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**“Thick Ethical Concepts *Still* Cannot be Disentangled:
A Critical Response to Payne, Blomberg, and Blackburn”**

Nathan P. Carson

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Introduction

Thick ethical concepts like ‘generous,’ ‘courageous’ and ‘cruel’ frequently structure our evaluative experiences. Moreover, when we are subject to a thick conceptually structured evaluative experience, the evaluative and descriptive aspects of these concepts *appear* to be thoroughly entangled in a seamless apprehension of, say, *cruelty*. For the non-cognitivist, only facts exist, while values are human projections. If so, thick concepts are a kind of deception, whose evaluative and descriptive components can and must be disentangled for the sake of normatively criticizing appearances.¹

Against non-cognitivism, in this paper I show that thick ethical concepts are not easily disentangled. After articulating several problems thick concepts pose for non-cognitivists, I examine two recent endorsements of disentanglement, showing why each account fails. Then, I take on Simon Blackburn’s older, but stronger arguments for disentanglement. Here I show that cognitivists can accommodate Blackburn’s insights, while he himself cannot consistently affirm them. Ultimately, I argue that all three accounts fail, and that the entangled character of thick ethical concepts still provides strong presumptions in favor of metaethical cognitivism about value judgments. Until better disentanglement arguments are forthcoming, we can accept the phenomenologically integrated character of evaluative appearances structured by thick concepts.

¹ For one example of this view, see Simon Blackburn (1998), 101.

I. Thick Concepts and the External Standpoint

“Thick” ethical concepts like *cowardly* and *generous* appear to be “amalgams” of inseparable evaluative and descriptive components, whose applications are thus both world-guided and action guiding.² Moreover, unlike “thin” concepts (e.g. *good*, *bad*, *right*) they involve more determinate descriptions and domains of application. The term ‘cruel’ cannot be predicated of just anything. Finally, much of our experience and talk about ethical realities involves these thick concepts. So, if their evaluative and descriptive aspects cannot be disentangled, non-cognitivism is in trouble.

For standard non-cognitivism, value ascriptions are expressive human projections occasioned by natural facts or kinds.³ This view requires a firm fact/value division, so for the non-cognitivist, *disentanglement* of the evaluative and descriptive “parts” of thick concepts is both possible and normatively desirable.⁴ Non-cognitivists, then, are (generally) committed to the *disentanglement thesis* [DT]:

For all genuine value concepts, there corresponds some factual (non-evaluative) feature (or kind) of the world to which it responds, and the fact and value in the concept can in principle, always be *disentangled* from one another.⁵

² Robert C. Roberts (2010) gives a nice example of this: “One can criticize a person for not acting generously, and thus guide his behavior in the direction of acting more generously; but also, one recognizes instances of generosity by virtue of characteristic behavior: giving to another something relatively scarce that seems important to oneself and not demanding anything in return (say)” (p. 53).

³ These expressions are things like endorsements, promotions, attitudes of approval or disapproval, prescriptions, etc., that respond to some purely descriptive and non-evaluative feature (or kind) of the world.

⁴ Blackburn (1998), 101.

⁵ I add the word “genuine” because at least some non-cognitivists, unlike Hare, deny that any thick evaluative concept *must* pick out a genuine natural kind, such as would figure, for instance, in Gibbard’s “Galilean core.” Blackburn, for one, denies that terms like ‘lewd’, ‘funny’, ‘divine’ and ‘gross’ pick out a genuine natural kind, for their extension is largely driven by the expressive tone accompanying their use. For what are generally taken to be genuine thick ethical concepts (courage, generosity, etc.), however, Blackburn does seem committed to the premise that each application picks out a genuine natural kind.

DT commits non-cognitivists to the further claim that genuine thick ethical concepts have a natural (and hence descriptive) shape [NS] *sufficient* to predict their application extensions.⁶

However, John McDowell's external standpoint objection [ESO] is problematic for both DT and NS.⁷ According to ESO, if the evaluative and descriptive "parts" of a given thick concept can be disentangled, then an outsider (non-user of the concept) could become an expert concept-user simply by mastering its purely descriptive applications, without even *attempting* to grasp its evaluative point. But, says McDowell, there is no reason to think this can be done, for there is no *prima facie* reason to think *there is* a general natural feature of the world common to all new applications, or a purely descriptive equivalent of these concepts.

Consider a non-user of 'rude' trying to derive its purely descriptive equivalent based on rude-users' applications. He will find (say) that 'rude' applies to someone who (1) passes an entrée plate with their left hand, (2) looks a superior in the eye, (3) leaves his front door closed on Sunday afternoons, and (4) speaks to a female in the marketplace about the weather. Without even *attempting* to understand the evaluative picture rude-users employ in their applications (perhaps their social norms), the outsider will be unable to predict new applications of 'rude.'⁸

That is, that in using thick concepts we are responding to some non-evaluative feature of the world that amounts to a *natural shape* for that concept. Blackburn (1998), 102.

⁶ Dancy (1995) gives three compelling reasons why non-cognitivists need not be committed to *natural shape*. They can say that there is a natural *base* in each concept application, without saying that various bases share a common natural shape. These reasons are somewhat contestable, but he adds that if their claims are true, non-cognitivists are nonetheless committed to moral concepts having *descriptive shape*. This creates a substantial problem for non-cognitivists. For, where the same description occurs, one must adopt the same attitudinal response, on pain of rational inconsistency (Dancy, pp. 273-74).

⁷ Invoked by Williams (1985, p. 141), ESO finds its origins in John McDowell's 1981 article, "Non-Cognitivism and Rule Following."

⁸ As McDowell notes (like Wiggins, Dancy, Taylor, etc.), the outsider cannot grasp the point *and extension* of that concept in purely descriptive terms. To do so, the outsider *has* to try to make sense of the evaluative point in the concept's use, and this is in fact what cultural anthropologists do all the time.

That is, McDowell's ESO reveals the natural "shapelessness" [\neg NS] of thick ethical concepts, making DT (and NS) *prima facie* false: For (plausibly many) thick moral concepts, there is no set of natural properties conceived of as individually necessary and jointly sufficient for an object to come under the concept.⁹

Of course, thick concepts do have natural *bases* or general descriptive conditions of applicability.¹⁰ Each application of 'courageous', for example, has something to do with the coherent facing of fears in fearsome circumstances. However, 'cowardly' or 'cruel' could also satisfy that description.¹¹ So, that description is a necessary but not sufficient condition for an action to count as 'courageous.' In sum, the full meaning of thick ethical terms is *underdetermined* by their non-evaluative, general descriptive conditions of applicability.¹² The difficulty non-cognitivists face, then, is to show that natural shapelessness [\neg NS] is either false or poses no problem for non-cognitivism, and that DT is not *prima facie* false. I now turn to two very recent defenses of non-cognitivism, showing why both of them fail.

⁹ That is, there appears to be no *unifying* descriptive feature that picks out natural facts or kinds, from which a non-user could infer its new applications. Cf. R. M. Hare's assumption that such a unifying feature does exist, in *Sorting Out Ethics* (1997), p. 61.

¹⁰ As Philippa Foot has shown, thick evaluative terms can't be intelligibly predicated of just *anything*, absent some special story. Talbot Brewer (2009) notes, for example, that "common usage sets decisive limits on which naturalistically specified acts can coherently be counted as cruel" (p. 184). I take this to mean that applications of 'cruel' must pick out some naturalistically descriptive features involving intentions or actions to cause pain or suffering.

¹¹ Here are three additional examples of general descriptive applicability conditions for courage, each of which is compatible with the underdetermination for which I am contending. Robert C. Roberts (2010a) notes that to call someone courageous is (partly) to say that "he remains able to act coherently despite fear and in fearsome circumstances" (p. 52). Blackburn (1998) says that someone described as courageous is being approved of for "overcoming difficulties and dangers that would daunt others" (p. 102). Finally, Payne (2005) takes "courageous" to descriptively pick out a conscious intention to perform a dangerous action in order to promote a valued end (p. 98).

¹² This is partly due to the fact that, as Dancy (1995, p. 263) and Gibbard (1992, p. 274) point out, the evaluative "part" of thick terms *itself* determines the descriptive extension of the term.

II. Two Recent Defenses of Non-Cognitivism

Andrew Payne

In his recent article,¹³ Andrew Payne (2005) argues that contrary to the “amalgamist” view, “thick descriptions” that convey information about agential intentions, desires, and motivations, are extractable from thick concepts.¹⁴ These thick, non-evaluative descriptions could isolate a natural shape (NS) for the concept.¹⁵ Moreover, says Payne, we praise or blame agents for satisfying these thick descriptions. Take ‘courage,’ for example. Instead of the “thin” description of an agent who ‘acts coherently despite fear and in fearsome circumstances’, we get Payne’s “thick” description: *‘intends to perform a dangerous action despite the danger, in order to promote some end [the agent] sees as valuable.’*¹⁶

Two critiques are in order. First, what “information” do we gain about the agent’s intentions, desires, or beliefs from Payne’s “thick,” non-evaluative description of courage? We get nothing, unless we fill in an *evaluative* picture of the agent or situation. An outsider with Payne’s “thick description” could not go on applying the concept successfully. For, a person or

¹³ Other recent articles, whose arguments are less directly relevant to our present inquiry, include Väyrynen (2009), Mišćević (2006), and Bonzon (2009).

¹⁴ For example, Payne says that “a courageous action must involve an awareness on the part of an agent of the danger or difficulty connected with the action, and the agent must intend to perform the action despite this danger in order to promote some end that is seen as valuable” (p. 98).

¹⁵ Payne, 98. In this section Payne uses both the phrases “thick descriptive concepts” and “thick descriptions.” Payne seems confused on this score, and it would behoove him to stick with “thick descriptions.” Here is why. For every thick concept, says Payne, there is a disentangleable “thick descriptive concept,” and a person falls under a thick concept if and only if he satisfies this thick descriptive concept that references agential beliefs, intentions and desires (95). But, if every thick concept has a separable “thick descriptive concept,” then of course every “thick descriptive concept”, being itself a thick concept, will also have a separable “thick descriptive concept,” and we’re off on a satisfaction regress. So, it looks like Payne just wants to say (and sometimes does say) that we can disentangle thick *descriptions* which, if they include reference to agential intentions, motivations and desires, can serve as a natural shape for (say) courage.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

action satisfying Payne's thick description could *equally* satisfy 'cowardly', 'cruel' or 'neurotic'. Even with a general reference to agential intentions or desires, the full thick concept is underdetermined by the description.

Second, is Payne right that we praise or blame agents for satisfying thick descriptions?¹⁷ Clearly Payne's thick description of courage isn't enough to get us to agential praise, which he himself later admits. We also need evaluations of the worth of the end, situational fit, and a "finely honed awareness" of the place of courage in a form of life.¹⁸ However, this not only contradicts Payne's earlier contention that agents are praised or blamed for satisfying thick *descriptions*, it also places him firmly within his "amalgamist" opponents' camp.¹⁹ To go on applying the concept 'courageous,' evaluation and description cannot be sundered. Hence Payne surrenders to the amalgamists when he later admits that one must already be an *insider* using the concept of courage, for the "thick description" to do any work in new concept applications.²⁰ Payne's argument thus reduces to the trivial point shared by all parties to the thick concept

¹⁷ Ibid., 95.

¹⁸ Ibid., 100.

¹⁹ Payne seems unaware that "amalgamists" also agree that there are minimal descriptive conditions for thick concepts, but that these are insufficient to get us to the thick concept itself.

²⁰ Payne, 102. In the very process of (allegedly) dismantling the "amalgam" view, Payne talks himself right back into it. For instance, he states that his "thick descriptions" can play a non-evaluative role in new applications of thick concepts. When we try to see if a new case counts as courage, says Payne, we don't *just* look to evaluative features. Rather, we *also* "look to the intentions, desires, and motives present in previous cases of courage, and attempt to answer the question of what a person with this sort of motivation would do in a given situation. Someone who previously chose, in the face of danger, to act in order to promote a valued end, could continue to do so by giving aid to a victim of state persecution. We use thick description to help bridge the gap between familiar and new contexts for courageous action" (101-102). Unfortunately, Payne's "thick description" tells us *nothing* uniquely courageous about the agent's motives, desires, intentions or ends. As Payne has to admit by the end of the article, one cannot extend the concept rightly without seeing the *substantial evaluative* content and point in previously courageous motives, intentions and ends. Otherwise, I could take the actions of a serial killer to guide my future applications of the concept. So, to put his thick descriptions to work, Payne seems to think that we must *already* be using the concept of courage, and hence he has no answer to McDowell's ESO.

debate: for all thick concepts, general descriptive conditions of applicability place limits on what can count as, say, courage.²¹ In any case, Payne fails to demonstrate that thick concepts can be disentangled.

Olle Blomberg

In his 2007 article, Ollie Blomberg takes a different approach than Payne. Rather than showing why disentanglement works, he argues that the “Thick Concept Argument” [TCA] poses no significant problems for non-cognitivism. First, while TCA shows that certain two-component analyses fail, says Blomberg, some non-cognitivists are not committed to this analysis.²² So, TCA misses its target.

Second, Blomberg claims that McDowell’s ESO establishes that the extension of at least *one* thick concept cannot be mastered by an outsider, and is naturally shapeless. But, says Blomberg, non-cognitivists (like Blackburn) *do* account for some naturally shapeless concepts like ‘funny’, ‘divine’, and ‘gross.’ They can thus account for ESO while still affirming that ordinary (ethically important) thick concepts (like courage, generosity, cruelty, etc.) *do* have natural shape whose extension an outsider can master.²³

²¹ The triviality of Payne’s point is captured in this comment: “just as actually scratching a match in the presence of oxygen makes a causal contribution to the appearance of a flame... satisfying such a thick description helps to explain what makes certain actions courageous.” (100). Nobody in the literature, cognitivists and non-cognitivists alike, deny this point or takes it as controversial.

²² Unlike Hare, says Blomberg, Gibbard and Blackburn arrive at non-cognitivism “not from a particular view of lexical meaning but rather from a commitment to Galilean naturalism” (p. 64).

²³ *Ibid.*, 75. As Blomberg notes, Blackburn strongly implies that most thick concepts have natural shape. The key passage in Blackburn is this: “Whenever there is a ‘thick’ term it is *easy* to see both its general descriptive orientation, and its general practical or attitude-giving one... We know that someone described as courageous is usually approved of for overcoming difficulties and dangers that would daunt others, that someone described as niggardly is attracting obloquy for being too careful with his money, and so on. There is a circumscribed range of inputs and outputs,” and he goes on to say that “this is how it has to be” if we are to prescribe courses of action normatively. Blackburn (1998), 102-103.

My first response is that Blomberg gives no evidence that non-cognitivists like Gibbard and Blackburn are uncommitted to a two-component analysis. Blackburn, for instance, explicitly endorses a two-component analysis built around lexical description “plus tone.”²⁴ Gibbard, on the other hand, does criticize two-component analyses.²⁵ However, at the end of the day, as Dancy notes, non-cognitivists like Gibbard and Blackburn “must think of an evaluation as a response to independent description,” for the two are “worlds apart,” having two opposite directions of fit.²⁶ So, despite Blomberg’s insistence, non-cognitivists are ontologically committed to *some* type of two-component view of thick concepts. If so, they had better talk about thick concepts this way.

Second, Blomberg underestimates the scope of McDowell’s external standpoint objection [ESO]. This objection shows not just that the extension of at least *one* thick concept cannot be mastered (and hence is naturally shapeless), but that there is no reason to think that *any* thick concepts have natural shape sufficient to “go on in the same way.” So, the fact that Blackburn makes room for several naturally shapeless concepts doesn’t entitle him to hold onto natural shape for the rest. Blomberg eventually recognizes this when he asks, “What supports the claim that most or all thick concepts have natural shape?”²⁷ His answer is that non-cognitivists *have to* assume natural shape in order to naturalistically account for the way moral agents acquire and

²⁴ Blackburn, (1998), 102-103. Blackburn also speaks in terms of a “circumscribed range of [factual] inputs and [evaluative] outputs.”

²⁵ Gibbard (1992), 273-276.

²⁶ Dancy (1995), 274.

²⁷ Blomberg, 75.

use thick concepts.²⁸ In short, Blomberg has responded neither to ESO, nor to underdetermination of thick concepts by pure description.

III. Blackburn's Argument Against Thick Concepts

I now turn to Simon Blackburn's more dated objections to the entangled character of thick concepts, which remain the strongest in the literature.²⁹ As Dancy notes, Blackburn's argument is aimed at a specific view of thick concepts advanced by Williams and Wiggins, which has it that their meaning consists in a single simple (lexically-signaled) attitude combined with a complex, essentially contestable property (or description).³⁰ So, Blackburn's constructive argument for disentanglement is meant to demonstrate that the attitudes associated with thick concepts are in fact (1) fluid and (2) variable, and hence that there are few (if any) truly "thick" concepts.³¹

By fluidity, Blackburn means that our ethical concepts seem to undergo vast change over time. If cognitivists are right that specific evaluative attitudes are "built-in" to various thick terms, then they have unduly concretized these terms, turning diachronic changes in attitude into changes in concept *meaning*. Then, says Blackburn, they cannot make sense of the most common kinds of moral disagreement. If two mature users of the concept "lewd" disagree in their attitudinal responses to lewdness (but agree on describing a given case as 'lewd'), they exhibit

²⁸ Blomberg also adds that teaching and learning shapeful concepts is "less costly" than the alternative, and that *therefore* "most concepts have natural shape" (pp. 75-76).

²⁹ Blackburn, 1998 and 1992.

³⁰ Dancy (1995), 266.

³¹ I draw these elements of Blackburn's argument from portions of *Ruling Passions*, chapter 4, and from "Through Thick and Thin" (1992).

differences in *concepts* rather than in mere judgments, resulting in their talking past one another completely.³²

Moving to his point on variability, Blackburn claims that if a specific attitude or set of attitudes *were* part of the meaning of thick concepts, we would expect these attitudes to be lexically-signaled, and hence uncancelably required by concept-users. However, with the exception of uniquely derogatory words like ‘nigger’, ‘ponce’, and ‘tart’, we in fact find no such stable lexical signaling.³³ What is more, a single thick concept can involve *lots* of evaluative responses. For example, people take ‘lewd’ actions to be funny, pleurably shocking, offensive, or an occasion for self-directed embarrassment, etcetera. We can also have multiple responses at once, such as responding to a generous action with gratitude, admiration and embarrassment at the same time.

In addition, says Blackburn, Hume’s claim that virtues are qualities whose “very names force an avowal of their merit” is false.³⁴ The truth, says Blackburn, is that we sometimes *criticize* actions using typically positive thick concepts, such as courage or tact. These actions can either be situationally inapt or aim at bad ends, and hence can have a negative attitude attached to their genuine instantiation. These evaluative valence reversals are commonplace, and we couldn’t do this if a positive attitude were inextricably part of each concept’s meaning.

³² Blackburn helpfully summarizes his view in this way: “The picture I want to paint, then, is of a multiplicity of attitudes and feelings, and a flexible and changing repertoire of linguistic expressions, with feelings more naturally signalled [*sic.*] by intonation, and only unreliably read back from vocabulary except in very few cases” (1992, p. 299).

³³ Blackburn explains this point as follows: “The dictionary puts no ‘positive’ indicator of attitude by any of Hume’s terms, in the way that it puts ‘derog.’ or ‘usually contempt.’ by certain epithets of abuse. In fact, dictionaries have no term signaling a convention of approval, in the way that ‘derog.’ and ‘contempt.’ signal the standard attitude communicated by offensive epithets. I take this to suggest that language maintains few lexical conventions of this thickening kind” (1992, p. 286).

³⁴ David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (ed. Selby Bigge, Oxford University Press, p. 242), cited in Blackburn (1992), pp. 285-286.

Overall, then, Blackburn argues for a *contingent relation* between attitudes and the descriptive part(s) of thick concepts, which are disentangled all the time. If this is right, says Blackburn, then it follows that there are no (or very few) “thick” concepts.³⁵

IV. A Critical Response to Blackburn

I have two responses to Blackburn. First, I grant fluidity, variability and valence reversal, but deny that evaluative and descriptive separability (or disentanglement) plausibly follows.³⁶ Second, Blackburn’s commitments to natural shape for most thick ethical concepts, and to attitudinal non-cognitivism, together prevent him from consistently affirming his own best insights. An Aristotle-inspired cognitivism can better and more consistently account for the phenomena Blackburn rightly identifies.

Variability and Lexical Signaling

First consider attitudinal variability and Blackburn’s lexical signaling requirement. If a *single* attitude were part of a thick concept’s meaning, says Blackburn, these would have to be lexically signaled and hence uncancelably required by the concept’s users. However, if

³⁵ Blackburn (1992), 295.

³⁶ That is, with Blackburn, I deny that the evaluative components of thick terms are “cemented by [linguistic] convention” or locked into a single-attitude mold (1992, p. 297). When I find a human being to be generous, for example, I can emotionally experience a host of things, including gratitude, joy, admiration, respect, embarrassment, and sometimes even regret or guilt over my own lack of generosity. Further, like Blackburn, I also affirm the existence of “*some* semantic anchors” for these concepts, in what I earlier called general descriptive conditions of applicability. A minimally necessary descriptive application of ‘generous,’ for example, applies to behaviors that include giving gifts to others without expectation of return. Blackburn sticks with his “lewd” example, saying that it has “something to do with sexual display, something to do with mockery” (1992, p. 297).

cognitivists accept a more flexible conception of entangled thick concepts, why should we expect this rigid or exhaustive sort of lexical signaling? As Dancy puts it,

We now see competence with a thick concept as requiring a general understanding of the *range* of attitudes associated with the concept, as well as the ability to agree with others on which possible mixes from that range are plausibly called for in the present case.³⁷

This flexible picture suggests that lexical signaling can fall short of what competent concept-users know, without this being a criticism of either the lexicon or of our conception of thick concepts.³⁸ Additionally, it renders common moral disagreements intelligible. Two people jointly applying ‘generous,’ with different attitudinal responses, could still be using the same concept and talk to one another about the excellence they see in generosity.³⁹ More importantly, this attitudinal flexibility is clearly compatible with descriptive and evaluative entanglement. The variability does not entail separability.

As further evidence of this last claim, note that the limited lexical signaling we *do* have *supports* entanglement. Typically, our best dictionaries (like the OED) lexically load thick concept definitions with evaluative language. The OED defines *niggardly*, for example, using the words “mean, parsimonious, stingy.”⁴⁰ Compare this against Blackburn’s evaluatively barren definition, that “someone described as niggardly is attracting obloquy for being too careful with

³⁷ Dancy (1995), 270

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ A case of valence reversal, such as when one person finds generosity repulsive or pathetic, and the other experiences admiration and gratitude, is one that I will address shortly.

⁴⁰ Other examples are myriad, including the following. “Courageous” in the OED includes the word “valiant,” and where “generous” once meant “noble of spirit, honourable, principled,” it now means something weaker but no less evaluative: “unselfish, magnanimous, kind” and “open-handed, charitable, liberal, bountiful.” Finally, “cruel” includes a descriptive component (“disposed to inflict suffering”), but quickly follows with a barrage of evaluatively-laden identifiers: “destitute of kindness or compassion; merciless, pitiless, hard-hearted.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*: <http://dictionary.oed.com.ezproxy.baylor.edu>. Accessed online on May 3, 2010.

his money.”⁴¹ Blackburn’s “careful” neither does justice to real lexical signaling, nor includes the bad qualities we really seem to criticize when we call a person “niggardly.” In short, lexical signaling supports the general inseparability of evaluation and description.

Valence Reversal

Now consider Blackburn’s strongest objection: evaluative valence-reversal. It is certainly true that people sometimes *criticize* actions using typically positive thick concepts like tact or courage, for being situationally inapt or aiming at bad ends. If a positive attitude were built into the meaning of these concepts, we couldn’t do this, says Blackburn.

This objection is effective against Hume, for whom virtues and vices were *automatically* or naturally pleasing or displeasing to human beings. However, Blackburn’s extension of this critique to Aristotle fails. For, Aristotle (and neo-Aristotelians) can say that approvals and disapprovals aren’t automatic, but largely the product of diachronic moral education, not only of our emotions and evaluative responses, but also of our *conception* of courage (say) and recognition of its instantiation. That is, people revise their understanding of courage as they come to see how it fits within a larger view of what it means to live well.⁴² Blackburn’s valence reversals are a good counter-example to Hume, then, but not to Aristotle. For, if Aristotle is right, we would *expect* myriad different attitudes (even valence reversals) to be associated with a given concept. Of course the valence reversals involved in a diachronic refinement of our grasp of what is excellent about courage, say, could suggest disentanglement, but it can equally suggest

⁴¹ Blackburn (1998), 102.

⁴² Blackburn himself suggests this in one of his examples, for instance, when he points out that his previous Oxford College Master’s frugality was “a fatal flaw in someone whose main job was dispensing hospitality” (1992, p. 286).

a diachronically entangled process of closing in on what ‘courage’ really means.⁴³ Again, neither evaluative diachronic fluidity nor evaluative valence reversibility entails thick concept disentanglability.

Natural Shape

I move to my second response, that Blackburn’s non-cognitivism about evaluative attitudes and his commitment to natural shape, together prevent him from consistently employing his own best insights. First, Blackburn remains committed to there being a purely natural (or at least descriptive) shape for a majority of our important ethical concepts.⁴⁴ However, like Blomberg, Blackburn fails to tell us *why* we should think this, in the face of overwhelming phenomenological evidence to the contrary. That is, Blackburn has not responded to McDowell’s ESO. Until he does, we have a strong presumption in favor of natural shapelessness. For it is *still the case* that any purely non-evaluative description of a thick concept fails to sufficiently capture that concept.

Second, Blackburn’s attitudinal variability is at odds with his commitments to both natural shape and attitudinal non-cognitivism. Natural shape is at odds with variability. For, where a given natural shape recurs, says Dancy, “how could any variability of attitude be called for?”⁴⁵ For the non-cognitivist, where the same naturalistically shapeful act recurs, rational

⁴³ The fact that the evaluative valence in my usage of ‘courageous’ as a six year old is different than it is now, when my understanding of its apt occasions and applications has developed and diversified, need not show that evaluation and description are separable. It more plausibly shows, rather, that human beings mature and change in their understanding and application of thick concepts.

⁴⁴ Cf. especially *Ruling Passions*, 102-103.

⁴⁵ I owe this insight to Dancy (1995), 273. However, the argument derived from this initial insight is my own.

consistency demands that one respond with the same attitude. Blackburn cannot affirm both natural shape and attitude variability, and retain rational consistency.

Next, given Blackburn's affirmation of attitudinal variety, one might ask him what distinguishes the attitudes from each another. His non-cognitivism prevents him from explaining the distinction (say between admiration and respect) in cognitive terms, so he is unable to account for the difference. By contrast, it's easy for the cognitivist, who can say that the evaluative dimensions of thick concepts have *some* propositional content.

An Aristotle-shaped cognitivist account, then, can consistently countenance valence reversals and attitudinal variety, *explain* the difference between these attitudes, and affirm our strong presumption in favor of natural shapelessness. It is thus in a better position to explain and aptly respond to the phenomena Blackburn illumines, while his position leaves him unable to do so.

Conclusion

I have argued that three non-cognitivist attempts to disentangle thick concepts fail. Payne reaffirms the entanglement view. Blomberg fails to show that non-cognitivists can avoid two-component analyses, underestimates McDowell's objection, and simply asserts natural shape for thick concepts. Finally, Blackburn's arguments need not underwrite an inference to disentanglement. Moreover, Aristotelian cognitivists can accommodate Blackburn's insights, while he himself cannot consistently affirm them.

The thick ethical concepts structuring our evaluative experiences of generosity, cruelty, and the like stubbornly resist evaluative and descriptive dissection. Until successful disentanglement arguments are forthcoming, we can accept the phenomenologically integrated

character of evaluative appearances through these concepts, and retain the presumption in favor of metaethical cognitivism about value judgments that their entanglement provides.

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