying to state facts. When she says that Paddy is good she is ascribing a value to him. Although it looks as if we can pick out values as much as we pick out facts, and that they form part of the stuff of the world, for those that hold to the fact-value distinction the two are very different. Facts are things in the world, while values seem as if they may well not be. Often the fact-value distinction was given a naturalistic edge, with theorists thinking that to be a (proper) fact is to be the sort of thing that is studied, or could be studied, by the natural sciences. Modern natural science has no room for values: it cannot measure them, or test them, and it seems impossible to sense them with any of the normal five human senses. So some other and quite different explanation is needed of our value judgements. As part of this view, doubt was cast on the reality of values. Additionally, questions were raised about the character of our language and psychology when we judge that a particular thing has a certain value. Some of those that relied on the fact-value distinction explicitly conceived of it as a development of Hume’s is-ought distinction.¹⁴

It is easy to see how Hare's prescriptivism and, say, A. J. Ayer's emotivism step in here. We have some supposed nonevaluative, factual, descriptive stuff. We have nonevaluative concepts that we use to pick this stuff out and categorize it as different things. Some of this stuff is further seen as good and some of it as bad. We then have some theory that tells us how it is that such value judgements are conveyed and what their exact function is. Some noncognitivists emphasize the emotive stance that such **(p.13)** judgements have, and get us to think about evinced Boos and Hurrahs. Others, such as Hare, get us to think about commands and prescriptions.

Present-day philosophers are used to the fact-value distinction coming under pressure from a number of sources. Foot and Murdoch, through concentration on Hare, can be seen as questioning whether there is such a distinction, and what one might mean by talking of the 'factual' in particular. When we say of Paddy that he is honest, or fair, or wicked, or stylish, are we trying to pick out some fact about him or ascribe a value to him? For Foot and Murdoch it is very likely that we are ascribing values. But it is not so obvious that we are not also picking out something factual and, further, that it would be unwise to separate these two aspects of the one thing. Their reasons—or at least Foot's—for thinking this will be outlined in Chapter Six.

A second point worth noting in our brief history is that although Williams coined 'thick concept', before him Gilbert Ryle used the phrase 'thick description' to describe ideas in the general ballpark.¹⁵ A thick description is simply a more specific sort of description that is required in order to categorize an action or thing. To give a hint of the idea, consider the difference between the more general THINKING and the more specific REFLECTING, MEDITATING, and DAYDREAMING. Ryle mixes this with his idea that among relevantly similar actions and things, described in similar ways, there need not be a separable and identifiable core or base thing that they all have in common. So reflection, meditation, and daydreaming are all types of thinking, but it is not as if there is a specific isolatable thing—thinking—that is common to all of the individual instances and which is attached to three other (separable) things in turn to create those three instances of thinking.

I mention Ryle here, not just because of his use of the word 'thick', but also because he thinks of some descriptions as being abstractions from other, thicker descriptions, echoing Williams' labelling in *ELP*. Williams would have been aware of Ryle's work and a comparison of their ideas is instructive. I discuss Ryle's view of thick descriptions and compare his thoughts with Williams' views of thick concepts, again in Chapter Six.

Alongside these points, it is worth remarking that writers other than Williams—prominently Simon Blackburn, Jonathan Dancy, Allan Gibbard, Susan Hurley, John McDowell, Hilary Putnam, and David Wiggins—were making interesting

points about thick concepts during the 1980s and 1990s. Although my study is primarily ahistorical, I will draw on the work of some of these writers in the coming chapters.¹⁶ **(p.14)** Key to their discussions was the aforementioned idea of whether evaluative and descriptive conceptual content were separable and, hence, whether thick concepts could be reduced to more basic concepts.

(d) In the previous few pages, and certainly in what is to come, a number of contrasts and ideas appear. Here I highlight three so as to orientate the reader.

(i) *The fact-value distinction*. I have just mentioned this. I do not speculate as to the origins of the distinction, nor as to how scientifically respectable it is.¹⁷ Suffice it to say, in this study I assume a fairly simple-minded characterization: there is stuff in and of the world, and there are values that humans attach to some of that stuff that take either a positive or negative cast. There is assumed to be a distinction between stuff and how we value that stuff, and that distinction is thought to be very deep and unbridgeable. Once the distinction is accepted, another question looms: even if facts and values are radically different types of thing, do values exist and, indeed, are they as ontologically respectable as facts?¹⁸ Some modern theorists may accept the distinction while trying to show that values, or evaluative properties, are still ontologically respectable. However, many who wielded the distinction originally did so with the explicit or implicit intent of casting doubt on the reality of values. These theorists thought it unwise to think of values as being part of the world of stuff *really* (and their theories may further explain this point), and that such values are in the world merely in some broader sense, namely in the sense that humans create values and humans are themselves part of the world.

There are different ways of charactering the fact-value distinction.¹⁹ Most discussions are based on this assumption: we are trying to characterize the world and what is fundamental to our ontology (and some discussions drop the 'fundamental'; they just care about what exists, fundamental or not). Our language and our concepts are essential to that, for reflection on our concepts and how we carve the world reveals to us what our ontological commitments are.

I take it that the broad distinction I am interested in shows up essentially with other terms and phrases: in the 'evaluative' and the 'descriptive', obviously, but also in the 'normative' and the 'positive' used in the social sciences, and in Hume's distinction between is and ought, which in modern-day terms has a narrower focus on normativity and the guidance of action. No matter what labels we use, there is **(p.15)** assumed to be some sharp distinction between how things are, on the one hand, and how we positively or negatively react to those things and how we might like things to be in the future, on the other. Use of

Hume's distinction will emphasize this latter idea, where the focus may be on reasoning: 'if this *is* the case, then what *ought* to be done?'²⁰

In this book my focus is not on arguing for the reality of evaluative properties. My aim is to question the fact-value distinction in the first place, and to provide *but one* building block in a defence (in fact, a family of different defences) of the reality of values and of a certain view of what happens when we reason and judge. The introduction of thick concepts, or their promise, is designed to cast doubt on the plausibility of the distinction between facts and values. The aim is to make us question what is going on in our language and concepts, our judgement and reasoning that uses them, and what we can conclude about the structure and character of our ontology.

(ii) *Concepts and properties*. This whole study is focused on thinking about conceptual content. I use 'stuff' as a colloquial and general term to indicate things in the world, with concepts being thought of in a simple way: they are the tools by which we characterize and capture that stuff.

Although this book is not a defence of (my version of) evaluative realism, as mentioned I indicate what implications my thoughts have for properties and reality in Chapter Nine, given that I discuss matters wholly in terms of concepts.

(iii) *Concepts and terms*. Again I am assuming something simple here. Terms are the linguistic tools by which we represent the world to ourselves, while concepts are the non-linguistic tools by which we do the same. The philosophical characterization of concepts is a controversial matter, and in this study I want to bracket this dispute because otherwise it will divert us from the main issues between separationists and nonseparationists.²¹ Indeed, it is fair to say that this has been the approach that most writers on thick concepts have taken. However, I will say here that I do not think of concepts as literal mental representations, as may be found in cognitive psychology. More positively, I think both that concepts are those non-linguistic entities that help us to present the world in a certain way to ourselves (such that they can be contrasted with the referents of such modes of presentation) and that they can be and are revealed in how people use terms to identify, categorize, communicate, and the like.

(p.16) One important distinction between concepts and terms is this. Just as a single word can have more than one meaning and more than one concept—think of 'bank'—so a number of words can have a single concept standing behind them. For example, a number of words such as 'fair', 'fine', 'good', and 'great' can be used not only to indicate the concepts linked explicitly to those terms, but they can all be used, in everyday conversation, to pick out some same, general concept PRO. Note something already mentioned in passing: Pekka Väyrynen, one of my chief interlocutors, casts the debates using 'thick terms', but I take it that our debate is about the same issues.

(e) One last set of comments. There are topics I would like to have discussed in detail but have decided to leave out for matters of space. Here are three. First, thick concepts are traditionally thought of as one word ‘things’, reflecting one word terms. But there is no reason to think that matters have to be like this; there could easily be, and probably are, inseparable evaluative concepts that require a number of words to express them, be they in English or any other language. Indeed, further, we might then think that all sorts of linguistic device, such as simile, metaphor, and the like might be useful (or necessary) in indicating some thick evaluations. For simplicity’s sake, however, I deal only with one word concepts in this study.²² Second, because of my language throughout this book I may give the impression that we have distinct evaluative domains, such as *the* ethical, *the* aesthetic, and so on. While some concepts and ideas are solidly within one domain, I do not believe for one moment that there are hard and clear demarcations between various types of evaluation and that every evaluative concept sits squarely in one domain and no others. For example, we can call an artwork grotesque, offensive, heroic, and the like. Such claims can be meant non-metaphorically and may have both aesthetic and ethical connotations. Other such examples abound when considering other borders, such as the ethical-prudential and the aesthetic-epistemic. Further to this, ethical evaluations can be offered without using clear and obvious ethical terminology.²³ These are all interesting ideas, but I do not detail them here. I hope that all I say in this book is both consistent with these ideas and conducive to them.

Lastly, I keep to one side, as much as possible, the idea that if there are concepts then there are very likely to be different conceptions of those concepts and, hence, we need some way to distinguish when a concept is a conception of another concept, and when it is a different concept altogether. Making good on this task is crucial in understanding, for example, whether people are in genuine dispute with one another, and in understanding the very conditions for agreement first of all. I find this whole topic of great interest, but I leave it aside here for another time.

Having indicated ideas that do not get detailed in this book, I now start on those questions I do wish to discuss.

Notes:

(¹) When referring to concepts as concepts, I write them capitalized as here. When referring to and mentioning associated terms and words, I write them thus: ‘generous’.

(²) However, innocent and acceptable as this identity is, I do draw attention to it and question it in Chapter Six when I discuss the labels that one applies to the various conceptual categories that are in play.

⁽³⁾ See Elstein and Hurka (2009), pp. 516–17 for discussion.

⁽⁴⁾ I use this phrasing myself from time to time. It is just that I do not think we can leave matters there, and we should not aim only to show that there is this intertwining. That last idea is really the point behind Chapter Five.

⁽⁵⁾ This possibility is barely discussed in the literature. There is a flavour of it in Wiggins (2006), pp. 378–9, note 20, and more strongly in Dancy (1995), p. 268. The most detailed discussion is Roberts (2013) which takes the articulation of this view as its main topic. I discuss this last paper in note 29, Chapter Six.

⁽⁶⁾ I leave aside throughout this study the complication of speaker versus hearer meaning so we can focus on the differences between the views themselves. In Chapter Six I sharpen these two views a little more and contrast them with two more views of evaluation.

⁽⁷⁾ This term is from Altham (1995), p. 162.

⁽⁸⁾ Or, unique to two thick concepts that share the same *differentia* but which have a different thin *genus*.

⁽⁹⁾ This discussion brings out the difference between saying that thin concepts are ‘wholly’ or ‘mostly’ evaluative. The first may indicate a difference in kind between the thin and the thick, while the second indicates a difference of degree.

⁽¹⁰⁾ With apologies for the ugliness of this and other labels.

⁽¹¹⁾ He mentions ‘thin concepts’ by that label in Williams (1996), p. 25, but does so without any indication that this is a new development. Samuel Scheffler in his 1987 review of *ELP* talks of ‘thin concepts’. Scheffler tells me that his memory is of Williams happily using ‘thin concept’ at the time of his writing *ELP*, so its absence is probably some quirk of no philosophical significance.

⁽¹²⁾ See Appiah (2008), chapter 1 for a nice discussion of this idea.

⁽¹³⁾ The best discussions of their ideas are in Foot (1958) and (1958–9), and Murdoch (1956), (1957), and (1962). Williams notes that this seminar was one of the inspirations for his work on thick concepts: Williams (1985), note 7 pp. 217–18. The precise idea he cites is that one cannot understand an idea unless one sees its evaluative point, an idea I discuss in Chapter Eight.

⁽¹⁴⁾ Putnam (2002), esp. chapter 1, is very good on the history of the development of the fact-value distinction (although Putnam prefers ‘dichotomy’) and its relation to Hume. One short discussion is worth repeating. He ends that first chapter with thoughts about Carnap and the distinction between observational and theoretical terms. Observational terms are those that refer to

properties for which there is a simple test procedure that can determine whether the supposed property in question exists. (Examples include 'blue', 'hot', and 'warmer than'.) Theoretical terms are those that refer to hypothetical physical properties (such as 'charge') that we introduce to explain and predict certain observable phenomena. Putnam (p. 25) imagines a historian describing someone as cruel. This, instead of being a theoretical term in Carnap's sense, is a "term that figures in a certain kind of reflective understanding of the *rationale* of conduct, in understanding both how the agent feels and acts and how others perceive the agent's feelings and actions". Putnam imagines Carnap dismissing cruelty, therefore, as some "metaphysical nonsense".

(¹⁵) Ryle (1966–7) and (1968). Although the phrase features prominently in these late papers, the idea of there being higher-levels of description that contrast with bare or minimal descriptions is something that runs through a lot of Ryle's work. I have not been able to ascertain the extent to which Ryle—or Hare—knew of the Foot–Murdoch seminar, let alone whether they attended.

(¹⁶) It is also worth mentioning Clifford Geertz who, in Geertz (1973), used Ryle's ideas to great effect in reflecting on what goes on when one attempts to understand other cultures. Although I do not discuss her work, Lovibond (1983) is also relevant.

(¹⁷) For example, we might think first of all about what facts are, and whether they can be respectable to and in modern science. The fact that the chair is over there is very different from the chair itself, and different again from the atoms that make up a chair. Often 'fact' in the mouths of some thinkers was just a placeholder for 'a thing that exists'.

(¹⁸) And further, if they are assumed to be real, should they be thought of naturalistically or nonnaturalistically? There are many discussions of this in modern metaethics. For a brief flavour see Brink (1989), Enoch (2011), and Shafer-Landau (2003). Kirchin (2012) discusses many positions in metaethics.

(¹⁹) As well as Putnam (2002) on this topic see both Blackburn (2013) and Väyrynen (2013), pp. 15–18 for responses.

(²⁰) There is a very interesting and different frame to be used for all of these discussions: perhaps there could be a three-way distinction between facts, value, and reasons (or similar ideas), and perhaps we should be casting doubt on clear distinctions between these three notions. Or perhaps we should simply be interested in exploring the relations more. Why put values and reasons on the same side against facts? Perhaps they are as different from each other as either is from facts. This is really interesting, but in order to make some progress I choose to focus just on the evaluative and the descriptive, although reasons and

actions do make appearances every so often. A focus on the relation between and differences between reasons and values is a matter for another time.

⁽²¹⁾ See Margolis and Laurence (2014), especially §1 for a flavour. Note that after they list three main views, including the family of ‘concepts as mental representations’ Margolis and Lawrence indicate that one could try to combine them.

⁽²²⁾ See Zangwill (2013) for more on this idea.

⁽²³⁾ This is a key theme of Crary (2007). See Kirchin (2008) for commentary.

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