



## Thick Evaluation

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# Evaluative Cognitivism

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## Abstract and Keywords

This final chapter considers what implication this study's account of thin and thick concepts has for metaethics more generally. If one thinks that thick concepts are basic and fundamental concepts, does that mean one is committed to the existence of thick properties? Or, in other words, is there a (thick) evaluative reality? This chapter unpicks a number of assumptions lying behind some evaluative realist accounts (particularly mind-independent accounts of evaluative properties) and shows the way in which a more modest cognitive account of evaluation may work. The chapter ends by indicating at least one further direction for our thoughts, namely the question of how one should understand the difference between concepts and conceptions, and what implications this has for how people communicate with each other and how one should conceptualize agreement and disagreement.

*Keywords:* cognitivism, concept-conception, evaluative property, evaluative realism, metaethics, mind-independence

## 9.1 Introduction

As advertised, this concluding chapter deals with an issue that has bubbled up every so often, namely what we are to say of the ontology that lies behind our conceptual categorizations? This is, to be frank, a topic worth a book or more itself.<sup>1</sup> My aim here is very modest, namely to sketch some recent philosophical currents and draw together some of my thoughts to show what we may begin to say on this issue in connection with points made in this book. Although this chapter uses 'cognitivism' in its title, 'realism' could have been used in its stead.

In §9.2 I set out a train of thought that leads us into territory that I regard as incorrect. In doing so I am offering a deliberately broad sweep of recent metaethical thought. In §9.3 I respond to that train of thought to show the possibility of a better position. In §9.4 I conclude, both this chapter and the overall book. However, I cannot resist a look beyond the confines of my main focus and so in §9.5 I permit myself one last thought.

## 9.2 A Train of Thought

The concepts that we use are typically couched in and expressed by various judgements we make.<sup>2</sup> It is natural to think that many of these judgements can be true or false, correct or incorrect, and we think it is important that such judgements are this way. The truth value of 'Jupiter is bigger than Saturn' really matters for many reasons, one of which is just that we think there is a fact of the matter about the comparative sizes of planets. Some judgements and issues are more important than others. It really matters how those bacteria behave and what we say about their nature, for people are getting very ill and the bacteria may be the cause. In contrast, it is typically not so important exactly how many worms are in my compost heap.

**(p.183)** We often express thick concepts in ways that indicate we are trying to make judgements about the world. We are categorizing the world in certain ways, and want to present it correctly. And, when it comes to evaluations, we are often doing things of importance. It really matters whether the action was cruel or kind, and it really matters whether the dress is classy or vulgar. If so, and if they are important, we had better make sure that we can support the idea that evaluative judgements get to be true and false.

When it comes to many other sorts of judgement and concept, we typically assume that we should look to the world. Rightly or wrongly we might assume a sort of correspondence theory of truth: our linguistic expressions are attempts to map onto the world in some way, and when they do it successfully we call such expressions true, and when they fail we call them false. Now, there is much to be said about the correspondence theory of truth, and the problems it faces, but it has a strong grip on people, be they philosophers or not. If we go down this path, we confront the obvious question, 'What sort of thing is there which makes evaluative judgements true?' The obvious answer is to postulate the existence of a type of evaluative entity: a property, fact or similar thing. There is some evaluative stuff that is real and which is such that if judgements correspond with it (whatever 'correspond' may mean), such judgements are true. If we do not postulate the existence of such stuff, then it is unclear how such judgements could be true. When it comes to evaluations and evaluative concepts, in particular, people have different views and employ different concepts. There is no way that there can be truth unless there are things—evaluative things—that anchor all of those judgements.

Indeed, once we reflect on that last point we must realize that we have to conceive of the existence of these evaluative things in some way which is free of human influence. Built into the train of thought I am following is the idea that people have all sorts of views and employ all sorts of concepts. We can thus distinguish two ways of going wrong: applying a concept to the wrong thing (because we are foolish, or uninformed, or mad, say), and using a bogus concept in the first place (perhaps by using SCHMABOO instead of TABOO, perhaps by using racist slurs). If we base the existence of the evaluative things that make judgements true and false on anything to do with humans and our influence then we are basing them on biases, prejudices, and other undesirable things. We need to assume such things are created and maintained in some mind-independent fashion. Or in other words, while it is a human matter which judgements we make, if we want to ensure the legitimacy and authority of evaluative judgements, we should say that the things which the judgements are judgements of, are decidedly not human matters: humans do not determine or influence what evaluative things exist and their nature.

So, in short, when we say that some action is cruel, or some dress is vulgar, there really is a fact of the matter that determines whether we speak truly. Further, this fact of the matter is not itself based on anything human, be it whim or something more solid and measured. It is determined mind-independently. Indeed, once we think like **(p.184)** that, it could be that the dress is neither vulgar nor elegant. That is, the concepts and terms we use are all hopeless; none of them capture or 'cut' the world correctly. Why think that our human-based concepts are correct, particularly as we have now invoked the notion of mind-independence? Perhaps there are better ways to categorize the world, such as those the Martians use. Perhaps the dress is schmelegant not elegant.

### 9.3 Thoughts about that Train of Thought

There is a lot that goes wrong in this train of thought. I will not worry too much about the end point. Mind-independent evaluative realism, particularly in ethics, will always have its supporters, both within philosophy and outside. It is easy to see why. It is fuelled by a fear of relativism and clamour for a certain sort of certainty. While some people (even philosophers) may be more inclined towards relativism of at least some variety when it comes to aesthetics, in ethics the stakes seem higher. Even if we care passionately about the transcendence of art, in ethics we are thinking about suffering and death, and prolonged happiness and freedom. We may feel happier to live and let live in art, but in ethics we cannot leave things there. (Or so many philosophers assume.) It seems to matter strongly whether we keep promises and whether a society is just. And these matters cannot be left to human judgement alone. We had better get these judgements right, and getting it right cannot simply be a matter of reflecting our own prejudices and biases, because for all we know we may be simply repeating what we are comfortable with, not getting at the truth.

I can understand why this view of ethical matters has its adherents, and why the quest for truth turns into a postulation of mind-independent ethical or evaluative entities. I believe, however, that this position is fundamentally misguided. But I am not going to argue against it here, and instead I turn to think about the various ways in which we can respond once we recognize it as an option.<sup>3</sup>

Many different sorts of theorist will reject this notion of an ethical or evaluative property. Some will think we can do away altogether with any notions of truth and will fall back on to a type of relativism or nihilism. Others will try to retain something of the idea of truth while rejecting the ontology. These are the more interesting positions in contemporary metaethics.

But of these more interesting positions some still go wrong, in my view. Let me sketch two. Error theorists, particularly those influenced directly by the arguments of John Mackie, think that the ethical properties—or ‘objective prescriptions’—that everyday moral thought and language can be seen to rely on simply do not exist. Why not? Because, according to those that follow Mackie, the sort of conception of ethical properties to be found in everyday moral thought and language is that given above, and the idea of a mind-independent value property is an incoherent notion. So **(p.185)** ethical thought as a whole is in systematic error, for we are making judgements using a bogus notion. There is a lot to say about Mackie’s version of error theory, and error theory generally.<sup>4</sup> One main worry is that Mackie and others have misidentified their target. It is unclear how strong this conception of ethical properties is in everyday moral thought and language. If other options are on the table, ones that make the truth of true moral judgements more palatable, then we should not reject something as old and as useful as ethical thought at all. And, further, what are we to say about other sorts of prescription and evaluative property, particularly such as those found in epistemology where there seem to be requirements or reasons to believe such-and-such?<sup>5</sup>

A second position that goes wrong is noncognitivism/expressivism.<sup>6</sup> Things are tricky here. Noncognitivism is, strictly, a view about the mental states that typically accompany everyday ethical judgements (or should be viewed by philosophers to accompany them). Similarly, expressivism is strictly a view about how language works (or how it should be seen to work). It is not, strictly, a view about ontology. However, ontological and conceptual claims about ethics come in noncognitivism’s (and expressivism’s) wake. For if we can show that ethical language and thought work in a certain way, and work fairly well in a certain way, without the need for a postulation of ethical properties at all, then why bother postulating such things?

Why and how does noncognitivism go wrong? Again, there is much to comment on, and some of this has already occupied us in this study. As with error theory, I think its failure is due to a misunderstanding about what a sensible sort of

realism could be: a realism that can respond to the challenge of relativism sensibly, yet which does not go as far as postulating mind-independent properties and which accommodates some of what is good in noncognitivism.

During the 1980s and beyond, analytic philosophy saw the rise of this sort of sensible position, labelled in various ways. For simplicity's sake, let me call it 'sensitivity theory'. (The name relates to people's sensibility, not the fact that many regarded it as sensible.) It was associated most famously with the work of McDowell and Wiggins. In short, values were seen to be analogous to Locke's idea of secondary qualities.<sup>7</sup> There were not mind-independently existing things, but things whose reality could be said to depend, in some way, on human beings and how they perceive and experience the world. In forming his view, McDowell was, famously, explicitly arguing against error theorists and noncognitivists.

There are questionable aspects of this view. For example, we require details of how some natural stuff and some human stuff combine to create some value stuff that in turn can be seen, by philosophers, to constitute the stuff to which our judgements are **(p.186)** answerable. There *is* devilish detail here. Despite that detail, I believe this view broadly get things right, or at least it is better than error theory and noncognitivism.

And yet...the sort of realism that is developed is, perhaps, far too optimistic. (In fairness, as I read them Wiggins was more reluctant than McDowell in his use of 'realism' and 'features'.) There is a confidence that ethical judgements are true and false, and that we can determine which ones are which and why. There is a confidence that we can indicate the better sorts of judge—the virtuous and wise judges—who will act as our determiners (if not stipulators) of the moral compass.

Williams' views on these matters, which I summarized in the previous chapter, are more nuanced. They are also more realistic, realistic in that everyday sense of the word that sometimes goes unconsidered in philosophical debates. Forming moral judgements is a hard process, and not just because there may be many considerations to bring to bear. It is hard because there is no clear sense that we have a best judge who can determine what we should say; even a philosophical fiction of such a person designed to further certain intuitions may stand in the way. It is also hard because it is one thing to say that we want to be able to distinguish the better concepts from the worse concepts; far harder to arrive at neutral criteria that would enable such a comparison. Perhaps the confidence on show in sensitivity theory is misplaced.

This is, as advertised, deliberately sketchy. Let me break out of this survey to make three points relevant to our concerns in this book. First, recall one of the notes from Chapter Five. It seems as if a commitment to the shapelessness of KIND involves a commitment to existence of something we can call kindness.

The challenge is to reflect on the reality of kindness. I pointed out there that cognitivism and realism are distinct positions, just as noncognitivism and non-realism are distinct. However, this is not to say that the two cannot be embraced by one overall stance, nor that the insights of one position cannot be shared by the other. Williams and McDowell have their differences, a few of which I have touched upon in this book. The best hope I can see of forming a position concerning the reality of the thick, if we call it that, is one that, like Williams' position, does not give in to easy views about realism but which, unlike him, is optimistic about our confidence in forming views and using evaluative concepts. In the previous chapter I indicated the ways in which we should be more confident than Williams is. If, over time, we find that our use of concepts results in a better life—I leave this notion vague here—then why should we not be confident in how we live, categorize, and justify? Given that we categorize and justify by looking at how the world works, why not call this position a type of realism? Why not assume that we can, within our own justificatory system, have the resources to draw meaningful divisions between the better and worse and, therefore, between the true and the false? Why not think that such divisions and justifications that started from within a worldview could not gain legitimacy and authority that reached beyond these initial confines? This would take, of course, a focus on what sort of theory of truth we would wish to adopt.

We can also call this position 'cognitivism'. I am, as a second point, not too fussed about labels here. Despite my use of labels through this book, what really matters to **(p.187)** me are the ideas that stand behind them. (And I hope my dissection of various labels shows how important that is to me.) Blackburn has often criticized McDowell, and other realists, for a seemingly simple postulation of something within one's philosophical view—reality, truth, knowledge—that really should be earned through honest toil, by which Blackburn means analysed, justified, and constructed in a plausible fashion. I am all for honest toil. Yet, in my view what we can earn has the right to be called a realist account, even if it falls short of the mind-independent realism I sketched earlier. Blackburn's position is labelled by him, accurately, as 'quasi-realism'. In my view there is no reason to think that we have to retain the 'quasi-' prefix, even if such a view postulates the existence of evaluative stuff that exists in a way different from the way in which, say, some scientific properties exist.

But this brings me to a third and most important point. Every so often I have mentioned the fact-value distinction, and I have discussed it earlier in this book. Thick concepts, it has been said, hold out the hope that this distinction is erroneous. A sensible challenge to those that advocate it does not claim that there are no value-free facts. Rather, it claims that there may be some things that appear to be factual but which, on closer inspection, are not as value-free as one thinks and, further, that the division between the two supposed groups is blurred. One reason noncognitivists, and possibly error theorists, go wrong is that they begin by thinking there is such a clear distinction, possibly influenced

by the thought that if there are clear examples of both groups, then there must be a clear dividing line between the two groups (and, in effect, label them as two distinct groups). Ethical and other evaluative talk has to be part of one or other group, and therefore it is clearly not factual.

This is not, as I indicated in Chapter Five, to signal that ethical and other evaluative facts and properties are of the very same ontological cast as scientific properties and entities, and facts based on scientific ideas. To end on this point would be madness, I think. Yet, the importance of reflecting on thin and thick concepts is to show how far evaluative thought can go and how factual it can be. Understood in the right way, such thought can be the vehicle for claims that can be seen as true and as claims to knowledge. My discussion of Williams in the previous chapter began us on that road.

Williams was right, I think, to contrast the conceptual schemes of our making with the absolute conception of the world. Yet, the conceptual schemes that are imposed on such a world can be seen as better and worse than other schemes, and we can be confident, I think, in saying which ones are better.

### 9.4 Overall Conclusion

There were few details in the previous section. As I said, providing those details is a book in itself. The main point, instead, is that we should not think we have an impossible task here. We are not fated to embrace mind-independent evaluative realism, nor a type of relativism. And, within the middle ground, we are not forced to say that because the stuff of evaluative concerns is not science, it therefore cannot be factual or truth-apt. To echo a thought from Chapter Five, **(p.188)** we can say that these issues call into question what might be meant by 'truth' and 'fact'. We should not cut off potential routes before we have begun: we need to think hard about truth and the factual, not assume we know about them already. Perhaps the correspondence theory of truth is not the right theory for evaluative concerns, for example.

That is one of the lessons of this study. In Chapter Seven I criticized Väyrynen. He argues that most standard thick concepts are not inherently or essentially evaluative because they do not conform to certain rules and norms about core semantic meaning. My criticism was partly based on the idea that we should think through how concepts are used and use this as a prompt to think about how the evaluative may be a broader category. In microcosm that is the overarching conclusion of this study. What I hope I have shown is that evaluation, and evaluative concepts, come in a variety of guises, but they are all no less the evaluative for that. Part of the point and joy of philosophy, particularly in its modern analytic variety, is an attempt to make clear various ideas. Yet it goes astray too often when it fails to realize that the phenomenon with which it is dealing is neither clear nor clean. It is pretty straightforward to say that thick concepts are just specific types of evaluative concept, but beyond

that there is not as much clarity as some suppose. Separationism imposes a clear division on matters where they may not be a division. Nonseparationism is to be preferred because it tries to understand thick concepts on their own terms. Thick concepts are simply evaluations of a sort different from thin ones.

### 9.5 One Last Thought

Having seemingly concluded, I break the rules and make one last point. In both Chapters Six and Eight I hid away in the main text and in footnotes a topic that could be one of the most important questions in this book. It is important to question how a concept can be held together as a single concept. We often find people agreeing about some idea, yet disagreeing because they have different conceptions that clash. The real-life debate between Rawls and Nozick over what it is for a distribution of resources to be just is one such example. Despite their differences—over particular points and over starting assumptions—no one could doubt that Rawls and Nozick were engaged in a dispute about the same concept, and had points of contact. But is it possible to pick out certain traits, or even necessary and sufficient conditions, that enable us to say when we have two ideas that are properly classed as conceptions of the same concept, and when those two ideas are just different concepts? If we can, what are they? And, further, do different sorts of concept (and conception) admit of different answers to these questions? Probing these ideas will give us a sense of some of the most everyday and fundamental of human social activities: communication with other people, understanding them, and agreement and disagreement with them. By getting a sound understanding of what it is for a concept to be evaluative, and what it is for it to be thick or thin, we can begin to make progress on these broader issues.

#### Notes:

<sup>(1)</sup> As noted earlier in this book, I discuss ontology and metaethics generally in Kirchin (2012). In that book I also discuss all of the main metaethical positions, questions, arguments and ideas in far more detail than in this brief chapter.

<sup>(2)</sup> We might replace 'judgement' here with 'sentence', 'proposition', 'belief', etc. Because I focus on other things, I am being deliberately broad and unspecific here.

<sup>(3)</sup> For arguments against, again see Kirchin (2012).

<sup>(4)</sup> See Kirchin (2010b) for commentary and discussion.

<sup>(5)</sup> See Cuneo (2007) for an extended discussion of this idea.

<sup>(6)</sup> Schroeder (2010) is a great survey and history of noncognitivism.

<sup>(7)</sup> McDowell (1985) is the *locus classicus*. See also some of the essays in Wiggins (1998), especially III and IV.



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