

Thick Concepts and Reasons

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1. Thick concepts as “action-guiding”

Bernard Williams characterizes **thick concepts** (e.g. “coward, lie, brutality, and so forth”) as not only “world-guided” in their correct application, but also “action-guiding” in that they “are *characteristically* related to reasons for action. If a concept of this kind applies, this *often* provides someone with a reason for action” (ELP, 140; italics added).

The hedges are likely due to **reasons internalism** (RI): S has a reason to φ only if there is “a sound deliberative route” from S ’s “actual motivational set” M to (an intention to) φ .

A conjecture about the hedges: The applicability of a thick concept provides reasons only for “insiders” (members of a community that uses/endorses it), not for “outsiders.”

- The hedges are needed because some thick terms and concepts are **objectionable**: one may understand a thick concept and grasp the evaluative point of its use, but reject the evaluative perspective that supplies this point and refuse to treat its applicability as providing reasons. (Insiders are supposed to have those reasons.)
- This phenomenon of “objectionable” thick concepts also tells against the alternative view that thick concepts provide reasons simply in virtue of their evaluative content; some thick concepts seem to “misevaluate.”
- RI can explain the putative difference in the reasons of insiders and outsiders: a disposition to use a thick concept and the correlative evaluative perspective is an element of insiders’ M but not of outsiders’ M .
- Note: according to this view thick concepts (or the properties they ascribe) are **contingently, not inherently, reason-giving**.

2. Two internal worries

A. RI applies to any considerations. If thick concepts are action-guiding only in the sense stated in RI, they have no special action-guiding character relative to non-evaluative ones.

- This looks worrisome if also one assumes (as many including Williams do) that thick terms and concepts are **inherently evaluative** in meaning/content. One might have thought that evaluative concepts are related to action in a special way.
- The worry may not be deep; one wouldn’t expect all evaluative concepts to provide reasons, at least not in any straightforward way; consider (e.g.) A GOOD THIEF.
- But the combination of RI and the claim that thick concepts are in some distinctive way both world-guided and action-guiding looks problematic. It isn’t clear in what distinctive sense thick concepts could plausibly be said to be action-guiding.¹

B. Objectionable thick concepts raise tricky issues within Williams’s framework.

- RI includes a “no-false-belief” clause; do the false evaluative presuppositions of objectionable thick concepts count, thereby undermining the insiders’ reasons?
- Could there be a suitable deliberative route from an insider’s M to a rejection of the evaluative perspective that provides an objectionable thick concept with its point?

1. U. Heuer, “Thick Concepts and Internal Reasons” (forthcoming), criticizes various options.

- [What about Williams's views on reflection destroying knowledge (perhaps, *inter alia*, by leading to a loss of thick concepts?) and the truth he sees in relativism?]

3. Two external worries

A. Why should I think that the applicability of thick concepts that I regard as objectionable provides reasons even for the insiders? Why should it be conceptually confused to say (e.g.) that the fact that something is lewd/lustful/unchaste, is not, in and of itself, a reason to condemn it? (Alternative view: such concepts don't apply because they are empty.)

B. The phenomenon of objectionable thick concepts cuts much deeper than just a need for some story about how the evaluative properties which thick terms and concepts allegedly pick out could provide reasons for insiders but not outsiders.

Why? Because I think that the presumption that thick terms and concepts are inherently evaluative is false, even in a sense not inherently connected to reasons. Some quick evidence for this claim is that the following seem coherent in the mouths of "objectors":

- (1) Extramarital sex might be unchaste, but that wouldn't mean that things are bad in any way just for being sexually provocative.
- (2) Whether or not the Rio Carnival is lewd, it would be in no way bad for that.
- (3) Whether or not Madonna's stage show involves overt sexual display [to a degree prudes would consider lewd], it would be in no way bad for that.
- (4) Lady Gaga's stage show isn't LEWD; things are in no way bad just for overt sexual display that transgresses conventional boundaries

I argue elsewhere that the wide range of thick terms and concepts that are in principle open to being regarded as objectionable (in the evaluations they are being used to convey) don't carry evaluations like *good/bad in some way* as semantic or conceptual entailments.²

If thick terms and concepts aren't inherently evaluative even in this sense, then it will be neither a surprise nor a problem if the relationship between thick concepts and reasons (internal or external) is contingent and not special relative to non-evaluative concepts.

This view has further consequences for certain issues about thick concepts and reasons.

4. Thick concepts and reasons holism

Holists about reasons can say that some reasons are invariable in their valence (Dancy).

- Dancy's suggested explanation of such invariability is that some considerations may provide reasons in virtue of their particular content; he offers some thick concepts as potential examples.
- Dancy also thinks that many thick concepts are in fact variable in their deontic valence. (That an action is considerate, or kind, is sometimes a reason against it.)

If thick terms/concepts aren't inherently evaluative, the claim that their deontic valence is contextually variable should be no more controversial than reasons holism in general.

- In particular, there would be no semantic or conceptual basis for thinking that virtue and vice concepts provide an invariable core of (moral) reasons (Crisp).

2. See my "Objectionable Thick Concepts in Denials" (*Philosophical Perspectives*, 2009) and "Thick Concepts: Where's Evaluation," both available at <http://www.personal.leeds.ac.uk/~phlpv/papers.htm>.

- There will also be no need to postulate a special kind of semantic evaluative content that has variable deontic valence to account for contextual variability.

But by the same token it becomes difficult to see why any considerations (save, perhaps, thin evaluative considerations) should be deontically invariable in virtue of their content, as opposed to (e.g.) substantive grounds derived from first-order normative theory.

5. Thick concepts and default reasons

Reasons holism has been accused of “flattening the moral landscape” by not being able to distinguish genuinely morally relevant considerations from things like shoelace color.

One reply to this proposal is to introduce **default reasons**: considerations that somehow or other are privileged to count as reasons unless something in context defeats them.

- The notion of default might be primarily epistemic (Lance & Little). In that case, the notion of default reasons has no particularly deep metaethical significance.
- The notion of default might be metaphysical: some considerations “arrive turned on” for favoring/disfavoring actions/attitudes (Dancy). What would make them so?

The most plausible source for a metaphysical default status would seem to be the content of the considerations (or the nature of the properties) that provide default reasons.

- Thick concepts (or the properties they pick out) might have seemed plausible candidates, had they been inherently evaluative in content.
- But if they aren't, then it isn't clear what would be plausible candidates for considerations that provide default reasons in a relevantly strong sense.

A residual worry arises for accounts like mine: cruelty and generosity seem normatively more important than, e.g., chocolate. What explains this difference?

- Substantive explanation: the former notions are more central and fundamental in the sorts of substantive evaluative outlooks we hold; the latter are more derivative.
- A similar move can be used to explain why pain is normatively more important than chocolate: it plays a more central role in the sorts of outlooks we hold.

6. Thick concepts and the buck-passing account of value

If thick terms and concepts were inherently evaluative in meaning, one question about the scope of the buck-passing account of value would be whether it also applies to the thick.

- If not, prospects for “reasons fundamentalism” would seem to diminish.
- If yes, what's the argument for analyzing the property of being cruel (etc.) as nothing more or other than the possession of some specific properties of a certain general type (taking enjoyment in causing suffering) that provide reasons against?

If thick terms/concepts aren't inherently evaluative in meaning, the question goes away.

- One also couldn't then object to the buck-passing view by saying that it fails to distinguish properties like gracefulness and elegance (Crisp).
- For if these aren't in themselves evaluative, buck-passing about value fails to apply.

7. Conclusion

The relationship between thick concepts and reasons is contingent and not conceptually grounded – irrespective of whether the reasons they provide are internal or external.