



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Reviewed work(s): Väyrynen, Pekka. The Lewd, the Rude and the Nasty: A Study of Thick Concepts in Ethics.

Citation for published version:

Roberts, D 2015, 'Reviewed work(s): Väyrynen, Pekka. The Lewd, the Rude and the Nasty: A Study of Thick Concepts in Ethics.', *Ethics: An International Journal of Social, Political, and Legal Philosophy*, vol. 125, no. 3, pp. 910-915. <https://doi.org/10.1086/679534>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1086/679534](https://doi.org/10.1086/679534)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Ethics: An International Journal of Social, Political, and Legal Philosophy

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



the reasoned argument. After all, the dilemmas raised by commercialization will inevitably intensify as medical and reproductive technology advance.

DEBORAH TUERKHEIMER
Northwestern University

Väyrynen, Pekka. *The Lewd, the Rude and the Nasty: A Study of Thick Concepts in Ethics*.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. 288. \$49.95 (cloth).

This book articulates and defends a novel view of thick concepts extremely carefully and rigorously. It is an excellent example of how method and theory from other areas, in this case philosophy of language and linguistics, can be brought fruitfully to bear on debates in metaethics. And it takes on a topic with a deserved reputation for being obscure and performs much needed clarifications. In short, *The Lewd, the Rude and the Nasty* makes considerable advances not only in the thick concepts debate but in metaethics and metanormative philosophy in general.

One standard characterization of thick terms and concepts—'lewd' and 'rude' are examples here—is that they have both evaluative and nonevaluative content, in contrast to thin(ner) concepts like 'good', 'bad', and perhaps 'nasty', which are wholly or more purely evaluative in content. Many philosophers have claimed that thick concepts have deep and distinctive philosophical significance.

The book begins by pointing out how the many different ways in which thick concepts have been held to have deep and distinctive philosophical significance all presuppose that thick concepts are evaluative concepts. These many different ways are likely familiar—thick concepts have had star billing in arguments against noncognitivism and the fact-value distinction and in arguments for certain accounts of objectivity in ethics, reasons for action, and the nature of evaluative thought and discourse. Pekka Väyrynen claims that these arguments all fail. This is not because he thinks (in line with a familiar response to these arguments) that thick concepts have evaluative and descriptive content that can be separated out or 'disentangled'. It is because he thinks that thick concepts have no evaluative content (or at least not any that could give them distinctive significance) in the first place.

Väyrynen's main aim is to deflate the philosophical significance of thick concepts. His main conclusion is that thick concepts are not inherently evaluative. The case for his view is an argument for the claim that the global evaluations most closely associated with thick terms and concepts are not a part of the meanings of those terms and concepts. 'Inherently evaluative' here is shorthand for 'inherently evaluative with respect to global evaluations'. Thick terms and concepts are inherently evaluative in this sense if these global evaluations are a part of their meaning. Call this the semantic view. Instead, Väyrynen argues that the best explanation of the relationship between thick terms and concepts and global evaluation, is pragmatic. I discuss each of these in turn.

An evaluation 'most closely associated with' a thick term or concept is *global* if that evaluation applies to all the features that distinguish the things falling under that term or concept. This is in contrast to *embedded* evaluations, which are

evaluations “needed to characterize the very type of things that may be subsequently subject to global evaluations” (40–41). Take ‘lewd’ as an example. Assume that all lewd actions involve overt displays of sexuality that transgress conventional boundaries (and assume that that description is nonevaluative). Then a global evaluation would be one that applies to the features X, Y, and Z, which an act has in virtue of being an overt display of sexuality that transgresses conventional boundaries, for example, the evaluation that acts with features X, Y, and Z are bad in a certain way. An embedded evaluation, on the other hand, would be present if specifying the type of thing to which the global evaluation applies required evaluative information. In this case, if one or more of X, Y, or Z were an evaluative feature, then ‘lewd’ would contain an embedded evaluation.

Väyrynen’s argument targets only global evaluation. He allows that (some) thick terms and concepts may contain embedded evaluation but holds that thick terms and concepts won’t have deep or distinctive significance if their meanings only contain embedded, and not global, evaluations. Väyrynen follows Daniel Y. Elstein and Thomas Hurka (“From Thick to Thin: Two Moral Reduction Plans,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 39 [2009]: 515–35) in claiming that this is because “embedded evaluations are independent of whether they figure in the meaning of thick terms and concepts” (43). If embedded evaluations had deep and distinctive significance, then they’d have this independently of their relation to thick terms and concepts. Accordingly, the book’s target—that thick concepts are inherently evaluative—is the claim that global evaluations are a part of the meanings of thick terms and concepts. For ease of exposition, I will follow Väyrynen in referring to the global evaluations most closely associated with thick terms and concepts as *T*evaluations.

Evaluation is here understood as “information to the effect that something has a positive or negative standing—merit or demerit, worth or unworth—relative to a certain kind of standard . . . the kind that is capable of grounding claims of merit or worth” (29). And a term or concept *T* is inherently evaluative on this view if “all literal uses of sentences of the form *x is T* in normal contexts entail, as a conceptual matter or in virtue of a semantic rule, that *x* is good (or bad, depending on *T*) in a certain way” (34). This last suggests the way to test whether *T* evaluations are a part of the meanings of thick terms and concepts.

In arguing against the claim that *T*evaluations are a part of the meanings of thick terms and concepts, Väyrynen ironically draws inspiration from Bernard Williams’s injunction in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* exhorting moral philosophers to pay attention to more of moral language. Williams meant that we should pay attention to thick concepts as well as thin (and Williams thought that thick concepts had deep and distinctive significance). Väyrynen remarks that if this advice is sound, we should also pay attention to a rich range of linguistic evidence concerning how thick terms work. (He holds that the linguistic behavior of terms constrains what concepts they may be used to express.) It is such evidence which Väyrynen appeals to in arguing for his *pragmatic* view of the thick.

This argument has two main parts. The first is a positive argument for the claim that *T*evaluations are no part of the meaning of thick terms and concepts (chaps. 3–6). The second is a negative argument which aims to show that considerations thought to favor the view that thick concepts are inherently evaluative can be better explained either by general features of context-sensitive

gradable terms or by these in combination with the pragmatic view. This argument spans chapters 7 and 8. Chapter 9 examines, and finds wanting, an argument in the literature that draws on the apparent contextual variability of the valence of evaluations associated with thick terms, to claim that those evaluations are no part of the meaning of those terms. Chapter 10 then takes stock, detailing the various respects in which the significance of the thick is deflated if the argument of the book succeeds.

If *T*evaluations were a part of the meaning of thick terms (and concepts), then we would expect them to be semantic entailments, semantic presuppositions, or conventional implicatures. Moreover, standard methods in linguistics give us ways to test for these things. Broadly, the strategy of Väyrynen's positive argument for the pragmatic view is to argue that *T*evaluations fail all these tests and that the best explanation for this is that they are related to thick terms and concepts pragmatically.

The notion of an *objectionable* thick concept is put to work here. A thick term or concept is objectionable if the global evaluation most closely associated with it doesn't fit the things which the term or concept is true of. For example, we might think that 'lewd' is objectionable because overt displays of sexuality are not bad for being such displays. Väyrynen thinks that all, or at least all paradigmatic, thick terms and concepts are in principle open to being regarded as objectionable. Since which concepts are in fact objectionable, as opposed to being merely open to being regarded as objectionable, is a substantive evaluative matter, conclusions about objectionable thick concepts will have the requisite generality.

The linchpin of the positive argument is thus a hypothesis that linguistic data concerning objectionable thick terms and concepts show that *T*evaluations *project*—they survive embedding in various contexts that cancel semantic entailments—and are *defeasible* in certain ways that semantic entailments aren't. Projection and defeasibility are also key to Väyrynen's argument that *T*evaluations are not conventional implicatures or semantic presuppositions. He argues that the best explanation of the behavior of *T*evaluations is that they are related to thick terms and concepts pragmatically. Specifically, his view is that global *T*evaluations are implications of utterances containing thick terms which are part of background, 'not-at-issue' content in normal contexts and which arise conversationally. This is fleshed out in chapter 6 which aims to round off the positive argument by telling a plausible story about how and why these evaluations arise.

How convincing is this positive argument? One thing that Väyrynen leaves open is whether thin concepts can be found objectionable, as embodying evaluations that ought not to be endorsed. He says it's unclear what this would amount to, though offers as an example that perhaps Marxists or Nietzscheans can think that there are moral properties but offer an account of them on which morality is something to be condemned.

It seems to me that the same strategy that Väyrynen employs in his positive argument can indeed be used in the case of thin concepts and that any difficulty we have here can be accounted for by the imaginative difficulty in occupying evaluative perspectives very remote from our own—something Väyrynen himself points to in explaining the difficulty we might have in imagining 'courage' to be objectionable. In other words, we could use the case of a Nietzschean finding 'morally good' objectionable, to argue that the global evaluation associated with

'morally good' projects and is defeasible in the same way as the global evaluation associated with 'lewd'. Someone who found 'morally good' objectionable would be unlikely to use the term in a question or embedded in a possibility modal or epistemic modal or in the antecedent of a conditional because the positive evaluation projects. And it seems possible to deny that an action is good for being morally good. Importantly, this would not show that 'morally good' is not an evaluative concept or that it fails to pick out an evaluative property. To reject a concept, as Dancy puts it, one has to see its point and reject it for that reason. Given that we are talking about evaluative concepts, another way to put this could be that one has to make the evaluation and then evaluate that evaluation as objectionable. A rough-and-ready characterization of what is going on here could be that there are two evaluations: one conceptual and one substantive. What it would show is that any substantive evaluation of 'morally good' is plausibly not itself a part of the content of 'morally good'.

Might not the same be true in the thick case? If *T*-evaluations are no part of the semantic content of thick concepts, this might be a reflection of the fact that substantive evaluations of thick properties are no part of the concept that picks out those properties (as evidenced by the bully who is quite competent with 'cruel' but evaluates cruelty positively). In fact, this is Väyrynen's view: that the substantive evaluations that (groups of) people make are no part of the content of the relevant concept but instead ought to be viewed as communicated via pragmatic mechanisms. Chapter 6 can be read as telling a very plausible story about how this comes about. However, this by itself does not answer the question of whether the thick concepts or properties themselves are evaluative, any more than a substantive evaluation of 'morally good' being no part of its content should lead us to conclude that 'morally good' fails to be an evaluative concept or pick out an evaluative property.

So where does this leave the issue of whether thick concepts are properly considered evaluative? At this point it is left open, I think. So we need to consider Väyrynen's negative argument. As noted above, that thick concepts are evaluative is assumed without argument in most of the literature on the thick. However, a common refrain in the literature, across party lines, is that for thick terms and concepts 'evaluation drives extension'. *Parochiality* (that the point of these concepts is only apparent from within a particular evaluative point of view), intuitions regarding disagreements, and the way in which their nonevaluative content underdetermines their extensions are all, at least implicitly, taken as evidence that evaluation plays an extension determining role for thick terms and concepts by being a part of their semantic content. Väyrynen's negative argument aims to show that the pragmatic view, together with general features of context-sensitive gradable terms, can also explain all of these considerations. Väyrynen then argues on grounds of Grice's razor that the pragmatic explanation is to be preferred. The same strategy is applied to two further claims about the thick that might be thought to support the semantic view, namely, that thick terms and concepts are nonevaluatively shapeless and that their evaluative and descriptive components are inseparable.

Väyrynen makes a convincing case for the claim that intuitions about univocality of disagreement can't be used to draw conclusions about the content of terms and concepts. In addition, I don't think that shapelessness and insepara-

bility are even implicitly supposed to be arguments for the claim that thick concepts are evaluative. The point of both, I think, is to push the view that evaluative concepts (where the evaluativeness is presupposed) pick out irreducibly evaluative properties, where this is supposed to be a problem for noncognitivists (and reductive naturalists).

What of parochiality and underdetermination? In my view, Väyrynen is correct that the pragmatic view together with general features of context-sensitive gradable terms could explain these features of the thick. However, it's worth noting that a term's (or concept's) being evaluative is compatible with its being a context-sensitive gradable term—thin evaluative concepts fall precisely into this category. If it is substantive evaluations that are communicated pragmatically, the pragmatic view combined with general features of context-sensitive gradable terms could nonetheless be combined with the view that thick concepts (and properties) are evaluative. This is perhaps just a different way of making the same point that Väyrynen makes, which is that the issue of whether thick concepts are themselves evaluative is really to be decided by the employment of (a generalization of) Grice's razor; other things being equal we should prefer the pragmatic view because it postulates fewer semantic properties (210).

But are other things equal? It seems to me that there are a few unresolved issues. One concerns why (the paradigmatic) thick concepts have been so universally thought to be evaluative. Väyrynen provides an answer to this question in chapter 6. In brief, this is that thick terms and concepts concern aspects of human life that matter: they “are widely invested with evaluative significance or systematically evoke various affective responses that are connected to evaluation” (133). On this view there is no difference in kind between ‘courageous’, ‘cruel’, and ‘loyal’, on the one hand, and ‘fun’, ‘athletic’, and ‘chocolate’, on the other (where these are nonevaluative terms commonly used to imply positive evaluation). Väyrynen holds that we can explain the appearance of a difference in kind by noting a cluster of contingent differences of degree. Chief among these are the differences in the degree to which the relevant evaluations are generalized: the greater the degree of generalization, the easier it is for a term or concept to appear inherently evaluative (138).

One worry with this is that it leaves it very mysterious as to why ‘pleasure’ and ‘pain’ aren't paradigmatic thick terms. These terms would seem to satisfy all the relevant criteria for being a paradigmatic thick term on Väyrynen's account. For one, they are typically used against a very broad and very strong background of agreement regarding their evaluative significance. “At most, thick terms and concepts may play a particularly central role in our normative thought thanks to how intimately they tend—as a substantive matter—to relate to our evaluative interests and concerns.”

In a footnote, Väyrynen offers two speculations as to why ‘pleasure’ and ‘pain’ aren't regarded as thick: that the properties ascribed by thick terms are less easy to characterize in general terms, and that many of us are confident that it is no part of what it is to be pain that it be bad and no part of what it is to be pleasant that it should be good and thus see no essential need to use evaluative notions in describing pleasure and pain. “Selfishness, courageousness and cruelty, by contrast, seem not to be exhausted by their experiential aspect or its psychological underpinning” (137 n. 12). The worry remains though, for another

way to put this might be that while we are confident that plain and pleasure are nonevaluative, the same cannot be said for the paradigmatically thick.

Of course, it is no good to merely carry on presupposing that paradigmatic thick concepts are evaluative. As Väyrynen notes when discussing the view that thick concepts are themselves evaluative in their own right, and not evaluative because of any connection to global evaluations, a compelling motivation is needed for this view.

One possible line of pursuit concerns the notion of *embedded* evaluation. Recall that an embedded evaluation would be present in the content of the thick concept if specifying the type of thing over which the relevant global evaluation takes scope requires evaluative information. Recall that Väyrynen follows Elstein and Hurka (“From Thick to Thin”) in claiming that thick terms and concepts won’t have deep or distinctive significance if they contain only embedded evaluations because “embedded evaluations are independent of whether they figure in the meaning of thick terms and concepts” (43). If all embedded evaluations were thin, and if they were genuinely embedded (i.e., could at least in principle be unembedded), this might be a plausible claim.

But why assume either of these things? On the first, if some embedded evaluations are themselves thick, why assume that there will be neat conceptual divisions such that each embedded evaluation can be regarded as independent? Our evaluative concepts may form a network with no such sharp divisions. Grasping the concept ‘courage’ may involve grasping when it is worthwhile to pursue goods regardless of the badness of the harm or risk of harm one is accepting. Grasping ‘harm’ may require grasping what welfare and flourishing and the worthwhile are. And grasping ‘flourishing’ and ‘the worthwhile’ may require grasping what courage is. And on the second, if so-called embedded evaluations cannot be separated from that in which they are embedded, it may not make sense to think of them as being independent (or, indeed, as embedded).

However, the above is of course a very sketchy sketch, and it does not do justice to Väyrynen’s detailed and careful work. In the end, having rigorously weighed the linguistic evidence and having cautioned against profligacy in postulating semantic properties where it seems that pragmatic mechanisms can do all the work required, Väyrynen concludes that thick concepts aren’t inherently evaluative and thus cannot have the distinctive philosophical significance that they have been thought to have. Though I am inclined to resist these conclusions, this book is a significant contribution. There is much to admire about it and much to engage with. In my view this work will profoundly shape the future of the thick concepts debate.

DEBBIE ROBERTS
University of Edinburgh