

Through thick and thin: *good* and its determinates

Christine TAPPOLET[†]

ABSTRACT

What is the relation between the concept *good* and more specific or ‘thick’ concepts such as *admirable* or *courageous*? I argue that *good* or more precisely *good pro tanto* is a general concept, but that the relation between *good pro tanto* and the more specific concepts is not that of a *genus* to its *species*. The relation of an important class of specific evaluative concepts, which I call ‘affective concepts’, to *good pro tanto* is better understood as one between a determinable and its determinates, whereas concepts such as *courageous* can be analysed in terms of affective concepts and purely descriptive concepts.

Most would agree that there is a wide variety of evaluative concepts.¹ *Good* is an obvious contender, but so are *desirable*, *admirable*, *virtuous*, *generous* and *pleasant*, to name but a few of the positive ones. Following Bernard Williams’ distinction between thin and thick (or substantive) moral terms, one can distinguish between thin evaluative concepts, like *good* and *bad*, and thick evaluative concepts, such as *mean*, *generous* or *cruel*.² According to Williams, thick concepts are more specific than thin ones; Williams refers to the latter as “the most general expressions used in ethical discussion”, complaining that these terms are also the ones theorists have tended to favour (1985, p. 128). Judgements involving thick concepts are supposed to be both action-guiding and world-guided, in the sense that the application of these concepts both determines what we ought to do and depends on how things are. As Williams puts it, “[t]he 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 of actions. Moreover, they usually (though not necessarily directly) provide reason for action.” (1985, pp. 129-130) By contrast, the judgements involving thin concepts are deemed merely action-guiding – they tell us what to do, but have no descriptive content.³

[†] Université de Montréal, Email: christine.tappolet@umontreal.ca.

¹ See however Blackburn 1992 for the claim that so-called thick evaluative terms are only contingently associated with attitudes. I discuss this issue in section 1.

² Williams 1985, esp. pp. 128-30, pp. 140-1 and pp. 150-152. Cf. Hume 1757, p. 227; Stevenson 1944, chap. 3; Hare 1952, p. 121; McDowell 1978, 1979, 1981; Anderson 1993, p. 97-104; Hilary Putnam 1990, 2002, and Ogien 2003.

³ Williams counts deontic concepts, such as *ought*, as thin, but I concentrate here on evaluative concepts and leave aside the question of the relation between evaluative and deontic concepts. I shall also take for granted that attempts, such as Scanlon’s (1998), to reduce evaluative concepts to deontic concepts are misguided. (See Ogien and Tappolet, in prep., for these questions)

The question I want to address is whether Williams' way of specifying the distinction is adequate. More generally, my aim is to examine the relation between thin and thick concepts. I shall tackle this issue by considering whether *good* is what I call a 'general concept', in the sense that *good* is more general than the (positive) thick concept.⁴ As we shall see, this raises the question whether *good* is a genus or whether it is what W. E. Johnson (1921) called a determinable, with the result that more specific evaluative concepts would count as determinates of *good*.⁵

The puzzling fact is that it is not clear whether *good* is a general concept or not. There is absolutely no doubt that the concept *animal* or *coloured* are more general than *cat* or *red*, respectively, but there does not seem to be a consensus on whether the concept *good* should count as general or not. Given his analogy between *good* and *yellow* and his lack of interest in thick concepts, G. E. Moore (1903) would probably have denied that *good* is a general concept. What is clear is that Moore explicitly denies that *good* is a determinable. In his reply to C. D. Broad, he writes: "I never supposed that the sense of 'good' with which I was principally concerned was a 'determinable', and that there were other more determinate characteristics related to it as different shades of yellow are related to yellow."⁶ Others follow Bernard Williams and simply take for granted the claim that *good* is a general positive evaluative concept.⁷ This is certainly a strange state of affairs. How is it that such an apparently easy question was not answered a long time ago?

The question whether *good* is a general concept has probably been deemed of little interest. This is not so, for this issue clearly has important consequences. Quite independently of Williams' claim that the deployment of thick concepts makes room for ethical knowledge, the way thin and thick concepts are related has epistemological implications; if *good* is indeed a general concept, it would seem that evaluative knowledge, if there is such a thing, would have to start with judgements involving thick concepts. The question whether *good* is a general concept has interesting ontological consequences as well. If it turned out that *good* is the same kind of concept as *coloured*, the matter of the existence of the property of goodness would arise, for there is an ongoing debate whether such properties as being coloured are genuine.⁸ The question I am interested in also bears on important issues in normative ethics. Some recent objections to utilitarianism and more generally to consequentialism are based on the premise that there is an irreducible plurality of evaluative concepts, a claim which depends on how one conceives the relation between thin and thick concepts.⁹

While the question whether *good* is a general concept has been largely neglected, philosophers have concentrated on whether thick concepts can be analysed into expressive and descriptive components and whether the concept *good* is prior to and inde-

⁴ This question might seem to presuppose a descriptivist or cognitivist view of evaluative concepts. This is not so, however. The claim that *good* is a general concept could be reformulated in non-descriptivist or non-cognitivist terms.

⁵ See Mulligan 1998 for this suggestion.

⁶ Moore 1942, p. 583. I owe this quote to Howard Sobel.

⁷ Kovesi notes: "Neither is 'good' a typical evaluative word, it is the most general word of commendation" (1967, pp.1-2).

⁸ See for instance Elder 1996. Thomson (1992a, 1992b, 1996, 1997 and 2001) argues that there is no such property of goodness, for things are only good in one way or another. See Piller 2001 for a reply to Thomson.

⁹ See Thomson 1992a, 1992b, 1997, 2001 and Anderson 1993, as well as Nussbaum 2001 and Piller 2001 for replies.

pendent of thick concepts. As will become apparent, the question of the generality of *good* is closely related to these issues.

Before I start, I should make it clear that I am presupposing that something's being good does not mean that it is a good F. As Peter Geach (1956) pointed out, it is true that 'x is a good F' is not equivalent to 'x is good and x is an F'. But contrary to what Geach claimed, the term 'good' has both predicative and attributive uses; sometimes, it modifies predicates, such as in 'a good book', but it can also be a genuine predicate. When I say that knowledge or pleasure is good, this does not entail that knowledge or pleasure is good *qua* being an F, while it also could be bad *qua* being a G. As Judith Jarvis Thomson notes, when we say that something is good, we might mean that it is good for someone (1997, p. 278). I shall concentrate here on predicative uses of 'good' and their corresponding concepts.

1. Some aspects of the logic of the concept good

Why would one doubt that good is a general concept with respect to certain thick concepts? After all, it seems a conceptual truth that if something is courageous or amusing, for instance, it is also good.¹⁰ And this appears sufficient for saying that *good* is more general than *courageous* or *amusing*. As far as I can see, we take a concept to be more general than another if the class of things which falls under the first concept is necessarily more encompassing than the class of things corresponding to the second one.¹¹ A kind, such as the one corresponding to the concept *animal*, constitutes a wider class than its different species. And this is a necessary truth which seems to depend on the concepts involved; we could not discover that animals form a species of cats. In the same way, a determinable, like *coloured*, constitutes a wider class than its determinates, such as *red* or *green*. So, it would appear that the claim that *good* is a general concept should be uncontroversial.

A first difficulty is that there arguably are cases in which what falls under a thick concept is *not* good. Consider predicates such as 'tidy' or 'industrious'. On some occasions, these terms have a neutral or even negative import. As R. M. Hare noted, we can say that someone is too tidy or too industrious.¹² In such cases, it is simply false to say that something's being tidy or industrious entails that it is good. In reply, it is possible to argue that there are different uses of terms like 'tidy' or 'industrious', corresponding to closely related, but different concepts. If one accepts that in some of its uses the term 'tidy' refers to a positive evaluative concept, there seems to be no reason to reject the claim that *good* is a general concept. In fact, there is reason to think that the uses in which 'tidy' refers to a positive evaluative concept are what one could call 'default uses'.¹³ To understand the term 'tidy', we need to grasp that unless the context indicates otherwise, what is meant is something positive. This is of course something which could change –

¹⁰ See Mulligan 1998, p. 164 for this claim.

¹¹ This is not exact: a genus could be coextensive with its species. But it remains true that the general concept is such that it is usually, and necessarily can be, more encompassing than the specific concept. I'm grateful to David Davies for drawing my attention to this point.

¹² Hare 1952, p. 121. See also Blackburn 1992.

¹³ See Kauppinen, forth. for a similar claim: "It seems that what is specific about genuine thick concepts like justice and benevolence comes down to two things: the corresponding properties have 1) a *default* status (either positive or negative) in 2) *moral* justification. A person who does not realize that benevolence or courage by default count for an action morally has not grasped the concept." He frames his account in an inferential semantics, but the idea of a default use is independent of such a commitment.

after all, language is not immutable. But as things stand, the default meaning of ‘tidy’ is that of a positive evaluative word. We can understand Hume as referring to the default meaning of literary criticism terms such as ‘virtuous’, ‘elegant’, ‘proper’ when he writes that “There are certain terms in every language which import blame, and other praise, and all men who use the same tongue must agree in their application of them.”¹⁴

The real problem is that it is not the case that someone’s being prudent or courageous, where these terms are taken to refer to positive evaluative concepts, straightforwardly entails that this person is good. Consider a person who is courageous but lacks generosity or, if this seems implausible, someone who is generous, but boring. Can we say that this person is good? She is surely good in some respects, but she is not good overall. In the same way, a dish can be healthy without being savoury – it might just lack salt, for instance. Thus, it will be good in some respects but not in all. It follows from such cases that good cannot possibly be the general concept corresponding to thick concepts such as *courageous* or *generous*.

However, if we use the expression ‘*good pro tanto*’¹⁵ to refer to something’s being good in some respect, the following principle, which I shall call ‘the generality principle’, can be formulated:

(1) If *x* falls under a positive thick concept, *x* is good *pro tanto*.¹⁶

In other words, an action or a person that is generous or courageous or just is necessarily “good in a way”, to use Thomson’s expression.¹⁷ This strongly suggests that *good pro tanto* is the general concept we are looking for. In any case, the principle mentioned above seems necessarily true. Moreover, it is the kind of truth that appears to be a priori. There is certainly no need to check whether each courageous person is also good *pro tanto*.

Against this, it could be argued that (1) simply manifests the fact that there is a conceptual relation between positive thick concepts and *good pro tanto*; there would be no need to make any further statement about the specificity or generality of the terms in question. This may be true, but it doesn’t seem likely. It would be surprising if all positive thick concepts are related in this way to the concept good *pro tanto* without the latter being a more general concept. What would explain the truth expressed by (1), if *good pro tanto* is not more general than the positive thick concepts?

Actually, there is a reply to this question, which suggests a second objection to the claim that (1) expresses a relation between specific and general concepts. It is possible to argue that the relation between positive thick concepts and *good pro tanto* follows from the fact that positive thick concepts can be analysed in terms of the concept *good pro tanto*. Thick concepts, it is claimed, are comparable to the complex concept *square and coloured*, which we could call ‘*squoloured*’. It is necessarily true that a *squoloured* thing is also a coloured thing, but this surely does not indicate that the concept *squoloured* is more specific than the concept *coloured*. Well, is this true? It is certainly true that being *squoloured* is not a natural species of the coloured, nor is it a species that

¹⁴ Hume 1757, p. 227, quoted in Wiggins 1987, p. 198.

¹⁵ See Hurley 1989 for the expression ‘right *pro tanto*’.

¹⁶ One might of course worry that this claim is circular. There seems to be no way to demarcate positive thick concepts from negative ones independently of the fact that (1) is true of the former, but not of the latter. This might well be true, but we should keep in mind that a claim can be circular without being useless. Thanks to Philipp Keller for raising this point.

¹⁷ See Thomson 1992b, p. 99, as well as 1992a, 1996 and 1997. Thomson’s conception of value terms draws heavily on von Wright’s *Varieties of Goodness* (1963).

the natural sciences would need to postulate. But in as far as *coloured* corresponds to a class of things encompassing the *squoloured*, it seems difficult to deny that the concept *coloured* is more general than the concept *squoloured*.¹⁸

It seems then that *goodness pro tanto* constitutes the wider class to which what is courageous, generous, just, admirable, desirable, etc. belongs. *Good pro tanto* is, it would appear, a general concept with respect to positive thick concepts.

What about the other direction of the implication? Does something's being good *pro tanto* entail that it falls under some thick concepts? Is it always possible to specify the concept *good pro tanto*? It certainly seems so. Consider a person whom you believe to be good *pro tanto*. She will have some desirable quality – she will be courageous or generous or intelligent, and so forth. The question is whether we should take this to be always true. It might be thought that pleasure and knowledge are exceptions.¹⁹ After all, pleasure and knowledge cannot be characterised in terms of virtue concepts – it would be a category mistake to say that pleasure or knowledge is courageous or generous. However, this is to forget that pleasure is desirable and that knowledge is desirable or admirable or else pride-worthy, thereby characterising these things with less general evaluative concepts than *good pro tanto*.

It is true that concepts like *desirable* or *admirable* are more general than concepts like *generous* or *courageous*, but they are nonetheless quite specific, compared to good *pro tanto*. For instance, to qualify something as desirable or admirable is to refer to a kind of mental state – desire or admiration – and to say that this state would be appropriate with respect to the thing in question. In any case it would be a mistake to believe that 'good *pro tanto*' and 'desirable' are synonymous. The reason is that something can be good *pro tanto* and not desirable. For example, past events: the fact that the flu vaccine was discovered is good, but it is not desirable, though it might have been desirable that the flu vaccine be discovered before the discovery. Other cases involve things that aren't feasible and hence make no sense as an object of desire. It would be good if I could be at two places at the same time in order to save two children, but strictly speaking, it is not desirable. I might wish to be at two places at the time, but desire would not be a proper response to something like this.

On the face of things, it seems difficult to find something which can be said to be good without falling under concepts like *desirable* or *admirable*, to mention only these two. Here is the claim that this suggests:

(2) If *x* is good *pro tanto*, some thick concept applies to it.

Against (2), it might be argued that *good pro tanto* is in fact an ambiguous concept. Depending on the context, it would mean different things, corresponding to different properties – admirableness, desirability, and so forth. This suggestion doesn't work, but it is interesting to see why. The problem is that the claim that *good pro tanto* is ambiguous does not allow for the fact that admirable things and desirable things, to consider just these two cases, have something in common: they are good *pro tanto*. Consider the term 'bank'. If the river-bank and the place where bankers work have something in common, it is certainly not the fact that they are banks.

The claim that 'good *pro tanto*' is a general concept raises the question of its relation to the ordinary predicate 'good'. I think that the view that is the most plausible is

¹⁸ It is of course true that *squoloured* is also more specific than *square*.

¹⁹ See Mulligan (1989) for the suggestion that the property of goodness can be specified only in cases in which it applies to non-psychological bearers; when it applies to psychological bearers, like pleasure, it is not specifiable.

that ‘good’ as we usually use it is ambiguous between ‘good *pro tanto*’ and ‘good all things considered’, or, as we might call it, ‘good *in toto*’, that is, good with respect to all aspects of the thing under consideration. It is worth noting that this should not be interpreted as meaning good in all respects, for a thing that is good *in toto* can well have some negative features. What counts is the overall evaluation, given all positive and negative features of what is evaluated. Moreover, something that is good *pro tanto* is not necessarily good *in toto*. But something’s being good *in toto* is at least normally also good *pro tanto*. This will be the case unless the presence of different negative features can result in something being good *in toto*, a possibility I shall not consider further here.

Be that as it may, the main question is how to understand the generality principle. Given the assumption that there are two main ways a relation between the specific and the general can unfold, namely as a) a *genus/species* relation or b) a *determinable/determinates* relation, the relation between *good* and thick concepts is either like *animal* with respect to *cat* or like *coloured* with respect to *red* and *blue*.

2. Goodness as a genus?

The first view I would like to discuss claims that ‘good *pro tanto*’ is a generic concept – that is, a concept corresponding to a *genus* – related to a number of more specific concepts. The different thick concepts would correspond to *species* of goodness (*pro tanto*), such as courageousness or amusingness. Thus, the predicate ‘courageous’ would bear the same relation to ‘good *pro tanto*’ as do ‘cat’ and ‘crocodile’ to ‘animal’.

At first sight, this view might seem foolish. Traditionally, the distinction between *genus* and *species* is taken to apply to substances, not to properties. Yet goodness, whether *pro tanto* or not, is certainly quite different from standard substances such as gold and electrons. Thus, the claim that goodness is a *genus* seems to involve a category mistake. Whether this accusation is true depends on what substances are taken to be. In a liberal mood, one might suggest that a substance is whatever can bear properties. If so, there will be no problem in the claim that goodness (*pro tanto*) is a *genus*. Maybe we should not be this liberal with substances. But even so, what should be underlined is that it is far from clear that the traditional view that *genus* and *species* need to be substances is true. This view is challenged by the suggestion that the square is a species of regular quadrilateral. Even though the terms ‘square’ and ‘quadrilateral’ are substantives, only properties seems to be involved, strictly speaking. This is confirmed by the fact, noted by Leibniz, that the *genus* and the *differentia* positions are often interchangeable: a square is also a quadrilateral regular.²⁰

The traditional account of *genus* and *species* is that the different species are marked out by a *differentia*, where the term that corresponds to the *differentia* and the one that corresponds to the *genus* are logically independent. To take a standard example, man would be the species corresponding to the *genus* ‘animal’, with the *differentia* that marks men (and women) from cats and crocodiles being rationality. Does such a model apply to ‘good’? Before considering this question, let me address another worry.

An account in terms of *differentia* seems to presuppose the traditional but mistaken claim that words like ‘man’ apply to particulars in virtue of some set of properties known by the speakers that, along with the *genus* term, constitute necessary and sufficient con-

²⁰ See Prior 1949, p. 2, who refers back to Leibniz, *Nouveaux Essais*, III, iii, 10.

ditions for the application of the word. Maybe this is true of some specific concepts; maybe when we apply the concept *stallion* we try to pick out male horses. However, as Hilary Putnam has argued, the meaning of natural kinds is not given in this way (1990). The meaning of a word like ‘gold’ cannot be given in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions for its application. Where does this leave us with respect to the *genus/species* distinction? Obviously, it would be rash to conclude from the above that ‘gold’ does not refer to a species of metal. We have to keep apart the ontology from the semantics.²¹ Thus, it is plausible that even if they are not reflected in any analysis of the concept of gold, there are features that differentiate gold from other metallic substances, where such features are possibly only known by experts, if at all.

This said, the question is whether thick positive terms refer to *species* of goodness *pro tanto*. Trivially, goodness *pro tanto* does indeed appear to be divided into *species*: we usually distinguish between moral goodness, aesthetic goodness, prudential goodness, not to mention more exotic kinds, such as culinary goodness.²² In the same way, one could suggest that thick terms are used to say some sorts of things are good *pro tanto*.²³ Something would fall under a thick concept provided that it is a certain sort of thing – a dish, a work of art, etc. – and good *pro tanto*. For example, something would be delicious on condition of its being good *pro tanto* and a dish; or a being would be virtuous if it is good *pro tanto* and a person. The problem with such a suggestion is that being a dish and being good *pro tanto* does not entail being delicious – it could be healthy or nourishing, instead. In the same way, being a person and being good *pro tanto* is not yet being virtuous. A person who is good *pro tanto* could simply be courageous, or else clever or witty.

The moral, it seems, is that we need more specific characterisations of the kinds of things involved. That would mean differentiating courageousness from other species of goodness *pro tanto* by some specific property or set of properties. In fact, this is what many versions of so-called ‘two component analyses’ entail. It is worth noting in passing that there are two possibilities here. Either the *differentia* is part of the meaning of ‘courage’ or it is not – maybe only experts would know what distinguishes courage from other virtues, if at all. As we shall see, what we could call ‘classical two component analyses’ can be interpreted as supporting the claim that the *differentia* is part of the meaning. Let us turn to such accounts.

3. Two component analyses

A number of philosophers have attempted to analyse thick concepts into a purely descriptive (non-evaluative) component and an expressive component.²⁴ It is worth pointing out that such analyses need not be committed to the claim that the evaluative element is non-cognitive. They are fully compatible with cognitivism. The simplest versions of such analyses claim that the two components are related by a conjunction. Thus, one could say that ‘courageous’ can be analysed into some non-evaluative predicate ‘F’ (referring to a property or a set of properties F) and the predicate ‘good *pro tanto*’, so that something would be courageous if and only if it is F and it is good *pro tanto*. More formally, we can write this as:

²¹ See for instance Armstrong 1989, p. 65.

²² But cf. von Wright 1963, p. 13.

²³ This seems to be Hobbes’ idea (*Leviathan*, I.vi).

²⁴ Stevenson 1944, chap. 3; Hare 1952, p. 121; Blackburn 1984, pp. 148-49.

(T1) x is courageous iff x is F and x is good *pro tanto*.

Following this suggestion, it could be claimed that courageousness is a species of goodness *pro tanto*. Being F would constitute the *differentia*. This suggestion would of course be resisted by non-cognitivists, since they certainly would dislike the idea that goodness is a genus. The expressivist, for one, would ask how the mere expression of a feeling could be considered more or less general. Still, even an expressivist would have to acknowledge that the entailment between something's being courageous and something's being good *pro tanto* would be easily accounted for.²⁵

As it stands, however, T1 is obviously unsatisfactory. It does not take into account that the goodness *pro tanto* of what is considered is due to its being F, that is, that it is in virtue of being F that something is good *pro tanto*.²⁶ To allow for a smooth explanation of the generality principle, we can replace T1 with the following:

(T2) x is courageous iff x is F and x is good *pro tanto*, and x is good *pro tanto* in virtue of F.

As has been pointed out by Bernard Williams, an important problem with expressivist or prescriptivist versions of two component analyses is that contrary to what they presuppose, there are no purely descriptive, or more precisely non-evaluative, equivalents to thick concepts. As he puts it:

Any such concept, on that account, can be analysed into a descriptive and a prescriptive element: it is guided round the world by its descriptive content, but has a prescriptive flag attached to it. [...] Prescriptivism claims that what governs the application of the concept to the world is the descriptive element and that the evaluative interest of the concept plays no part in this. 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. (1985, p. 141)

It has to be agreed that it is difficult to believe that thick concepts always have purely descriptive equivalents. Consider again the concept of courageousness. What purely descriptive concept would share the same extension? Let us suppose that courageous actions are done in spite of danger and involve overcoming fear. Now, it has to be acknowledged that there are behaviours, such as the attempt by someone who can hardly swim to save a child drowning in deep waters, which correspond to this description but which fail to be courageous. Such actions are silly or foolhardy, but not courageous. It would take more than a few examples to establish the claim that concepts such as *courageous* have no purely descriptive equivalents. Yet, such examples make for an impressive *prima facie* case for the conclusion that there are no readily available descriptive equivalents to thick evaluative concepts.²⁷

The question is to what extent this problem also arises for *cognitivist* versions of two component analyses. In fact, such versions are not committed to the claim that thick concepts have purely descriptive equivalents. The reason is that courageous things, to return to our example, do not only have to be Fs, they also have to be good *pro tanto*. More precisely,

²⁵ Note that what Gibbard calls 'licensing' and 'presupposition' accounts fail on this count (1992, p. 274).

²⁶ See Blackburn 1984, p. 148, 1992, p. 289.

²⁷ An argument would have to draw on McDowell's Wittgensteinian claim that we have to share the evaluative perspective to be able to apply thick concepts (McDowell 1978, 1979; and Williams 1985, pp. 141-142).

some instances of the property F make something good *pro tanto*, while others fail to do so. To emphasise this, one can adapt Stephan Burton's suggestion in the following way:

(T3) x is courageous iff x has a particular instance of F and x is good *pro tanto*, and x is good *pro tanto* in virtue of this particular instance of F.²⁸

Still, one might object that T3 falsely presupposes that having some descriptive property is a necessary condition for the possession of some thick value.²⁹ And whatever the way F is specified, it can be denied that being F constitutes a necessary condition for having the thick value in question. Thus, it might be claimed that some courageous actions are not done in spite of danger and do not involve the overcoming of fear. Speaking up at a meeting to denounce an injustice may well be courageous, even though no danger is at hand and no fear has to be overcome. At most, there might be some sort of risk, such as the risk of social sanction, and one might be aware of such a risk without feeling an emotion of fear. More generally, what is striking is the wide variety of actions that can count as courageous – saving a person from a fire as well as getting up in the morning can manifest courage. Thus, it seems quite debatable that all courageous actions have to be Fs, whatever the specification of F. What descriptive property is involved seems to be a contestable matter, so that we might conclude with Allan Gibbard that “[p]ractice [...] attaches no sharp descriptive property to the terms [corresponding to thick concepts]”.³⁰

This objection is fatal for classical two component analyses. However, there is room for more sophisticated versions of such an approach. Two component analyses need not be committed to the claim that the speakers know the *differentia*. It might be claimed that there is some set of descriptive properties, whatever it is, which something has to possess in order to fall under a thick concept. The case would be similar to that of gold mentioned previously. Thus, Gibbard would be right when he claims that practice does not attach a readily available descriptive property to a concept such as *courageous*. But he would be wrong to infer from this that we do not at least implicitly aim at a particular descriptive property that would be necessary for the application of the thick concept.

One might wonder whether it is plausible to claim that thick concepts and natural kind concepts are similarly out of the ordinary speaker's reach. The suggestion that the necessary descriptive underpinnings of a thick concept might be unknown to ordinary speakers is bound to appear implausible. It is quite clear that we do not want to claim that the difference between courage and other virtues is one that has to be discovered by means of empirical research and that only scientific experts could possibly be in a position to know. However, instead of supposing that scientific experts will eventually tell us what this set of properties is, it might be suggested that it is the community's task (possibly with the help of philosophers, as they are prone to think) to determine which property or set of properties are involved. To put it in a nutshell, that something is contestable does not mean there is no way to make progress in determining what it is.

This brings us to a fourth objection which can be raised against two component analyses. According to Susan Hurley, two component analyses are guilty of *centralism*, that is,

²⁸ Here is what Burton writes: ‘So instead of analysing (positively valenced) thick concepts ‘C’ as ‘X, Y, Z, etc... and therefore (pro tanto) good’ one might define it as ‘(pro tanto) good... in virtue of some particular instance of X, Y, Z, etc.’ (1992, p. 31). Note that Burton's suggestion is meant to be compatible with both cognitivism and non-cognitivism.

²⁹ See Gibbard 1992, p. 274 for this point, and also Wiggins 1987, p. 198.

³⁰ See Gibbard 1992, p. 277. Cf. also Wiggins 1987, p. 198.

the view that ‘the general concepts in some category [are] conceptually prior to and independent of the specific [concepts]’ (1989, p. 11). T3 indeed seems to presuppose centralism: goodness *pro tanto* apparently needs to be independent of thick concepts in the same way as ‘animal’ is independent of ‘cat’ or ‘crocodile’. And clearly, ‘animal’ can be defined without reference to cats or any other particular animal species. Hurley compares two component analyses to the attempt to analyse colour concepts like *red* in terms of a general colour concept which would be prior to and independent of specific colour terms (1989, p. 15). Such an attempt would be misguided. Being coloured is by definition being either red or blue or green or some other specific colour. As Hurley says, “[o]ur understanding of what is to be coloured isn’t independent of our understanding of [...] specific colours [...]” (1989, p. 16). In fact, as will become clear in the next section, this is just what follows from the claim that ‘coloured’ is a determinable.

In my view, Hurley is right when she claims that ‘good *pro tanto*’ does not correspond to a concept which is prior to and independent of more specific evaluative concepts. The reason for believing this is that, in the same way as to understand the concept *coloured* it is necessary to understand some of the more specific colour concepts, understanding the concept of goodness *pro tanto* entails understanding some more specific concepts. These can be virtue concepts, but they can also be concepts such as *pleasant* or *desirable*.

Should we thus reject T3? Actually, I think there is a close alternative which is immune to Hurley’s objection. The idea is to use concepts such as *pleasant* and *desirable*, but also *admirable*, *amusing*, and *pride-worthy*. Such concepts form a distinct group, for they are conceptually related to affective states.³¹ The suggestion I have in mind is to substitute ‘good *pro tanto*’ with such terms. This is quite a natural move, for there are close connections between concepts such as *courageous* or *generous* and what one could call ‘affective concepts’. Both courage and generosity are admirable, for instance.³² Thus, one could suggest the following account of courageousness:

(T4) x is courageous iff x has a particular instance of F and x is admirable, and x is admirable in virtue of this particular instance of F .³³

The difference between the courageous and the generous would be drawn in terms of the differences in the necessary descriptive properties.

Do we have to conclude that it is being admirable and not being good *pro tanto* which is a *genus* with respect to being courageous? Since what’s generous, just or sincere is also admirable, one might be tempted to say that the former constitute different species of the admirable. But there are several problems with this claim. A first worry is that being courageous or generous *makes* something admirable.³⁴ The problem is that we wouldn’t want to say that being a cat *makes* Felix an animal. Given this, it is far

³¹ See Anderson 1993 for the claim that “(s)ome thick concepts describe objects as meeting standards defined in terms of the attitudes they merit: as humiliating, ridiculous, wonderful, deplorable, titillating, fascinating, and so forth.” (1993, p. 98)

³² As a referee correctly noted, courageous actions have other positive features, such as desirability or pride-worthiness. This means that the proposed definition might have to be amended, but since the purpose of the definition is simply to illustrate a strategy, I leave it as it is.

³³ Actually, if one takes admiration to be warranted iff the thing is admirable, this suggestion does not seem far from Gibbard’s, who writes ‘(a) person’s applications of the term ‘lewd’ (...) are driven by his view on which feelings various descriptive kinds of acts warrant’ (1992, p. 282).

³⁴ I owe this point to Howard Sobel.

from clear that affective concepts and thick concepts have a *genus/species* relation. Another worry is that the two kinds of concepts involved are quite different. The members of the latter are at least partly in the business of picking out certain features of the world, while affective concepts point towards human responses without attempting to specify what makes such responses appropriate.³⁵ How could a genus be so different from its species?

Now that we have introduced what I called ‘affective concepts’, a further objection to the claim that goodness *pro tanto* is a *genus* can be formulated. Two component analyses of affective concepts have no plausibility whatsoever. Consider the suggestion that something is pleasant if and only if it is F and it is good *pro tanto*, where ‘F’ refers to the non-evaluative properties that are necessary for being pleasant. Now, what would such properties be? Something’s being pleasant is therefore good *pro tanto*, but apart from it’s being pleasant, there seems to be nothing which sets it apart from other things that are good *pro tanto*. So, even if ‘good *pro tanto*’ had referred to a *genus* with respect to courageousness and the like, it would not have been a *genus* with respect to all more specific evaluative terms.³⁶

We have, I take it, sufficient ground to reject the view that goodness *pro tanto* is a *genus* with respect to what falls under thick concepts.³⁷ How then can we account for the generality principle? Actually, as will become clear in the next section, the preceding considerations suggest that what we have here is a relation between a determinable and its determinates.

4. Good *pro tanto* as a determinable?

Determinables are best introduced with a quote from their father, the logician W. E. Johnson: “I propose to call such terms as colour and shapes *determinables* in relation to such terms as red or circular which will be called *determinates*.” (1921, chap. 11) In general, size, weight, age, number and texture are taken to be determinables.³⁸ Contrary to species terms, determinates are not to be construed as a conjunction of two logically independent terms. Thus, a concept like *red* cannot be defined by conjoining the term colour and some other term which would play the role of the *differentia*. As John Searle puts it: ‘Red things do not possess some trait other than their redness which, when conjoined with their coloredness, makes them by definition red.’ (1967, p. 358) Still, the relation between a determinable and its determinate is comparable to that of the *genus/species* relation in

³⁵ I think however that just as it is a bad idea to reduce general evaluative concepts to deontic concepts, it would a mistake to claim that affective concepts can be analysed in terms of what ought to be felt. (See Ogien and Tappolet, in prep., for this question.)

³⁶ It could not be claimed that being pleasant is the species of goodness *pro tanto* which is constituted by what makes pleasure appropriate. It is surely true that what is pleasant makes pleasure appropriate. Indeed, this seems to be a conceptual truth. However, making pleasure appropriate cannot function as a *differentia*, and the reason for this is simply that the concept of making pleasure appropriate is not conceptually independent of the concept of being pleasant. As we have seen, the two terms of the conjunction need to be logically independent.

³⁷ I thus agree with von Wright when he writes: “It seems to me that the forms of goodness are not related to a generic good as species are related to a genus. (This is why I speak of ‘forms’ and *not* of ‘kinds’ or ‘species’ of goodness).” Note that he adds “But I do not know how to argue conclusively for my opinion.” (1963, p. 13)

³⁸ See Searle 1967.

that it is between the less specific and the more specific. The difference is simply that in the case of determinates, the specification is not provided by a *differentia*.

Now, the fact that there is no specific difference marking the amusing, the pleasant or the admirable suggests that such concepts are determinates of the good *pro tanto*. In the same way as *red* and *blue* are determinates of the determinable *coloured*, concepts such as *pleasant*, *amusing* or *admirable* would be determinates of the determinable *good pro tanto*. Of course, the branches of the tree do not stop here: *being pleasant*, *being amusing* and *being admirable* are themselves determinables with respect to the different instances of pleasantness or of admirableness – something is pleasant in a specific way (to a particular degree, etc.).

It should be underlined that there are differences between the colour case and the case of evaluative concepts. One important characteristic of specific colour concepts and of determinables such as size, weight, age, number and texture, is that they form what Armstrong calls ‘mutual detestation societies’: determinates of the concept *coloured* are incompatible.³⁹ Obviously, the same thing cannot be red and green at the same time. But something can be both admirable and amusing. A second difference with the colour case is that *x* being coloured in a way entails that *x* is coloured. By contrast, that *x* is good in a way does not entail that *x* is good. To be coloured is just to be coloured in a way. But to be good is not simply to be good in a way. As I suggested above, the term ‘good’ appears to be ambiguous between ‘good *pro tanto*’ and ‘good *in toto*’. However, the resemblance between colour concepts and affective concepts is sufficient to justify the claim that they share the same determinable/determinate structure.

Conclusion

The following picture emerges. First, *good* or more precisely *good pro tanto* is a general concept. Even so, von Wright (1963, p. 13) was right: the relation between *good pro tanto* and affective concepts is definitely not a *genus/species* relation. It is one of determinables versus determinates. Second, such affective concepts, or at least some of them, bear a close relation to specific concepts such as *courageous* or *generous*; the latter can be analysed in terms of affective concepts. As we have seen, it is plausible that something is courageous just if it has some particular non-evaluative features that make it admirable.

Given the proposed account of evaluative concepts, we have reason to reject Williams’ conception of the thin and thick distinction.⁴⁰ As we have seen, Williams claims that thick concepts are both descriptive and prescriptive, while thin concepts are merely prescriptive. This is incompatible with the view that *good pro tanto* is a kind of determinable. Consider the colour case and suppose that the concept *red* has a descriptive content. If so, it will be impossible to say that the concept *coloured* lacks a descriptive content. For being coloured is nothing but to possess one or the other particular colour. So, if being red or being blue consists in falling under a descriptive concept, the same will be true in the case of being coloured. Thus, if Williams is right to say that specific evaluative concepts are at least partly descriptive – and I think he is right – he

³⁹ See Armstrong 1978, p.112; cf. also Prior 1949, p. 11 and Searle 1967, p. 358. As Searle notes, this is true ‘unless one of the determinates is a lower-order determinable of the other’, as in the case of scarlet with respect to red. (1967, p. 358)

⁴⁰ See also Scheffler (1987), who objects to Williams that “(...) any division of ethical concepts into the two categories of the thick and the thin is itself a considerable oversimplification.” (1987, p. 418)

has to say the same of thin concepts. While I agree with Elizabeth Anderson when she writes that “the thin concepts derive their world-guidedness only through their conceptual ties to thick concepts” (1993, p. 98), I would insist on the fact that the thin concepts are world-guided even if they derive world-guidedness through their conceptual ties to more specific concepts. This is why in the end it seems of little use to speak of *thin* and *thick* evaluative concepts. It would be just as well to stick to the classical distinction between the specific and the general.

Following Williams, it is often claimed that what is characteristic of thin concepts is that they are more theoretic than a thick ones: in contrast to the latter, the former depend on a theory, possibly a normative theory such as consequentialism or deontology. If my account is correct, a concept like *good* or *good pro tanto* need not be more theoretic than thick concept. It is always possible to try and define a concept in terms of a network of other more or less theoretical concepts. But if saying that something is good *pro tanto* entails simply that it has some feature such as being admirable or courageous, then there is no reason to think that good *pro tanto* need to be more theory-dependent than the more specific evaluative concepts we use. I have said nothing here about another kind of action-guiding concepts, namely concepts such as *right*, *wrong*, *obligatory* and *permissible*. I think that if there is a distinction that matters in the field of moral or more broadly practical concepts, it is not the thin and thick distinction, but the one between the evaluative and the deontic.⁴¹

Several other questions arise. One would need to investigate whether Thomson is right when she claims: “It seems very plausible to think that a thing’s being good must consist in its being good in some way [...]. If that is the case, then there is no metaphysically mysterious property goodness [...]” (1996, 128-9) And it should also be determined whether she is right to infer that the claim that all goodness is goodness in a way shows utilitarianism and more generally consequentialism to be false. I have doubts about both claims, but it would take me too far to make my case.⁴²

REFERENCES

- ANDERSON, E. 1993 *Values in Ethics and Economics*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- ARMSTRONG, D.M. 1978 *A Theory of Universals. Universals and Scientific Realism*, Vol. II, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- ARMSTRONG, D.M. 1989 *Universals*, Boulder, Col.: Westview Press.
- BLACKBURN, S. 1984 *Spreading the Word*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- BLACKBURN, S. 1992 “Morality and Thick Concepts”, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. 66, pp. 285-99.

⁴¹ In this respect, it is interesting to note that Scanlon’s examples of thin concepts are the deontic ‘right’, ‘wrong’, ‘duty’, ‘obligation’ and ‘ought’ (2003, p. 276); in contrast to Williams, he consistently fails to mention ‘good’.

⁴² The germs of the ideas developed here were first presented in the thesis I wrote under the supervision of Kevin Mulligan, to whom I am most grateful (see Tappolet 2000). I would also like to thank Monique Canto-Sperber, David Davies, Daniel Laurier, Philipp Keller, Frédéric Nef, Ruwen Ogien, Fabienne Pironet, Howard Sobel, Stelios Virvidakis and Daniel Weinstock as well as the anonymous referees for their helpful comments. I am also indebted to audiences at the University of Rennes, at the ECAP in Slovenia and at the Centre de Recherche Politique Raymond Aron in Paris. My work was supported by grants from the FQRSC and the SSHRC, which I thankfully acknowledge.

- BURTON, S. L. 1992 "Thick Concepts Revisited", *Analysis* 52, pp. 28-32.
- ELDER, C. L. 1996 "Realism and Determinable Properties", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 56, 149-59.
- GEACH, P.T. 1956 "Good and Evil", *Analysis* 17, 33-42.
- GIBBARD, A. 1992 "Morality and Thick Concepts", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 66, pp. 267-283.
- HARE, R. M. 1952 *The Language of Morals*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- HOBBS, T. 1651 *Leviathan*, ed. by R. Tuck, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- HUME, D. 1757 "Of the Standard of Taste", in J.W. Lenz, ed., *Of the Standard of Taste and Other Essays*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961.
- HURLEY, S. 1989 *Natural Reasons*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- JOHNSON, W. E. 1921 *Logic*, part I, New York: Dover Publications.
- KAUPPINEN, A., forth., "Are There Thick Concepts?"
- KOVESI, J. 1967 *Moral Notions*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- LEIBNIZ, G.W. 1966 *Nouveaux Essais*, ed. J. Brunschwig, Paris: Garnier-Flammarion.
- MCDOWELL, J. 1978 "Are Moral Requirements Hypothetical Imperatives?", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 52, pp. 13-29.
- MCDOWELL, J. 1979 "Virtue and Reason", *The Monist* 62, pp. 331-350.
- MCDOWELL, J. 1981, 'Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following', in McDowell (1998), *Mind, Value, and Reality*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., pp. 198-218.
- MOORE, G. E. 1903 *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- MOORE, G. E. 1942 "The Philosopher replies", in P. A. Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of G. E. Moore*, vol. 1, La Salle, Il.: Open Court, third edition 1968.
- MULLIGAN, K. 1989 "Wie verhalten sich Normen und Werte zueinander?", ms.
- MULLIGAN, K. 1998 "From Appropriate Emotions to Values", *The Monist* 81, pp. 161-188.
- NUSSBAUM, M. 2001 "Comment", in A. Gutman, ed., *Goodness and Advice*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- OGIEN, R. 2003 *Le Rasoir de Kant et autres essais de philosophie pratique*, Paris: Édition de l'Éclat.
- OGIEN, R., TAPPOLET, C. in prep. *Au-delà des normes et des valeurs*.
- PILLER, C. 2001 "Ways of Being Good", *Acta Analytica* 16, pp. 153-167.
- PRIOR, A. N. 1949 "Determinables, Determinates and Determinants", *Mind* 58, pp. 1-20 and pp. 178-194.
- PUTNAM, H. 1990, 'Objectivity and the Science/Ethics Distinction'. In *Realism with a Human Face*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, pp. 163-178.
- PUTNAM, H. 2002, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- SCANLON, T.M. 2003, "Thickness and Theory", *The Journal of Philosophy* 100, pp. 275-287.
- SCANLON, T.M. 1998 *What we Owe to Each Other*, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- SCHEFFLER, S. 1987 "Morality Through Thick and Thin. A Critical Notice of Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy", *The Philosophical Review* 46, pp. 411-434.
- SEARLE, J. 1967 "Determinables and Determinates", in P. Edwards, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, New York, London: Macmillan.
- STEVENSON, C. L. 1944 *Ethics and Language*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.
- TAPPOLET, C. 2000 *Émotions et valeurs*, Paris : Presses Universitaires de France.
- THOMSON, J.J. 1992a "Goodness and Utilitarianism", *Proceedings and Address of the American Philosophical Association in Washington* 67, pp. 145-159.
- THOMSON, J.J. 1992b "On Some Ways in Which a Thing Can Be Good", *Social Philosophy and Policy* 9, pp. 96-117.
- THOMSON, J.J. 1996 "Moral Objectivity", in G. H. Harman and J. J. Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*, Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell.
- THOMSON, J.J. 1997 "The Right and the Good", *The Journal of Philosophy* 94, pp. 273-298.
- THOMSON, J.J. 2001 "Goodness and Advice", in A. Gutman, ed., *Goodness and Advice*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- VON WRIGHT, G.H. 1963 *The Varieties of Goodness*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- WIGGINS, D. 1987 *Needs, Values, Truth*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 3rd ed. 1998.
- WILLIAMS, B. 1985 *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, London: Fontana Paperbacks.