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Thickness and Theory

T. M. Scanlon

When I read Bernard Williams's trenchant objections to moral theory and "the morality system" I am torn, and uncertain where I stand. A kind of existential crisis ensues. Am I a defender of moral theory? Should I respond defensively, "No, that's not what a moral theorist should think. Morality doesn't need to be like that!" Or should I take a more detached view: "Yes, moral theory and the morality system are mistaken. I'm glad I don't believe any of that!"

What I will do in this paper is to go through some of the leading ideas in Williams's critique of moral theory, trying at the same time to link them together and to work out a stable set of reactions to them. I will begin with the contrast between thick and thin concepts, and continue from there to questions about the nature and viability of moral theory.

Williams famously says that the application of thick ethical concepts such as "coward, lie, brutality, gratitude and so forth" is both action-guiding and world-guided. "If a concept of this kind applies," he writes, "this often provides someone with a reason for action ... At the same time, their application is guided by the world. A concept of this sort may be rightly or wrongly applied, and people who have acquired it can agree that it applies or fails to apply to some new situation."¹

This world-guidedness might be thought to be a matter of the greater empirical content of thick concepts as contrasted with thin ones like "right" and "ought." On this

¹ *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, pp. 140ff.

understanding of the term, a concept is “world-guided” to the extent that its correct applicability to a situation is determined by empirical (physical and psychological) features of that situation. When the concept is understood in this way, however, the significance of the contrast between thick and thin concepts seems open to doubt. As Samuel Scheffler pointed out in his review of Williams’ book, ethical theories typically deal with a variety of moral concepts including well-being, consent, and various specific rights, such as rights to privacy, all of which seem to have considerable empirical content.² So the contrast in empirical content between thick and thin concepts is at most one of degree.

Moreover, the term “world-guided” suggests that what distinguishes thick concepts is a kind of objectivity, that judgments using these concepts can express knowledge because (in virtue of their thickness) they make claims about the world—claims that are made true by (hence their proper use “guided by”) what the world is like. But there is a doubt about this claim of objectivity, which is raised by something Williams himself says. Responding to a imagined challenge from a non-cognitivist, that thick ethical concepts can be divided into separate descriptive and evaluative components, Williams points out that there is no reason to believe that there will be a descriptive concept that will pick out just the same features of the world as a world-guided thick ethical concept. In order to trace the contours of the ethical concept’s applicability we have to understand its evaluative point. But if this is true—if we must be guided by the evaluative perspective of a thick concept in order to apply it—this seems to undermine the claim that its application is guided by the world in a sense that, by itself,

² Scheffler, “Morality Through Thick and Thin,” *The Philosophical Review* 96 (1987), pp.

conveys objectivity. To claim objectivity for these concept we would also need, it would seem, to claim it for the evaluative judgments that determine their empirical shape.

This suggests a different way of understanding the contrast between thick and thin ethical concepts, one that emphasizes not the degree of empirical content of thick concepts, but their degree of content *period*, especially the richness of the evaluative perspective that they involve. Here it will be helpful to start from a characterization of thin concepts. The thinness of thin concepts such as right, wrong, duty and obligation lies first and foremost in the abstractness, hence relative emptiness, of the ethical ideas that they involve, by contrast with concepts such as coward, lie, betrayal, brutality, honor, and gratitude, whose greater content reflects the distinctive character of particular social worlds. Differences in the degree of empirical content, and hence in “world-guidedness,” are consequences of this deeper difference.

This interpretation of the contrast fits with something that Williams says in later work about why judgments employing thick concepts might constitute knowledge, while those employing thin concepts could not.³ He says that there could be such a thing as expertise in the application of thick concepts, but no analogue of this in the case of thin ones. Expertise becomes relevant to knowledge through the following argument.

In order for a person to know that p, p must be true, he must believe that p, and he must be warranted in this belief. The importance of this third condition, Williams says, citing E. J. Craig, “has its roots in the fact that we need some detectable property to lead

411-434. See esp. pp. 417-418.

³ “Truth in Ethics,” in B. Hooker, ed., *Truth in Ethics*, pp. 27ff, and “Who Needs Ethical Knowledge?” in Williams’s *Making Sense of Humanity*

us to informants with reliable information.”⁴ He goes on to say that with respect to some kinds of questions, including empirical matters and theoretical questions in science and mathematics, people have different levels of expertise because they have different opportunities for becoming acquainted with the relevant information. There are two kinds of possible expertise here (corresponding to two kinds of warrant and hence two kinds of knowledge.) The first is expertise grounded in training in relatively abstract theoretical matters, such as quantum mechanics. The second is expertise which consists in having the right kind of direct experience of the phenomena themselves.

There is, Williams argues, no analog of theoretical expertise in ethics. He gives two sorts of arguments for this. The first appeals to what he takes to be the absurdity of someone’s believing an ethical claim on the authority of his teacher’s credentials as an expert, even though he cannot see it for himself. The second is the chilling idea of life and death decisions in a hospital, for example, being made by someone whose only qualification is a PhD in moral philosophy. These observations have, initially, considerable force. But what is to be made of them?

Is it implausible to think that someone could have good reason to accept an ethical conclusion simply because some moral philosopher whom he believed to have thought long and hard about the subject was convinced that it was true? It would no doubt be unfair here for me to say, but is nonetheless true, that the fact that *Williams* is convinced that some ethical claim is mistaken gives me pause in continuing to hold it—at the very least gives me reason to spend a lot of time reexamining it—even if I cannot, at first, see why he thinks this. And I believe that this has to do not only with the fact that Williams is

⁴ “Who Needs Ethical Knowledge?” p. 205.

Williams, but also with the fact that he is an excellent moral philosopher, not a philosopher of physics, a physicist, a literary critic, or an anthropologist.

Supposing, however, that this claim about the implausibility of accepting an ethical conclusion “on authority” is correct, might there not be some explanation for it other than the irrelevance of moral theory? The implausibility of this kind of authority in ethics may rest on an idea about the kind of truths that ethical truths are supposed to be. They are supposed to be action-guiding and to serve as the basis for justifications and demands for justification that we can offer one another. If ethical judgments are to have this function, then it must not only be possible for us in general to see what they require of us, but also to see why this should be required. This explains our reaction to the idea of a student’s taking his professor’s word for an ethical conclusion, but it does not rule out theory, at least theory of a kind that meets the relevant transparency requirement. So it is not yet clear, to me at least, why there could not be something like theoretical expertise in ethics. This may become clearer, however, when we turn to Williams’s reasons for thinking that there could be ethical expertise of the second kind he mentions.

This is the analog of expertise grounded in experience. An adviser, Williams says, is someone who “may see better than you do how things stand and will help you see them aright.” The adviser’s expertise need not be only non-ethical knowledge. It may, he writes, “take the form of certain kinds of knowledge under ethical concepts—that a certain course of action would be cowardly, for instance, or would count as a betrayal, or would not really be kind, and contributions of this kind can offer the person who is being advised a genuine discovery. So there is, in a sense, some ethical knowledge, it seems: knowledge of truths under ‘thick ethical concepts.’” There are also “marks of reliability”

of such advisers, but these are “not best characterized in terms of possessing information, but rather in terms of certain capacities, such as judgment, sensitivity, imagination, and so forth.”⁵

This may at first seem unfair, on two grounds. First, in order for the fact that a certain course of action would count as a betrayal to amount to a discovery, and one with reason-giving force, seeing that this is so would have to involve some new and better understanding of what makes something a betrayal. What the expert deploys thus begins to sound like a piece of ethical theory as I would understand it. Second, the contrast proposed may strike one as a put-up job. The “theorist” is portrayed as someone who has learned some moral philosophy (can talk about the difference between deontological and consequentialist theories, for example) but is (utterly) lacking in judgment, while the possessor of thick ethical concepts is supposed also to be endowed with good judgment. Couldn’t we have made the opposite assumptions—pairing a wise theorist with a woodenly conventional deployer of thick concepts?

I believe that in Williams’s view there could be a woodenly conventional and unimaginative user of thick concepts, and a wise person might also have a thorough understanding of moral theory, but this person’s wisdom could not arise from or consist in this grasp of moral theory. This is because in Williams’s view there is not enough *there*, at the level at which moral theory seeks to operate, for someone to be expert about. Here we are brought back to the second interpretation of the distinction between thick and thin concepts that I discussed above. On this interpretation, the fundamental problem with thin concepts is a lack of the kind of distinctive evaluative point which gives thick

⁵ The quoted passages are from “Who Needs Ethical Knowledge?” pp. 206 and 207.

concepts their definite shapes. Their lack of empirical content (and of the kind of objectivity that such “world-guidedness” entails) is one consequence of this, and, we now see, their failure to ground a form of expertise is another.

What this contrast between thick concepts and thin ones calls attention to is, in the first instance, an alleged weakness of thin concepts. The corresponding virtue of thick concepts is merely that they do not have this weakness. Emptiness is a fault, but content is a virtue only if it is the right content. There are plenty of thick concepts one would not want to employ. Concepts that presuppose racist views are obvious case in point, but there is no shortage of other examples. So the question is, what kind of reasons can be given for using one set of thick concepts rather than another, or for understanding these concepts one way rather than another?

Williams agrees that we need to be able to give such reasons. He writes, “Nothing that has been said should lead us to think that traditional practices are beyond criticism; practices that make distinctions between different groups of people may certainly demand justification, if we are not to be content with unreflective traditions which can provide paradigms of prejudice.”⁶ The question, then, is how to distinguish between the kind of reflective criticism that Williams endorses and the kind that leads to ethical theory of the kind he urges us to reject. The difference lies, I believe, the ways in which the mechanisms of criticism are related to the moral views (Williams often calls them dispositions) that they are used to criticize or support.

⁶ *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 115.

Theory of the kind Williams objects to looks for “justificatory reasons” for our ethical views.⁷ These are not just reasons for applying our thick ethical concepts in one way rather than another—reasons for calling certain actions cruel, for example—but reasons for using these concepts at all and for taking seriously the judgments made with them. Such justifications can take either of two forms. What I will call *moral justification* tries to show that the judgments we make using our particular ethical concepts are correct judgments about what is morally right and wrong. *Rational justification*, on the other hand, tries to show that the judgments we make using certain ethical concepts are ones that we have good reason to take seriously as guides to action. This kind of justification might be sought even after adequate moral justification has been given. Even if the judgments we make using certain concepts do express genuine moral requirements, we may still ask “Why care about that?”

Whichever kind of justification is in question, ethical theory tries to provide it by looking for a justificatory standpoint that is independent of our ethical concepts. Williams believes that this quest is mistaken. He writes,

Any such picture makes in some degree the Platonic assumption that the reflective agent as theorist can make himself independent from the life and character he is examining. The belief that you can look critically at all your dispositions from the outside, from the point of view of the universe, assumes you could understand your own and other people’s dispositions from that point of view without tacitly taking for granted a picture of the world more locally familiar than any that would be available from there; but neither the

⁷ *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 112.

psychology nor the history of ethical reflection gives much reason to believe that the theoretical reasonings of the cool hour can do without a sense of the moral shape of the world, of the kind given in the ordinary dispositions.⁸

If the evaluative attitudes that we express when we “look critically at our dispositions” are themselves included among our dispositions, then it is very plausible to claim that we cannot “look critically at all our dispositions from the outside” (at least not all of them at the same time.) We will always, as it were, be looking through some of these dispositions rather than at them. Consider first the case of rational justification. The search for this kind of justification involves “standing outside of” certain of our judgments (those we call moral) and asking what reason we have for being guided by them. But in answering this question we will still be expressing our own evaluative attitudes. I will call this “the no escape thesis.”

Some would hold, of course, that such an answer can be grounded in something more fundamental and inescapable than a particular evaluative judgment. Kant, for example, believed that his Categorical Imperative expressed a condition of rational agency: that recognizing its authority was not just a matter of coming to accept one evaluative judgment among others but rather matter of understanding what is required in order to have any such attitudes at all.

Like Williams, I am not convinced by Kant’s argument, and I do not think that any other attempt to ground moral requirements in preconditions of rationality is likely to succeed. The alternative, as I see it, is what I call the substantive strategy of trying to characterize morality in a way that makes clear why it, and the kind of life it makes

⁸ *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 110.

possible, are things that we have reason to value. This strategy runs the risk of failing to account for the special force of morality—“the moral must”—because it seems to base the claims of morality on what is just one good among many others. I think that the best response to this problem is to call attention to relations between this good and others which make it sensible to give it priority over them, rather than to try to argue that unlike other goods it is a requirement of rationality itself.⁹

In accepting the no escape thesis, in rejecting Kant’s argument, and in adopting this substantive strategy, I may be coming closer to the position Williams recommends in the following passage.

The main consequence that this discussion has for ethical argument is that reflective criticism should basically go in a direction opposite to that encouraged by ethical theory. Theory looks characteristically for considerations that are very general and have as little distinctive content as possible, because it is trying to systematize and because it wants to represent as many reasons as possible as applications of other reasons. But critical reflection should seek for as much shared understanding as it can find on any issue, and use any ethical material that, in the context of the reflective discussion, makes some sense and commands some loyalty. Of course that will take some things for granted, but as serious reflection it must know it will do that.¹⁰

⁹ I defend this substantive strategy and try to carry it out in Chapter 4 of *What We Owe to Each Other*.

¹⁰ *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, pp. 116-117.

Important points of disagreement may, however, remain between Williams's position and mine. What I have called a substantive strategy consists in trying to characterize an ethical concept in a way that brings out our reasons for taking it seriously as a guide to action.¹¹ This approach can be applied either to thick concepts or thin ones, but in my own work I have concentrated on thin concepts, specifically the concepts of right and wrong. Williams takes this emphasis to be characteristic of ethical theory of the kind he believes is misguided.

This brings me to what I called above moral justification. Williams sees ethical theory of the kind he opposes as essentially reductive. This is because it takes the process of critical reflection on our moral concepts to be a matter of determining whether the judgments made using these concepts are true judgments about what we ought morally to do, this being something that can be specified by general principles that use only thin concepts such as "right" and "wrong." Williams believes that this approach is headed in the wrong direction. He believes, as we have seen, that judgments made using thick ethical concepts can be true in a substantial sense. But the various languages of assessment employing thick concepts are in his view not "homogeneous."¹² That is, they are not various ways of stating truths about one thing, "what we ought, morally to do." Since judgments using these concepts all give, or purport to give, reasons for action, there is a sense of "right" and "wrong" in which they all make claims about what it is right or wrong to do. But this is just the sense (not specifically moral) of "right" and "wrong" in which to call an action wrong is to say that there are strong reasons (of some

¹¹ This inquiry may, of course, lead to a negative conclusion: that the concept in question does not provide good reasons, or that it would do so only if modified in certain ways.

¹² Truth in Ethics," p. 33.

kind or another) against it, and to call an action right is just to say that there are no such reasons and, perhaps, that there are good reasons (of some kind or other) in its favor.¹³ Williams doubts, however, that there is a more substantial, specifically moral, sense of right and wrong such that people in different cultures, or people within the same culture who belong to groups using different thick concepts, are all using those concepts to make claims about what is right or wrong in this sense.

Here it is helpful to distinguish two questions. The first is why one would think that there are substantial notions of moral right and wrong that we have reason to take seriously. The second is whether these are the *only* ethical concepts that are, ultimately, to be taken seriously: whether we or others have good reason to take other ethical concepts as guides to action only if they are reducible to these concepts, or justified in terms of them.

In response to the first question, I believe that there is such a sense of moral right and wrong because it seems to me that an important part of our ethical thinking is unified in two respects. It seems to be unified in method—there is such a thing as the way that moral conclusions can and should be arrived at—and to be unified in its authority and in the motivation that it triggers—when one concludes that an action is wrong this entails the recognition of a particular kind of reason not to do it. Moral theorists thus are driven to give a general characterization of the idea of moral rightness and wrongness (i.e. of that part of our ethical thinking that has this unity) both in order to characterize the relevant method and to explain its rational authority.

¹³ This is my candidate for the sense that Williams is referring to when he speaks of “a univocal sense of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ that is closely related to practical reason.” *Ibid.*, p. 32.

An ethical theory that offers an account of this method may explain some thick ethical concepts in terms of thin concepts such as right and wrong. I believe, for example, that the obligation to keep a promise can be explained in terms of general principles regarding our behavior in situations in which we have created expectations in others about what we are going to do.¹⁴ These principles are more general than the concept of a promise: they apply to some situations in which expectations have been created without promises having been given as well as to ones in which promises have been made. I believe that the structure of the concept of a promise as we understand it, in particular the conditions under which a promise is binding, are well understood by asking what principles of this kind it would or would not be reasonable to reject. The point of view from which we answer this question is less “local” than the concept of a promise, if being “local” means presupposing a particular thick concept.¹⁵ But it does presuppose certain features of our world which make the concept of a promise important for us, such as the fact that we often need to rely on assumptions about what others are going to do and have reason to want to provide others with reason to rely on assumptions about our behavior. It thus may rely on what Williams calls “a sense of the moral shape of the world.” If so, then what this example shows is that such a sense is not to be identified with the use of particular thick concepts.

In a case of this kind, a moral theory explains a thick concept in terms of a thin one, so what it offers is in this respect a reductive account. But the result of coming to accept such an account need not be that one ceases to use the thick concept. One can go

¹⁴ I offer such an explanation in Chapter 7 of *What We Owe to Each Other*.

¹⁵ I have in mind here Williams’s remark, quoted above, from p. 110 of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*.

on making promises and talking of the obligation to fulfil them even after accepting the analysis I offer. Nor is a theory of the kind I am defending reductive in the further sense of singling out one thin concept, such as “obligation” as the only morally relevant consideration and holding that all moral questions have to be settled by balancing competing claims of this kind. (Williams puts this in terms of the principle, “only an obligation can beat an obligation.”)

Williams illustrates this principle with the example of a person who has made a promise to a friend but then finds that he has an opportunity to do something that would be important for some cause that he believes in but that is incompatible with fulfilling the promise. He supposes that the example is set up so that we would agree that the right thing for the person to do would be to break the promise. But, he says, in order for the moral theory of the kind he is criticizing to support this conclusion (or even make it tempting) it has to construe promoting the cause as something the agent has an obligation to do. If it is just something he cares about or thinks important then it cannot trump an obligation.

I think Williams is right in finding this way of viewing things implausible, but I do not see why it is one that a moral theorist must adopt. In most moral theories I know of (certainly in my own view, if it counts as a theory) the very understanding of the obligation to keep a promise includes the idea that various factors, not themselves competing obligations, can make it permissible not to do the thing promised. Fulfilling a promise can fail to be obligatory simply because it turns out to have costs to the promisor that were unforeseeable at the time the promise was made and vastly outweigh any interest that the promisee has in the matter. In order to explain why promissory obligations

have this form we need not assume that would be promisors have obligations to themselves not to undergo such costs.¹⁶ It is enough to see that this exception is something promisors have reason to want and that promisees could not reasonably object to (indeed they may even have reason to want it, since it makes people willing to enter into promises that they otherwise would be wary of.) More generally, in most moral theories (certainly the more plausible ones) virtually any obligation or duty will be seen as admitting of exceptions of this kind, ones that are triggered by considerations that need not themselves be other obligations.

I have so far been describing how an ethical theory might explain the thick ethical concept “promise,” but I think that there is a range of other thick concepts in common use—“murder” and “lie,” for example—that can be accounted for in a similar way. That is to say, there is a range of thick ethical concepts whose force and content is best explained by a theory of right and wrong. Insofar as these explanations are successful, they rebut the charge that ethical theory lacks substantive content.

There are, however, other thick concepts that are not plausibly explained in this way. For example, although some people keep their promises because they believe that it would be wrong (in the sense described by a theory of the kind I have proposed) not to do so, others may keep their word because they believe that breaking it would be dishonorable. Their concept of honor may have little to do with what they owe to others and much more to do with an ideal of character that they see as appropriate for a person of a particular class, role, or tradition, and perhaps also with an ideal of personal strength. “Chastity,” which Williams often mentions as an example of a thick concept, may also

¹⁶ Or, as Williams suggests in a footnote, that the promisors have an obligation to release

belong to this class. These concepts are most plausibly understood not as special cases of a general notion of moral right and wrong but rather as deriving (or purporting to derive) their force from other, independent values. Someone who defends a substantive notion of moral right and wrong need not deny that there are such independent values that people can have good reason to be guided by. (This is my answer to the second question mentioned above.)

Even though these free standing thick concepts do not need to be derivable from the notions of right and wrong that moral theories describe, one important form of critical reflection on such concepts takes the form of asking whether they are consistent with the values that underlie this morality. This is how I would describe the kind of reflection that Williams refers to when he suggests that some thick concepts are properly dismissed as forms of prejudice.

But it is also appropriate to ask, about thick concepts to which there is no such moral objection, whether the ideals they involve are really worth valuing.¹⁷ The result of this further kind of reflective criticism is unlikely to be anything one would call a *theory*—not even a general, systematic account of what is worth valuing let alone a set of principles. It does, however, involve stepping back from certain of our evaluative attitudes and looking for “justificatory reasons.” This search may involve only a very short step back—we may simply conclude, on reflection, that these ideals are worth valuing. But the step may be longer—we may offer further reasons or even rather

them from their obligations. See *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 222, note 7.

¹⁷ I do not think that this is, at the most fundamental level, a question about whether having a disposition to value these things is part of a “flourishing” life. In at least some cases, a life is a good one because it involves valuing things that are (independently) worth valuing.

complicated arguments in support of them. In either case, (as the no escape thesis entails) the justifications that we come up with will be grounded, ultimately, in substantive judgments of value.

I have argued that the notions of moral right and wrong that moral theory describes have more content than Williams suggests. But in adopting what I have called a substantive strategy for explaining how these notions are reason-giving, and in endorsing the no escape thesis, I am committing myself to the view that the only possible justification for morality in the narrow sense or for free-standing ethical values rests ultimately on substantive judgments of value. I may therefore seem to be in agreement with Williams's view that deliberation and justification must always start from our evaluative dispositions.

In one sense, the one entailed by the no escape thesis, I do accept this view. The justification of any ethical judgment must rest on substantive claims about what we have good reason to do, and our acceptance of such a claim reveals a certain "disposition of evaluation" on our part. But Williams's use of the terms 'disposition' and 'local' sometimes seems to suggest another idea, which I would not accept: that the justification of ethical values comes to rest not in certain substantive judgments but in the fact that, for various contingent historical reasons, we *have* these dispositions and are thus disposed to accept these judgments. This distinction is one that Williams himself mentions, as the distinction between "the inside point of view, the view from one's dispositions and the outside point of view of those dispositions," and he goes on to suggest that from the

latter, “outside” point of view “there is a sense in which they [people’s dispositions] are the ultimate supports of ethical value.”¹⁸

It is of course trivially true that practices of evaluation depend on people’s dispositions—that people who entirely lacked these dispositions would not value anything. But it is equally true, and perhaps also trivially so, that judgments about what makes things valuable can be made only from what Williams calls the inside point of view. (This is just the no escape thesis again.) And from this point of view (or, rather, from the only such points of view that seem to me to survive critical scrutiny) our dispositions to value things are not, in general, what makes them valuable. The fact that one is drawn to a certain value, or that this value has in the past played an important role in shaping one’s life, or the lives of those around one, *can* be a reason for continuing to be guided by it. Whether, in a particular case, these facts are good reasons or not is, however, a substantive normative question that can only be answered from “the inside point of view.” It is not itself settled by any facts about our dispositions. I hope that Williams would agree.

¹⁸ *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 52.