

## **Thin and Thick Concepts for Expressivists**

Rachel Dichter (Draft of 8/12/24)

This essay tries to work out an understanding of the distinction between thin and thick ethical concepts as it is appealed to in the contemporary philosophical literature and to develop the point, suggested by Blackburn, that the existence of this distinction need only be acknowledged by proponents of certain views about the nature of moral concepts (Blackburn 2010 p. 130). More explicitly, the point is that expressivists may not have the conceptual resources to recognize the distinction between thin and thick ethical concepts as it has typically been spelled out by others. I argue that the reason this is the case is that following Hare, expressivists have often accepted a view of so-called ‘thin’ moral concepts on which these have descriptive contents.

Because there are varied understandings in the literature of what the distinction between thin and thick ethical concepts even consists in, a large portion of this paper will be expository. The first section will try to distill a unified understanding of the distinction between thin and thick ethical concepts from various appearances of this distinction in the contemporary metaethics literature. The second section will go into more detail about how the understanding of ethical concepts embraced by expressivists apparently renders all evaluative concepts ‘thick.’ Finally, the third section will propose two alternatives to the usual way of understanding the distinction between thin and thick ethical terms that would both be compatible with Hare’s preferred view of ‘thin’ terms and allow expressivists to substantively distinguish between the set of concepts generally called ‘thick’ and the set of concepts generally called ‘thin.’

### **I. The Distinction between Thin and Thick Ethical Concepts**

This section provides general background on the distinction between thin and thick ethical concepts as the distinction has been appealed to in the contemporary metaethics literature. Bernard Williams is often credited with being the originator of the distinction, though Blackburn suggests that the distinction between thin and thick concepts was actually introduced by Hume (Blackburn 2010 p. 129).

On a popular contemporary understanding of the distinction between thin and thick moral concepts, it consists in a distinction between two types of ethical concepts with different types of ‘contents.’ The short explanation is that ‘thin’ concepts have only ‘normative content,’ whereas ‘thick’ concepts are supposed to have a combination of normative and descriptive content. Reuter and Williemsens 2020 write:

“Thin terms evaluate an object...yet they do not explicate  
in what way the object is right or wrong. Thick terms do not

merely evaluate, they also provide substantial descriptive information...[T]here is widespread consensus that thick terms and concepts somehow unite descriptive and evaluative content, [but] how they actually do that is subject to remarkable disagreement." (Reuter and Willemsen 2020 p. 136)

Heuer 2012 makes a similar point in writing that "thick concepts...are marked by having greater empirical content than thin ones" (Heuer 2012 p. 219). Later, her explanation of Blackburn's view of thick concepts says:

"According to Blackburn, the meaning of thick concepts is made up of two distinct and in principle separable components: a descriptive one and the expression of an attitude." (Heuer 2012 p. 221)

These very general sketches of what the distinction between thin and thick concepts consists in raise a basic issue about what it really means to say that whereas thin ethical concepts have 'only normative contents,' thick ethical concepts combine 'descriptive and normative contents.' Various reconstructions which identify the descriptive and normative components of a thick concept's content with the concept's 'meaning,' including Heuer's above, suggest a Fregean view of conceptual contents.

In contemporary philosophy of language, there are two mainstream but opposing views about the nature of conceptual contents that are worth mentioning. The first is the Fregean view, according to which the content of a concept is its Fregean sense. The Fregean sense of a concept is what fixes its referent, where the referent of a concept is the item that the concept picks out in some use. On many accounts, including the one proposed by Christopher Peacocke, the Fregean sense of a concept is identified with its 'informational value,' which consists in the information about the referent that is accessible to the user of the concept in applying it. A Fregean sense of anything, including terms and propositions, is supposed to be its 'mode of presentation.'

The other view of conceptual contents is the Russellian view, according to which the content of a term or concept is just the thing it picks out, i.e. the referent of the concept. It is still possible, on this view about the nature of conceptual contents, to identify the meaning of a concept with its content *qua* referent, though it is also possible to hold that the meaning of a Russellian concept consists partly or wholly in aspects of its conceptual role, or the function that the concept has in language. It is more common among those who hold the Russellian view of conceptual contents to distinguish between

a concept's content and its meaning than it is among those who hold the Fregean view of conceptual contents.

Because most of the metaethics literature assumes that the conceptual contents involved in determining whether some ethical concept is thin or thick figure in meaning, and because a difference in the application conditions of thin and thick ethical concepts is frequently cited to explain what the difference between the contents of the two types of concepts consists in, there is a basis for holding that metaethical theorists typically presuppose a Fregean view of conceptual contents in their discussions of the distinction between thin and thick ethical terms.

Indeed, Williams's canonical discussion of the distinction between thin and thick ethical terms in his 1985 *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* describes thick concepts in the following way:

“[A] lot of those ‘thicker’ or more specific ethical notions I have already referred to...seem to express a union between fact and value. The way these notions are applied is determined by what the world is like (for instance, by how someone has behaved), and yet, at the same time, their application usually involves a certain valuation of the situation, of persons or actions.” (Williams 1985 p. 129)

In this passage, Williams characterizes thick ethical concepts in terms of how “the way these notions are applied is determined.” Korsgaard contrasts this characterization of thick concepts with her own characterization of thin ethical concepts as “like those little gold stars you can stick on anything,” and implies that this is so because thin ethical concepts are “pure in their normativity” (Korsgaard 1996 p. 71). What determines how a concept is applied are its application conditions, which, on the Fregean view of conceptual contents, are identical to its Fregean sense. You could also say that the application conditions of a concept are what fix its referent.

It might be useful to clarify that the phrase “descriptive content” is sometimes also used in the philosophy of language literature to refer to whatever the Fregean sense of a concept is, rather than whatever is supposed to stand in direct contrast to ‘normative [conceptual] content,’ as metaethicists use that phrase. It may be worth noting that some metaethical theorists need not be committed to holding that the ‘normative content’ of thin ethical concepts is ‘descriptive,’ in the sense of ‘descriptive content’ meaning ‘Fregean content.’ For example, if a nonnaturalist realist were to embrace an

unconventional view of thin moral concepts on which these refer directly, their 'normative content' would not be 'descriptive' in the sense meaning 'Fregean.'

To return to the main thread of the paper, however, we have seen that Williams identifies what distinguishes thick ethical concepts from thin ones with how "the way these notions are applied is determined." Later, Williams's commendation of Hare's account of thick ethical concepts provides support for the claim that he conceives of the descriptive and normative content belonging to the application conditions that are distinctive of thick ethical concepts as 'descriptive' in the Fregean sense as well. He writes:

"The clearest account, as so often, is given by Hare: a term of this kind involves a descriptive complex to which a prescription has been attached, expressive of the values of the individual or of the society. A statement using one of these terms can be analyzed into something like 'this act has such-and-such a character, and acts of that character one ought not to do.' It is essential to this account that the specific or 'thick' character of these terms is given in the descriptive element. The value part is expressed, under analysis, by the all-purpose term *ought*." (Williams 1985 p. 130)

We have said that according to one kind of Fregean theory about the nature of concepts, they have a 'descriptive content' or sense that both fixes the referent of the concept and gives its meaning. The quoted passage provides evidence toward establishing that metaethicists working in the tradition of Williams presuppose this Fregean view about the nature of ethical concepts in discussing the distinction between thin and thick ethical terms. One point from the quoted passage that indicates the presupposition of Fregeanism is the point that a statement using a thick ethical concept can be analyzed into a description that involves descriptive and evaluative features of how someone has behaved. The kind of analysis referenced here seems definitional. Recall, also, that earlier, Williams says that the referent of a thick concept is fixed by "what the world is like" as well as "a certain valuation of the situation, of persons or actions" (Williams 1985 p. 129)

That the description into which a thick ethical concept can be analyzed, according to Williams, is identical to its application conditions, i.e. what fixes its referent, implies that the content of a thick ethical concept is conceived by Williams both as fixing its referent and as contributing to its meaning. Kripke, in *Naming and Necessity*, makes the

point that if a name can be analyzed by replacement with a description, then it is synonymous with that description (Kripke 1972 p. 33).

Blackburn's manner of dismissing the notion of a thick ethical concept altogether further supports the idea that most involved in talk of thick and thin concepts take thick ethical concepts to have both 'descriptive and normative' Fregean content. Blackburn calls the notion of a thick concept exemplary of "the dangers of a slavish adherence to the Fregean template in which meaning is invariably approached through a set of categories including that of a 'concept', where this is thought of as a rule determining an extension" (Blackburn 2010 p. 142). We have seen that in the case of thick terms, as these have been commonly understood as terms that have 'both descriptive and normative content,' part of the rule that determines their extension is supposed to appeal to descriptive features, while part of it is supposed to appeal to 'normative' features.

Later, Blackburn suggests that part of his reason for rejecting the idea of 'thick concepts' in this sense is the idea from the "Fregean tradition in semantics" that linguistic content has to do with only those psychological elements that have "to do with logical implication" (Blackburn 2010 p. 145). He seems to hold that only the 'descriptive content' part of a thick concept has to do with what language involving it logically implies, while the 'normative content' part of a thick concept is not really content at all (or part of what goes into the rule that determines the term's extension and is relevant to logical implication), but rather consists in the attitude-conveying tone that the speaker attaches to the term.

Because someone with a different attitude than the one conventionally associated with a 'thick' term can still use the term without the attitude-conveying tone we might think is conventionally appropriate, there are also no stable inferences that can be drawn from a proposition involving a thick term to propositions about speakers' attitudes or the evaluative properties of the items that so-called 'thick terms' pick out. That is, Blackburn's stance is that the 'normative content' of a thick term is not really Fregean content at all, because it is not conventionally involved in determining the semantic values of propositions in a stable or non-coincidental way. These points provide some of the basis for Blackburn's skepticism about the existence of thick moral concepts in general.

This section has offered an interpretation of how most writers on the topic understand the distinction between thin and thick ethical concepts: in terms of a distinction between concepts whose Fregean contents are purely 'normative' and concepts whose Fregean contents are both 'normative and descriptive.' I have suggested that Fregean conceptual contents have been multiply understood (1) as comprising a

concept's meaning, (2) as being the mode of presentation that determines the referent of the concept, i.e. identical to the application conditions of the concept, and (3) as encompassing everything about the concept that is relevant to logical inferences involving sentences that contain it.

To say that an ethical concept is 'thick,' then, is to say (1) that its meaning is comprised of both normative and descriptive components, (2) that both normative and descriptive features belong to the mode of presentation that determines the concept's referent, i.e. that the concept's application conditions involve appeal to both normative and descriptive features, and (3) that both the normative and descriptive features involved in fixing the referent of the concept are salient to the logical inferences that can be made involving judgments that include the concept. To say that a concept is thin, in contrast, is to say (1) that its meaning is wholly normative, (2) that only normative features belong to its mode of presentation, i.e. its application conditions appeal only to normative features, and (3) that only the normative features involved in fixing the referent of the concept are relevant to the inferences that can be made involving judgments that include the concept.

## **II. Expressivist Thin Concepts**

This section begins to make the case that based on a) the way common understandings of the distinction between thin and thick ethical concepts was reconstructed in the previous section and b) the way expressivists have historically understood how moral terms refer, expressivists who adopt Hare's account of thin concepts do not have the resources to draw the distinction between so-called 'thin' and so-called 'thick' ethical concepts in the way that contemporary theorists normally do. I have argued that most theorists consider so-called 'thick' concepts to be those whose Fregean contents, or application conditions, include both normative and descriptive features, while so-called 'thin' concepts are supposed to be those whose Fregean contents, or application conditions, reference only normative features.

Paradigmatic examples of thick concepts tend to be virtue terms, such as 'courageous' and 'generous,' whereas paradigmatic examples of thin concepts include 'right,' 'good,' and 'ought.' The thesis of this section can be restated as the claim that if Hare's view of thin concepts is true, then all expressivist concepts are thick, including the concepts that theorists typically use as examples of paradigmatically thin terms. I will first make my own argument for this thesis based on Hare's account of the 'thin' term 'good' and will then explore how it differs from Blackburn's argument for the similar view that

expressivists face challenges in recognizing a distinction between thin and thick ethical terms.

First, it will help to give some background on the view called ‘expressivism,’ which I am claiming does not have the resources to accommodate the usual manner of distinguishing those concepts typically called ‘thin’ from those concepts typically called ‘thick.’ Expressivism is most often considered a noncognitivist view about moral judgments. Whereas the orthodox view about ordinary, apparently propositional judgments such as “That tree is green.” is that a speaker expresses a cognitive belief state by judging, believing, or asserting its linguistic formula, noncognitivists about moral judgments hold that the apparent propositions that are used to communicate moral judgments, like “You ought to save that drowning child.” express a noncognitive desire state.

In some cases, metaethicists who hold a noncognitivist view about moral judgments are also anti-realists about moral properties. Anti-realists about moral properties are theorists who hold that there are no uniquely moral properties, or equivalently, that there are no moral properties that do not also belong to the set of the other properties we would recognize in our ontology independently of any talk about morality. Realists, by contrast, hold that there are objective properties that are uniquely and distinctively moral.

There may be a side question about how naturalist realism can still be considered a realist view about moral properties according to these definitions, where naturalist realism is the view that moral properties are identical to natural properties. The reply is that naturalist realists do hold that there are some moral properties that do not belong to the set of properties we would recognize in our ontology independently of any talk about morality, because absent talk about morality, we would not recognize in our ontology the natural properties that are identical to moral properties according to naturalist realism. This is the case because it is a feature of naturalist realist views that moral terms are analytically equivalent to certain nonmoral terms.

The reason why cognitivism about moral judgments pairs well with moral realism is that philosophers tend to regard cognitive belief states as states that aim at truth. The objects of belief are therefore apparent facts, while the objects of true beliefs are actual facts. Thus, cognitivists are committed to the claim that if there are true moral judgments, then there are moral facts. Realists about moral properties hold that there are genuine moral facts.

Unlike cognitive states, the noncognitive states that expressivists hold are expressed by moral judgments in language are not typically thought to aim at truth. Although noncognitivism about moral judgments does not rule out the existence of moral facts, the fact that the noncognitive states expressed by moral judgments, according to noncognitivism, are not thought to be representations of apparent truths makes noncognitivism about moral judgments compatible with there being no moral truths, even if some moral judgments are made “correctly” or in some way that is considered appropriate.

R.M. Hare is widely known for giving a noncognitivist account of the term ‘good’ in his 1952 book *The Language of Morals*. ‘Good’ is among the terms that have usually been listed as examples of paradigmatically ‘thin’ ethical terms, or terms that have only normative Fregean content according to the way ‘thin’ concepts have been understood in the contemporary literature. This should mean that the application conditions of the term ‘good’ involve only ‘normative features,’ whatever those amount to. It is clear from Hare’s discussion of the concept ‘good’, however, that he considers this concept one that has both descriptive and normative content (Hare 1952 p. 118).

Roughly, the ‘evaluative meaning’ of ‘good’ that Hare takes to be constant throughout its various applications to items belonging to different classes (“constant for every class of objects for which the word is used” (Hare 1952 p. 118)) is commendation, and commendation “for the purpose of selecting some [item belonging to a class of objects]... *in preference* to others” (Hare 1952 p. 103). Nonetheless, Hare identifies a “descriptive meaning of ‘good’” that he says is “secondary to the evaluative meaning” (Hare 1952 p. 118) and consists in “the criteria in virtue of which [some item belonging to a class of objects]...is to be called a good one, or what are the characteristics that make a[n item belonging to that class of objects]...a good one, or what is the standard of goodness in [that class of objects]” (Hare 1952 p. 111).

Hare states elsewhere that the descriptive meaning of the term ‘good’ has to do with the reasons why the thing called ‘good’ is being commended in some instance; “because we are commending all of [the items belonging to different classes of objects]...for different reasons, the descriptive meaning is different in all cases,” he writes (Hare 1952 p. 118). That is, the ‘descriptive meaning’ of ‘good’ as it is applied to a particular class of objects is the “information of a purely factual or descriptive character” that is conveyed by calling a member of that class ‘good,’ which corresponds to “what is the accepted standard of goodness in [items belonging to that class of objects]” (Hare 1952 p. 112-113).



Hare's contention that "[a]lthough the evaluative meaning of 'good' is primary, the secondary descriptive meaning is never wholly absent" (Hare 1952 p. 121-122) plainly shows that his expressivist account of the term 'good,' which is usually considered a 'thin' term with no descriptive content by contemporary theorists, takes the term 'good,' in every instance of its use, to have descriptive in addition to evaluative content.

One could object that there are grounds, in Hare's discussion of the 'thin' concept 'good' as one that has both descriptive and normative content, for questioning whether he embraces the same notion of linguistic 'content' *qua* Fregean content that I have suggested is presupposed by most writers on the distinction between thin and thick ethical terms. Namely, it seems like Hare sharply distinguishes, in places, the meaning of 'good' from its application conditions. The upshot of this discussion is that Hare holds that the application conditions for the term 'good' vary depending on the class of objects to which the term is being applied, whereas the meaning of the term has to do with its commendatory force in marking out one item for selection (or choice) in preference to others. In one portion of the text, he writes:

"To teach *what makes* a member of any class a good member of the class is indeed a new lesson for each class of objects; but nevertheless the word 'good' has a constant meaning which, once learnt, can be understood no matter what class of objects is being discussed. We have, as I have already said, to make a distinction between the meaning of the word 'good' and the criteria for its application." (Hare 1952 p. 102)

Hare's main point in distinguishing the 'meaning' of the term good from its application conditions in the quoted passage seems to be that the constant evaluative meaning of the term is somehow its meaning in a truer or more genuine sense than its descriptive meaning in some instance. Hare explicitly says this later when he writes: "the descriptive meaning of 'good' [is] secondary to the evaluative meaning" (Hare 1952 p. 118), partly because it is constant for every class of objects to which the term is applied.

These remarks do not rule out that what Hare calls the 'descriptive meaning' of the concept 'good' belongs to its Fregean content. Again, the 'descriptive meaning' of 'good' amounts to the descriptive information conveyed by the standard of goodness according to which the term 'good' is applied in some instance. Hare's later explanation of this descriptive meaning in a way that suggests a close relation between it and the application

conditions of the term indicates that the descriptive meaning in question belongs to the Fregean content of the concept.

One could still object that the content of the concept 'good,' considered as a whole in any use, exceeds the descriptive information that the concept conveys about a standard of goodness for some class of objects that in part comprises the term's application conditions in a given use; the content of the thin concept 'good' includes its constant evaluative meaning as well. Because it is not entirely clear that the evaluative meaning of the term, according to Hare, plays a role in comprising its application conditions, one could question whether Hare truly accepts that the concept 'good' has both descriptive *and normative* Fregean contents

The reply to this objection is that it seems like Hare takes what he calls the 'evaluative meaning' of the term 'good' to play a role in its application conditions in novel uses. He discusses how this is the case when "we...use the evaluative force of the word in order to change the descriptive meaning" or when "the evaluative meaning...is being used in order to shift the descriptive meaning" by "altering the standard" based on which items are deemed worthy of the commendation conveyed by the term's evaluative meaning (Hare 1952 p. 119).

So there is ultimately evidence that Hare considers the thin concept 'good' to have, in some sense, both normative and descriptive content that work together to fix the referent of the term in some instance, or, that is, that comprise the term's application conditions in some instance. This is, in other words, evidence that Hare indeed does take the thin concept 'good' to have both descriptive and normative content in the sense that would be implied by the 'Fregean' view that takes content, meaning, and application conditions to be identical.

At this point, there may be a question of how similar Blackburn's stated rationale for rejecting the distinction between thin and thick ethical concepts is to the one I just provided based on Hare's account of the thin concept 'good' as one that has both descriptive and normative content. Blackburn's position is that so-called (or conventionally agreed upon) thick concepts, such as those named by virtue terms such as 'courage,' are not really 'thick' because they do not actually have normative Fregean content. This is implied by his claim that attitude "is in the *background* of meaning...But...is not communicated in empirical judgment" (Blackburn 2010 p. 136).

Blackburn holds that the attitude conveyed, and in some cases, even conventionally conveyed, by the use of a thick term is not part of the meaning of the term, and thus not part of its linguistic content. The attitude is conveyed only as a matter of the tone with which the term is used. He seems to think that this is still compatible with “the attitude...*play[ing] a role* in determining the extension and in ruling out of the extension things which...escape the attitude” (Blackburn 2010 p. 134). “[T]he tone may drive our propensity to apply or withhold,” he says. That is, a conventionally associated tone can influence whether one applies a thick term, but it does not actually enter into the meaning of the term.

It is not addressed in the 2010 essay whether Blackburn also holds that the concepts we consider paradigmatically ‘thin,’ such as the concept ‘good,’ are also such that these terms have only descriptive Fregean content and commendatory force or ‘evaluative meaning’ only in virtue of attitudes that are conventionally associated with their use (but that does not belong to their Fregean modes of presentation, which may be identified with their ‘meaning’ proper). It is clear, however, that Hare takes the thin term ‘good’ to have an evaluative meaning that we have seen he considers ‘primary’ in remaining constant across applications of the term to different types of objects, and that presumably may be called ‘meaning’ in the Fregean sense.

My skepticism that a paradigmatic expressivist like Hare would be unable to recognize a distinct category of ‘thick’ concepts comes out of Hare’s position that the concepts that theorists typically consider ‘thin,’ such as the concept ‘good,’ are also such that their meaning has a descriptive aspect. Blackburn’s skepticism that expressivists can recognize a distinction between thin and thick ethical terms, on the other hand, is based on his doubt that the meanings of those concepts that theorists typically consider ‘thick’ really have any normative aspect. To reiterate, Blackburn apparently rejects the distinction between the two types of concepts on the grounds that thick concepts have only descriptive meaning, when usually thick concepts are defined as those that have both descriptive and normative meaning. I reject the distinction on behalf of expressivists who take the concepts that theorists usually consider ‘thin’ to have both descriptive and normative meaning, which would make those concepts ‘thick’ according to the contemporary way of defining thick terms.

Now, there still remains a more fundamental question about what it would really even mean to say that a concept’s descriptive application conditions ‘involved only normative features.’ This amounts to asking what thin concepts would be like if we allowed that some concepts are truly ‘thin,’ according to the standard, contemporary definition of a

thin term as one that has only normative content. In its appeal to descriptive application conditions, the question also presupposes a Fregean picture of conceptual contents, or one on which terms do not just pick out their referents directly, but do so by way of a Fregean sense, or mode of presentation.

A Fregean conceptual content, again, is supposed to be the mode of presentation of a concept's referent in thought. Recall Blackburn's characterization of a concept, on the Fregean picture, as "a rule determining an extension" (Blackburn 2010 p. 142). The rule that is used to determine the extension of a concept has often been conceived as a reference-fixing description, involving properties of the referent, that fixes only the referent of the concept in thought, and no other objects, when the concept is applied. To say that the content of a thin concept were wholly normative, then, would be to say that all of the properties involved in the thin concept's reference-fixing description were in some sense normative. One would apply a genuinely 'thin' ethical concept in thought by fixing on an object of thought through a description that presents the object of thought by appeal to only its normative properties.

Notably, then, granting that there are genuinely 'thin' concepts in this way, or in the sense of there being concepts that have only normative Fregean contents *qua* application conditions, implies that the referents of the terms that have traditionally been called 'thin' terms, such as 'good,' actually have normative properties. This, in turn, implies that there are properties of objects to be picked out that are genuinely, in themselves, normative.

We can easily see how the concepts in question might look for realists about normative properties, where realists about normative properties hold that there are properties that are intrinsically normative. Realists about normative properties might be either naturalist realists, who hold that the properties there are that are intrinsically normative are identical to natural properties that are simultaneously 'descriptive,' or nonnaturalist realists, who hold that the intrinsically normative properties there are belong to a class of their own that completely sets them apart from the other types of properties that exist.

There is a question of whether some types of antirealists about normative properties, including expressivists, could hold that there are normative properties of objects that are relational, like, for example, 'the property of being valued by so-and-so.' Someone who wanted to press this point could say that expressivists could actually allow that some ethical concepts are 'thin,' in the sense that their Fregean contents are strictly 'normative,' by holding that the thin concepts are the ones whose reference-fixing

descriptions involve only these relationally normative properties. The reference-fixing description that comprises the mode of presentation of the referent of 'good,' for example, might involve only reference to properties like being valued by some person or group, which we have supposed an expressivist could consider normative in a weaker, more relational sense than that in which realists about normative properties consider what they would call 'normative properties' normative.

This proposal seems like one way that contemporary expressivists might push back against the claim that they do not have the resources to recognize a substantive distinction between thin and thick ethical concepts. What Hare's account of the thin term 'good' seems to say, however, is that even granting that there are relational, 'normative' properties like 'the property of being valued by so-and-so,' a property like that one is never enough, by itself, to completely fix a referent of the term 'good.' Some domain-specific descriptive standard for choice within some class of items is also needed to fix on a particular object during a specific application of the term. To use Williams's language, the application of the thin term 'good' must always be, to some extent, 'world-guided' on Hare's view.

This reasoning makes sense. It does seem like if we apply the term 'good' to some object to commend it, the reasons for our commendation of that object play a role in fixing *it*, in a particular instance, as an object of commendation. These reasons involve the particular descriptive features of the objects, belonging to a particular class, to which the term 'good' is applied that make these objects more apparently worthy of commendation, or choiceworthy, than other members of their class.

### **III. Expressivist Proposals for Alternative Ways of Drawing the Distinction between Thin and Thick Concepts**

So far, I have laid out the distinction between thin and thick ethical concepts as it has been most commonly understood in the contemporary metaethics literature and have examined the most influential account of expressivist 'thin' ethical concepts (that laid out by R.M. Hare) in order to argue that if contemporary expressivists adopt Hare's account of thin ethical terms, then they do not have the resources to distinguish, in the way I have argued contemporary metaethicists typically do, between those terms theorists tend to regard as 'thin' and those terms theorists tend to regard as 'thick.'

This section addresses two proposals for alternative ways of distinguishing between those concepts that have traditionally been regarded as 'thin' and those that have been

traditionally regarded as 'thick' that might allow expressivists who embrace Hare's account of the contents of thin ethical terms to distinguish the same two classes of terms that others use the distinction between thin and thick terms to distinguish without identifying as the difference that 'thin' terms lack descriptive content. As we have seen, Hare holds that so-called 'thin' terms have descriptive content.

Once again, terms that have traditionally been regarded as 'thin' include 'good,' 'right,' 'ought,' and 'should,' whereas terms that have traditionally been regarded as 'thick' include virtue terms, slurs, and a range of other words (e.g. 'abuse') whose application we think of as implying both a descriptive state of affairs and an evaluative judgment.

The first alternative way of distinguishing those concepts theorists usually consider 'thin' from those concepts that theorists usually consider 'thick' that does not rely on positing that so-called 'thin' concepts lack descriptive content is discussed at length by Thomas Hurka in his work on the moral concepts of the 'intuitionist school.'

"The school agreed, first, on a view of the normative concepts that I will call *conceptual minimalism*. It says there are not a great many irreducible normative concepts, as some hold, but only a small number, in terms of which all normative judgements can be expressed. They also agreed on the leading candidates for this role, most centrally 'good' in the sense of 'intrinsically good' on the one side and 'ought,' 'right,' and 'duty' on the other; any other apparently normative concepts are either reducible to those few or not truly normative. This led them sometimes to analyse a non-basic normative concept in terms of a basic one and sometimes to argue that what may seem a normative concept is in fact merely descriptive." (Hurka 2014 p. 22)

And later:

"Despite their differences [in which normative concepts they recognized as irreducible], the...proposed basic concepts [by different intuitionists] are all what are today called 'thin' normative concepts, and a first facet of the school's minimalism was their belief that any 'thick' concepts can be reduced to thin ones." (Hurka 2014 p. 23)

The proposal in these passages, which Hurka claims the intuitionist school took seriously, is that a normative concept's being classified as 'thin' or 'thick' is really a matter of its being basic/irreducible or nonbasic/reducible. The idea is that some normative concepts cannot be defined in terms of anything further, and, in virtue of this, those irreducible normative concepts are called 'thin.' The rest of the normative concepts, which can be reduced or analyzed in terms of 'thin' concepts, are called 'thick' in virtue of their reducibility. This proposal for distinguishing thin from thick concepts does not rely on so-called 'thin' concepts lacking any descriptive content, so long as 'thin' concepts with certain descriptive contents are irreducible or unanalyzable into further concepts.

It seems important to distinguish this view that thin and thick concepts can be distinguished based on whether they belong to an irreducible and basic or reducible and nonbasic class of normative concepts from unrelated views that appeal to the reducibility of thick concepts. One such view has been called 'cognitivist separability' by Heuer and is related to the view called 'prescriptivism' by Williams, as well as a view that Hurka attributes to John McDowell.

"Some cognitivists suggest that thick concepts are made up of two components: a descriptive one and a thin one. Roughly, kindness has a descriptive content, and those who use the concept regard actions that exhibit the descriptive features of kindness as good...a cognitivist of this stripe may suggest that we have to figure out whether the person who uses the concept is right in assuming that having the descriptive features in question makes an action good. We can 'test' thick concepts by asking ourselves whether acting kindly is really good. T.M. Scanlon for instance suggests a test of this kind in order to distinguish thick concepts that refer to properties that can provide reasons from those that do not. He claims that we can provide what he calls a 'reductive account' of some thick concepts in the sense that in some cases we can explain 'a thick concept in terms of a thin one' (284). Some thick concepts can be reductively explained within the correct moral theory that explains the thin concepts. The availability of such an explanation vindicates their use." (Heuer 2012 p. 223-224)

Cognitivist separability, as it is described here, resembles the view called ‘prescriptivism’ that Williams rejects and implies something like Blackburn’s account of thick concepts, where these are better thought to be descriptive concepts that have commendatory force only in virtue of the tone or attitude with which they are used, or even, in some cases, conventionally used. This group of views also resembles that Hurka attributes to John McDowell, namely that “if the descriptive and normative parts of a thick concept could be separated, its extension would be determined entirely by the descriptive part, so we could tell what does and does not fall under it without knowing its evaluative point” (Hurka 2014 p. 25). Williams summarizes the view that he calls prescriptivism in the following way:

“Prescriptivism claims that what governs the application of the [thick] concept to the world is the descriptive element and that the evaluative interest of the concept plays no part in this. All the input into its use is descriptive, just as all the evaluative aspect is output. It follows that, for any concept of this sort, you could produce another that picked out just the same features of the world but worked simply as a descriptive concept, lacking any prescriptive or evaluative force.”  
(Williams 1985 p. 141)

Williams goes on to reject prescriptivism by denying that any such purely descriptive concept corresponding to a given thick concept could be found. Although cognitivist separability, prescriptivism, and the view that Hurka attributes to McDowell appeal to the reducibility of thick concepts, we can distinguish these views from the view that Hurka proposes for distinguishing thin concepts from thick ones. One notable difference is that cognitivist separability, prescriptivism, and McDowell’s view still seem committed to claims about what the contents of thick concepts are like, and namely, say that thick concepts have only descriptive Fregean content. Hurka’s proposal, on the other hand, is neutral with respect to whether the contents of thin and thick concepts must be normative or descriptive or both. The defining feature of ‘thin’ concepts, according to Hurka’s proposal for distinguishing thin and thick concepts, is that they are the most basic normative concepts there are, while the rest of the normative concepts are thick in virtue of being reducible into further concepts.

Although Hurka’s proposal seems like a promising avenue for expressivists who wish to embrace Hare’s account of ‘thin’ conceptual contents but still want to distinguish, in a principled way, the terms theorists typically consider ‘thin’ from those that theorists typically consider ‘thick,’ it might not be attractive to those who also wish to hold that



“thick concepts...are both irreducible to thin ones and central to sound ethical thought” (Hurka 2014 p. 23).

Hurka also attributes this view to John McDowell, who holds that “no plausible reductive analysis will take the descriptive part of a thick concept to completely specify the properties that make objects falling under it good or right; it will only indicate a general area in which those properties are found” (Hurka 2014 p. 25). This point resembles Williams’s point that using a thick concept requires “grasp[ing]...its evaluative point” (Williams 1985 p. 142). The point seems to be that if thick concepts were reducible, their descriptive component would provide complete insight into why their application implies a certain valuation of the referent.

To use a concrete example, one might deny that “generous” in “he was generous” is reducible to the description “gave five dollars to a homeless man” and the thin concept “good” because “generous” contains further information from an evaluative worldview that illuminates why it was good for him to give five dollars to a homeless man. If the concept ‘generous,’ in that use, could be reduced in the way proposed, the idea is, it would be self-evident that and why it is the case that his giving five dollars to a homeless man makes him ‘good.’ The issue is that we actually need more apparently normative information to completely fill out that explanation.

A second proposal for distinguishing those concepts that are usually called ‘thick’ from those that are usually called ‘thin’ while still adopting an account of ‘thin’ concepts on which these may have descriptive content comes from some of Hare’s own remarks about the variability of the descriptive meaning conveyed by a ‘thin’ concept. Recall that Hare holds of the ‘thin’ term ‘good’ that its descriptive meaning varies with the class of objects it is being used to describe, whereas “the evaluative meaning is constant for every class of object for which the word is used” (Hare 1952 p. 118). The proposal, then, would be to define thick terms as those with constant descriptive and evaluative (or normative) content and to define thin terms as those with constant evaluative (or normative) content and inconstant descriptive content.

That is, although this proposal grants that both so-called ‘thin’ and so-called ‘thick’ terms have a combination of descriptive and evaluative content, it distinguishes the two classes of terms based on whether their descriptive content remains the same regardless of the objects they are being used to describe. If a term with some evaluative content has the same descriptive meaning across all of its applications, it is a thick term, and if a term

with some evaluative content has a descriptive meaning that is subject to change based on the kind of object it is being used to describe, it is a thin term.

That the descriptive meaning of a 'thick' term remains constant across all of its applications constrains the items that can belong to its extension to a greater extent than does the descriptive meaning of a 'thin' term. This is consistent with talk about 'thick' terms being 'world-guided' to a greater degree than thin ones, and about thin terms being 'thin' because "they give no indication what these properties [that they refer to] are" (Hurka 2014 p. 23). Traditionally, that thin terms "give no indication what the...properties [that they refer to] are" has been taken to imply that "it is no part of the[ir] meaning...that...[their referent]...has any...specific descriptive property" (Hurka 2014 p. 23).

We have seen that this would only be partly true on the expressivist proposal under discussion. The descriptive properties attributed to a thin term by its descriptive content would vary based on the class of objects to which the term is applied. Although a thin term might give the appearance of lacking descriptive content due to its more expansive domain of application than that of a given thin term, the actual story is more complex.

There might be a question, here, of why a 'thin' term that has one descriptive content in its application to one class of objects should be considered the same term as it is when it has a different descriptive content in its application to a different class of objects. The objection would be that "good," as it is used in the phrase 'a good car,' for example, is actually a different term than it is when it is used in the phrase 'a good hockey stick.' When the so-called 'descriptive meaning' of the so-called 'thin' term 'good' shifts, it actually becomes a different term.

The tentative response to this objection is closely related to Hare's remark that the evaluative meaning of the thin term 'good' is more fundamental, and that it serves as the identity criterion for the term. Additionally, there is some basis in the term's descriptive meaning for maintaining the identity of the term 'good' as it is used in 'a good car' with the term 'good' as it is used in 'a good hockey stick.' In either case, the descriptive information about the standard of goodness used to evaluate the referent of the term that comprises its descriptive content is fixed by the higher-order description that domain-specific standards mark out an object with certain descriptive properties as an ideal object of choice. That the specific 'descriptive content' of a thin term in a given use is fixed by a more general, higher-order description in this way could be a basis for maintaining the identity of the term across its various applications to objects belonging to different classes.

#### IV. Conclusion

In summary, this essay has explored the resources that expressivists have to distinguish between thin and thick ethical terms. First, it reconstructed the distinction between these two classes of terms as it has been discussed in the contemporary metaethics literature. 'Thick' terms have both normative and descriptive content, whereas 'thin' terms have only normative content. The essay also made the case that in these contemporary definitions of thin and thick terms, the notion of 'content' invoked is assumed to be Fregean. The best-known expressivist account of the term 'good,' however (that given by R.M. Hare in *The Language of Morals*) holds that this so-called 'thin' term also always has descriptive content.

The demand that thin terms have descriptive content, I have also suggested, makes sense within the larger context of the expressivist view, where a 'thin' term is applied to an object or not on the basis of whether that object is judged to have a property that makes it the object of a certain kind of attitude. This understanding of 'thin' terms, as they are conceived by expressivists as terms that have descriptive content, calls into question the way that contemporary theorists have distinguished 'thin' terms from 'thick' ones based on the claim that 'thin' terms lack descriptive content. Finally, the essay proposed two ways expressivists might still substantively distinguish between those terms typically considered thin and those terms typically considered thick, while acknowledging that both thin and thick terms have a combination of descriptive and normative content.

Even though the final section of the paper has tried to offer two proposals for ways that expressivists might distinguish so-called 'thin' terms from so-called 'thick' ones, there remains a question of whether this distinction between terms like 'right,' 'good,' 'ought,' and 'should' and terms like virtue words and slurs really marks out a distinction between two fundamentally different categories of normative language.

The suggestion in this essay has been that, on the expressivist view, the difference between so-called 'thin' terms and so-called 'thick' ones is not a matter of a fundamental difference in the natures of their contents. All 'normative content,' for expressivists, consists in the expression of evaluative attitudes, and all 'descriptive content' consists in highlighting certain properties of referents as proper objects of those evaluative attitudes. Because expressivists hold that all normative properties are attitude dependent, both 'thin' and 'thick' terms contain both elements.

In contrast, on a realist view, the 'normative content' of a term fixes on definite, intrinsically normative, attitude-independent properties of the term's referent. This is why the normative contents of 'thin' terms, when used by realists, can be used to pick out items based on the normative properties that those items have independently of any further features of those items. The normative properties of the object of a thin term, for realists, are independent of any of its descriptive features, and can thus completely comprise, by themselves, the application conditions of a thin concept. This is not so for expressivists, which is why descriptive information is required to fix the referents of their thin concepts. The conclusion is that because expressivists are challenged to recognize intrinsically normative properties, they are challenged to recognize concepts whose Fregean contents make reference to only intrinsically normative properties.