

Cruelties

CHRISTOPHER COWIE

Simon Kirchin, editor

THICK CONCEPTS
256pp. Oxford University Press. £45 (US \$85).
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Pekka Väyrynen

THE LEWD, THE RUDE, AND THE NASTY
272pp. Oxford University Press. £32.99 (US \$49.95).
978 0 19 931475 1

Philosophical problems are often a legacy of the terms in which they are formulated. In recent years, some moral philosophers have suspected that the problems that characterize their own discipline are like this. Bernard Williams, Hilary Putnam and Alasdair MacIntyre (among others) have argued that the impediments faced by contemporary moral philosophy are, to a significant degree, the result of a myopic focus on what Williams called "thin" ethical concepts: goodness, badness, rightness, wrongness and so on. They propose instead to approach the problems of moral philosophy in terms of "thick" concepts such as cruelty, kindness, poverty and prosperity. Unlike thin concepts, whose function seems purely evaluative, these thick concepts are used simultaneously to evaluate and describe agents and their actions. Calling someone cruel implies more than just a negative evaluation: it tells you something about their character. These philosophers suggest that, if we refocus our attention on thick concepts, we can gain traction on longstanding debates concerning the extent of moral disagreement, the role of value in the natural world, and the nature of the good life.

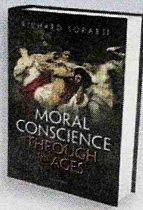
While many have found this philosophical vision appealing, its details have remained curiously under-developed. For this reason, Simon Kirchin's *Thick Concepts* is a very welcome addition to the literature. Kirchin collects thirteen purpose-written articles by leading moral philosophers on the nature of thick concepts. Two questions dominate the book. The first concerns whether there is a sharp distinction to be drawn between thick and thin concepts, or whether concepts are better understood on a spectrum from thicker to thinner. In a striking defence of the spectrum view, Timothy Chappell sketches an argument from cross-cultural comparisons to the conclusion that even paradigmatically thin concepts are laden with descriptive content to which ordinary users are typically insensitive. A second question concerns whether thick concepts should be regarded as a seamless "fusion" of their descriptive and evaluative aspects, or whether these are separable into two distinct components, one descriptive, one evaluative. Kirchin's contributors divide roughly evenly on this question.

For those already familiar with the debate about thick concepts in moral philosophy, Kirchin's collection is a rich resource. For the uninitiated, however, it may at times be difficult to see what all the fuss is about: what of philosophical interest turns on the analysis of this particular class of concepts? This is not so much a criticism of the contributors and the editor – who provides an excellent introduction – but rather it is an inevitable consequence of the book's origin. Each chapter takes up themes from existing debates within the literature; each one is a contribution to an ongoing academic debate. For those lacking the requisite background, it may be difficult to place these contributions within a broader philosophical framework that makes sense of their significance (though there are exceptions: for example, Nick Zangwill's colourful

contribution on the relationship between thick concepts in morality and aesthetics).

It is against this background that Pekka Väyrynen's monograph *The Lewd, the Rude, and the Nasty* is particularly impressive. Väyrynen's central argument is a rigorous exercise in the application of the methods of the philosophy of language and linguistics to moral philosophy. But it is the way that he sets the stage that will be of most interest to a wider readership. Väyrynen provides a thorough and genuinely readable introduction to the philosophical significance of thick concepts, their relation to thin concepts and the separability of their components. He tells us – in a fashion that does justice to the ambitions of his predecessors – what exactly turns on the detailed linguistic analysis that follows. Most notably, the relationship between thick concepts and the often-touted "dissolution" of the distinction between facts and values is helpfully clarified. Väyrynen's summary is the clearest and most engaging introduction to the philosophical significance of thick concepts in the contemporary literature.

He argues that thick terms and concepts are philosophically interesting only insofar as they are supposed to "contain evaluation". This is a claim about the linguistic meaning of thick terms (their semantics). So, for example, for the term "cruel" to contain evaluation is for it to imply, simply in virtue of its meaning, that cruel acts are bad. There is some irony, then, in Väyrynen's ultimate conclusion: he argues that thick terms actually do not contain evaluation in the relevant sense. On his view, an act can be described as cruel without implying, simply in virtue of the meaning of "cruel", that the act described is bad. This is supported by a range of linguistic data. Väyrynen's conclusion leaves a puzzle as to why our use of thick terms does typically suggest an evaluation of the act or person described in those terms. His response is that the evaluation typically implied by our use of thick terms is fully explained by the conversational presuppositions that underlie our shared use of these concepts: it is a matter of the way we use words (pragmatics) rather than their meaning (semantics). When, for example, we describe an act as cruel, we and our interlocutors typically share the background assumption that acts that cause deliberate suffering are in fact bad. Pekka Väyrynen's arguments are persuasive, both in connection to the philosophical significance of thick concepts and to their nature. His arguments suggest thick concepts cannot be the panacea for moral philosophy for which some may have hoped.



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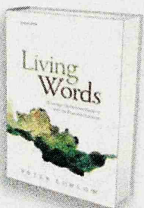
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