



Thick Evaluation

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Disentangling and Shapelessness

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter considers a second anti-separationist strategy, namely the thought that if one separates thick concepts into thin evaluation and nonevaluative, descriptive content, as separationists think, one is erroneously committed to thinking that the latter can in some way map onto the evaluative concept that one is analysing such that one can predict novel uses of that concept. This anti-separationist argument is often called the ‘disentangling argument’, something that is reliant on the ‘shapelessness hypothesis’, and is associated with John McDowell and David Wiggins, among others. This famous argument and hypothesis are laid out in great detail. The upshot is that the argument does not work as traditionally given, although a weaker version may have some attraction. Overall it is argued that nonseparationists should pursue a different anti-separationist strategy.

Keywords: anti-separationist, concept use, disentangling argument, John McDowell, shapelessness hypothesis, David Wiggins

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter I suggested that the first anti-separationist strategy fails to convince. In this chapter we focus on the second anti-separationist strategy.¹ I said in my Introduction that they can be seen as linked since both stem from the *genus-species* model. We have focused on the thin. In this chapter we now turn our attention to the *differentia*. Recall that the key idea is whether separationists can develop a *differentia* unique for each and every thick concept that will create that concept when combined with some thin conceptual content.²

This issue has been a key point in the debate about thick concepts and metaethics generally over the past thirty years or so. However, it has not been put in terms of *differentia* and *genus-species*. Instead, people have talked only of the possibility of evaluative concepts being ‘disentangled’ into component parts, and whether evaluative concepts are ‘shapeless’ with respect to descriptive, nonevaluative concepts. I slot the debate about shapelessness into my overall discussion of the *genus-species* (p.81) model because this wider discussion helps to highlight what is at stake about disentangling.

The main moral of this chapter is that while separationists are committed to there being *differentia* that play the role we have envisaged them playing, the anti-separationist point concerning shapelessness does not quite work. That is not to say that separationists come out unscathed, but just that nonseparationists should look for a further argument, or set of considerations, beyond discussion of shapelessness. That is the motivation for my discussion in Chapter Six.

In §5.2 I orientate us, laying out how the terminology of my debate links with the normal way of talking about shapelessness. In §5.3 I lay out the anti-separationist argument used by nonseparationists. In §5.4 I list a few notes that need to be made explicit, and which normally are not, in order to understand better what is going on. These take up a fair amount of space, but are important for setting up the main discussion. In §5.5 and §5.6 I get to the heart of matters and show where the argument falls short, as typically given. In §5.7 I show how the argument may be revived and what power it retains. I also deal with possible responses. In §5.8 I conclude, arguing that some other sort of strategy is needed for us to adopt nonseparationism.

5.2 Cognitivism and Noncognitivism

The disentangling debate about evaluative concepts maps onto the debate about whether the *genus-species* model accounts for such concepts. Is it possible, for any and every concept traditionally thought to be thick, to ‘disentangle’ it into different, component parts? And, normally, these parts are assumed to be some thin evaluative conceptual content (or similar), and some descriptive conceptual content. I prefer to talk in terms of the *genus-species* model because that lays bare the sort of conceptual priority that separationists assume, and also allows us to introduce and reflect on other traditional conceptual models, such as the determinate-determinable model.

One interesting difference is that the ‘disentangling debate’ was fought most strongly between cognitivists and noncognitivists. In the former camp were, notably, McDowell and Wiggins. (Although he disagreed about some things with them, especially with McDowell, Williams was also sceptical that the disentangling manoeuvre could be made.) In the latter camp were people such as Blackburn and Gibbard. To my mind noncognitivists have to be separationists.

But, as we have noted in earlier chapters, separationism can be combined with cognitivism about the thin. In this chapter I focus mainly on simple separationism, although I indicate towards the end how the discussion affects complex separationism.

The disentangling argument was not so much an argument for cognitivism, as an argument against noncognitivism. The explicit claim was that a noncognitivist account of evaluative concepts could not be made to work. I retain that broad orientation, although I am more doubtful than, say, McDowell, that the argument **(p.82)** works. I also change terminology, and label this an ‘anti-separationist’ argument, for this is not really a positive argument for nonseparationism. That will come in Chapter Six.

The worry about disentangling focused on the descriptive conceptual content that was supposed to be part of any thick concept. It was assumed, contrary to the noncognitivism of the day, that evaluative concepts are shapeless with respect to nonevaluative recharacterizations of them, and that this called into serious question the disentangling move. To see why this is so, and to see what is meant by ‘shapelessness’, I now lay out the argument, leaving behind talk of cognitivism and noncognitivism.

5.3 Shapelessness and Outrunning

The argument starts simply. We divide situations, actions, and other things into different conceptual categories: *these* things are kind while *those* things are selfish. We should take as bedrock the idea that our normal conceptual divisions are rational. In other words, there has to be some reason to the divisions we make; they cannot be made capriciously and on a whim. It is commonsensical that we should be committed to thinking that there must be *something* that connects all of the items that are grouped together using any sort of evaluative concept, such as KIND, and furthermore something (probably the same something) that distinguishes them from other things grouped together using different concepts, such as SELFISH.³ To preserve the idea that our divisions are non-capricious, what links certain items together has to be more than just the bare fact that they *are* grouped together by people, since this criterion is satisfied if people decide on only a whim that any randomly selected two actions are selfish, say. There needs to be something about the grouped items such that it is justifiable to group them.

The next stage is concerned with identifying what the ‘something’ is that connects all and only all the things deemed kind.⁴ This move is premised on the fact that both sides are attempting to make sense of our conceptual practices.⁵ Nonseparationists argue that neither of the two elements—the descriptive conceptual content used to **(p.83)** pick out stuff seen to fall under the concepts, and thin evaluative elements—taken separately and, hence, ‘disentangled’ could, on their own, explain such practices. Hence, it makes sense to think that the

‘something’ that connects all and only all the kind things must be (something we are justified in calling) the evaluative feature of kindness, *something* that we are picking out using a (genuine, unitary) concept.

Let us take each of these two elements in turn. A thin evaluative element, interpreted cognitivistically or noncognitively, will be insufficient to pick out all and only all the examples of an evaluative concept. We like or hoorah or think good many, many things and these thin positive responses are alone insufficient to distinguish the kind from the just, nor will they distinguish the kind from the sublime and the humorous. We have already had a taste, in Chapter Four, of how the battle will then go. Separationists can argue that the evaluative elements can be conceived to be less than minimal, and that we can thicken them up so as to enable us to distinguish as required. I have already given pause for thought here, as to whether really specific evaluative elements of the sort suggested by Gibbard exist widely, and can be used as he wishes to use them. Other separationists may wish to employ evaluative elements that are less than specific than the ones Gibbard suggests, but which are more specific than PRO and CON. Right now we can see that *even if* this sort of path is taken, a debate about shapelessness needs to happen. For at this point the evaluative element is less specific than the thick concept being analysed. So it stands to reason that some work will have to be done by some descriptive element, some *differentia*. Hence, there is a suspicion that this descriptive element, either in tandem with some (somewhat specific) evaluative aspect, or just on its own (with some minimal PRO or CON), will be insufficient to distinguish all of the evaluative concepts as required.

Thus, from now on I focus just on that descriptive element. It is at this point that the shapelessness hypothesis is introduced. We could specify that all kind actions have the same nonevaluative feature in common, and, hence, we can characterize kindness as simply being this feature. (And the same for all selfish actions, just actions, and so on.) But what would that feature or small number of features be? I suggest that it would very hard to find anything. For example, ‘having concern for others’ is too loose to do the desired work. If it is interpreted in a nonevaluative manner, then we have concern for others as part of all sorts of actions, not just kind ones: ones where we act bravely for people, ones where we cruelly torture people, and so on. Interpreting this idea in an evaluative manner is ruled out, obviously. But even then it is too loose and vague to do the required work.

And, anyway, if one thinks of the types of kind action there are, then a whole host of actions suggest themselves: opening doors for people, telling the truth, telling a ‘white’ lie, giving someone some sweets, refraining from giving sweets, and so on. Not only is there a wide variety of descriptive features that constitute various kind actions, many kind actions have no, or no evaluatively relevant, descriptive features in common. It seems that we will move quickly beyond the

idea of there being a single **(p.84)** descriptive thing common to all kind actions. Indeed, based on a quick list of the various kind actions there are, we might think that there is a fairly long, disjunctive list of descriptive features that might make an action kind. In short, we might have something like this: ‘something is kind iff it has features *a, b, c*; or features *b, c, d*; or features *e, f, g*; or...’, where the letters indicate things or features of things picked out using descriptive language alone.

And then we have the killer thought. Supposedly, our evaluative concepts are shapeless with respect to descriptive concepts and ideas. That is, if we were to try to find a pattern between all of the sets of descriptive features that constitute kindness, without trying to view things from an ethical or an evaluative point of view (or the correct ethical or evaluative point of view), we would not be able to see it. Why so? We will investigate that in full detail below, but the idea, briefly, is that the characterization I have just given in the paragraph above can never be completed. Notice the three dots at the end. An incomplete analysis is no analysis at all.

We can put these ideas slightly differently to develop a thought that will be the focus of my discussion.⁶ It is plausible to say that we could imagine a cruel situation that would turn into a kind situation with the addition of one or more features. To take a simple example, it might be cruel to refrain from sharing chocolate with a young child who desperately wants it, but it can be kind if, in addition, we are acting because there is some risk of her teeth rotting in the future. In more complicated situations it might be kinder to share, despite the risk of tooth rot, because, say, someone has hurt her feelings and she needs comforting. Or, it might be kind to offer some extra chocolate just to this one child, even if justice and fairness demand otherwise, because nothing else will stop the tears flowing and there is no possibility of any lessons being learned or of any bad behaviour becoming entrenched from such a short-lived action. We can easily imagine that situations can become more complex than this and that it is always possible that the addition of new features, or the subtraction of existing ones, will affect the situation’s ethical value. Or, in other words, the chocolate case and others like it motivate us to see that the variation of features relevant to the ethical value of the situations they constitute can continue indefinitely. The key thought is that KIND might *outrun* any descriptive characterization we could give of the actions deemed kind. I will refer to this throughout simply as ‘outrunning’.

Why is this bad for separationists? They wish to identify ‘something’ that connects all and only all the kind actions. Imagine we try to create and employ a list of disjunctive clauses of the type I have just given. This list will merely be, by definition, a summary of all the descriptive features of the actions judged to be kind up to that point. The test is whether comparison of the list alone with a new action—an action with a combination of descriptive features never before

encountered—will enable us **(p.85)** to say correctly whether the new action is or is not kind. If the above train of thought is correct, then we need not arrive at the correct answer if we employ this method. It seems there could always be a kind action that escapes being captured by our list, or there could always be an action that according to the list should be kind but which is cruel because it has new features, combined in a way that has not yet been encountered. (That is, perhaps it does have features *a*, *b*, and *c*, but it also has feature *x* that renders the action cruel. This extra information is not encoded in the list, and so we judge incorrectly.) These thoughts are often brought to life by imagining an ‘outsider’—an anthropologist, perhaps—trying to predict correctly the applications of evaluative concepts within an alien community. All she can see are descriptive features *a*, *b*, and *c* (and *x*). She has no appreciation of their evaluative significance and how the ‘sequence’ might continue with new clauses. I illustrate more thoughts using the outsider later.

Nonseparationists typically put these matters in a positive light and say—or said—that separationism’s failure is to be expected since our evaluative concepts reflect, or are an expression of, our interests and such things cannot be reduced to descriptive, nonevaluative terms, or codified using non-interest-laden terms, or similar.⁷ This thought will reappear in §5.6.

There is a lot to sort out here, even from this short introduction. I now turn to a number of notes we should consider in relation to the argument. In §5.5 I think about outrunning in detail.

5.4 Seven Notes

(a) Phrases such as ‘mastery of a concept’ are often bandied around in this debate. A number of ideas might be meant by this. I think we should be clear that, thus far, all that the debate is concerned with is whether a theorist can map the extension of evaluative concepts, and use this to guide future use.⁸ I will offer one reason to support setting matters up in this way in §5.5.⁹

(b) Note that I gave no thought as to what ‘levels of description’ are appropriate when considering the characterization of the descriptive features that are seen to compose the evaluative features of things, that is the descriptive characterization of the relevant evaluative concept. Are we supposed to imagine recharacterizations that include the movements of agents’ limbs? Can one include the agents’ intentions? Can the whole argument be run in terms of sub-atomic structures? Usually no thought is given to this question in the context of this argument. The shapelessness hypothesis is **(p.86)** presumed to be correct for any level of description we could choose. I will proceed on this assumption, although a fuller treatment than mine might consider if the level of description affects the plausibility of either side of this debate and why.

(c) Following on from (a) and (b) a more general point emerges. Earlier on, in characterizing the debate, I made out that the challenge for separationists is to provide the descriptive element and do so in a way that summarizes all of the aspects of all of the examples of the evaluative concept. That is, separationists are typically asked to provide a summary of the extension of the concept. But, we might ask, should we not be interested in the intension of the concept and associated term, that is the concept's meaning?¹⁰ Are we not interested in concepts that are either PRO or CON and which, in addition, are those concepts that mean such-and-such?¹¹

This is a good question to ask, which is rarely raised. Although it seems as if the move I have made is odd, if not just plain wrong, it is understandable in the context of this debate.

Note that separationists, as well as their opponents, often present matters that suggest 'extension' rather than 'intension'. The wording of Gibbard on LEWD and Elstein and Hurka on DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE suggest conditions that need to be fulfilled in order for the concept to apply, and these conditions are given in terms of aspects of things that fall under the concept. So it seems that in order to break down the meaning of a term or the content of a concept into more understandable parts, we can get a lower level of description and in doing that we are providing more specific descriptions of parts of the things that fall under the concept. This leads us from intension to extension generally and, in any instance, by concentrating on how the concept is 'extended' or applied to various things we can be led back to the meaning of the term: 'it is these types of thing that fall under the concept, because they have these aspects, and so we can list those aspects in order to get at the meaning of the term, and associated concept'.

We can challenge this move in a number of ways. I choose not to in this study, but instead make the following point. Separationists typically think that they will be able to provide short analyses of evaluative concepts, with few clauses; just think of the amount of text that the analyses of both Gibbard, and Elstein and Hurka take up. But the key anti-separationist idea, which we have yet to evaluate, is that any analysis, for any level of description, will not be that short. Gibbard's analysis of LEWD will not (**p.87**) cover all of the examples we want it to cover, perhaps. (Blackburn agrees on that.) Elstein and Hurka sneakily only put in three letters! And both analyses seem guilty of employing terms in their respective analyses that are not obviously descriptive. (Gibbard's WARRANTED comes to mind, here, which has to function as more than a simple PRO.) Once we look at some illustrative analyses, we will see that short versions will be suspicious. Just think of my 'having a concern for others' example from earlier. Similarly, to give one more example, saying that 'someone is wise if and only if they employ sufficient understanding and relevant knowledge' is nowhere near up to the task. For a start, being the sort of person who employs

UNDERSTANDING or who is KNOWLEDGEABLE seems to bring in evaluative content, if not employ straightforward synonyms. Also, this analysis, in pointing to the balance and interplay between two items, gives us only vague suggestions: what exactly is 'sufficient' and 'relevant' in this context anyway? Indeed, it is not obvious that these ideas are wholly descriptive.¹² I think we can imagine with confidence that the analyses given will rely on the extension of the concept, and that these extensions may well be quite long affairs.

Having justified that this is the battleground, nonseparationists argue that when we try to create extensions in descriptive terms we encounter the phenomenon of outrunning, thus showing separationism to be wrong.

(d) We should sort out the exact relationship between the disentangling argument and the shapelessness hypothesis. What I have said reflects, fairly I think, normal introductions of the debate. Yet, there is a large hole.¹³ The traditional way of construing things makes it seem obvious that the shapelessness hypothesis can be run for any evaluative concept, including thin ones. After all, just think of the many sorts of good or right action there can be. But if that is the case, then the connection **(p.88)** between it and the disentangling argument requires clarification. If thin concepts involve evaluative content alone, then there are no supposed parts to disentangle.¹⁴

Below I develop the discussion as traditionally implied, as I take it to be, and think of the shapelessness phenomenon as applying equally and strongly to thin and thick concepts. So to underline the point, I reckon that the chocolate example could be run for GOOD and there be the same philosophical outcome. But we need to adjust the traditional set up. If shapelessness is proved in the case of thick concepts, then we cannot disentangle any supposed evaluative and descriptive content. If it is proved in the case of thin concepts, then we can say that there is no disentangling argument to then be given, although we can talk of the shapelessness hypothesis leading to *an* argument (perhaps the shapelessness *argument*) and *a* conclusion that are both similar to that reached in the case of thick concepts, namely that thin concepts should be thought of along nonseparationist lines.

Going down this route adds an extra argumentative aspect. It might be that thick concepts are shapeless *only because* they have an element—a *separable* element—of them that is agreed on all sides to be shapeless, namely thin evaluative content or some thin element. That is, even if the shapelessness of thick concepts is shown, it is still an open question as to whether they can be disentangled. I will comment on this in §5.7. What should be emphasized, however, is that my prime interest here is whether the shapelessness hypothesis is correct in the first place. We need to keep an eye on how it relates to the disentangling argument, but that should not dominate.

If I had decided not to go down this route and argued instead that thick concepts are shapeless in a way different from their thin cousins, then in addition to having to argue for there being a distinction between the types of concept, I would have had to have found something in that distinction or elsewhere that supported the anti-separationist conclusion. I do not rule out such a strategy, despite the route I take, although I think that finding such a reason to identify thick concepts as different or unique with regards to the supposed phenomenon of shapelessness will be very hard.¹⁵

(e) At certain points I have shifted between concepts and features. I have occasionally talked of evaluative features that concepts pick out, for example. We are certainly interested in concepts, but are we interested in features?

Let me put the worry more plainly. The argument seemingly has the following broad structure. We note something about how humans use certain concepts. We argue that these concepts cannot be replaced by other concepts and there be the same extension. We then conclude that there must really exist corresponding features that **(p.89)** the original concepts pick out.¹⁶ This last move seems a little wild. Why think that anything about human concept use implies, let alone entails, anything ontological? Are nonseparationists, through employment of the disentangling argument, committed to a type of evaluative realism?

I agree that this move seems less than innocent. Indeed, it is clear that people who have argued for the hypothesis, and those who have referenced it, have been opaque in their language. There are two things we could do. First, having noted the worry we could be strict with ourselves and previous writers. Perhaps all that we have is an argument for a nonseparationist cognitivism and we should ignore any reference to features and properties. We should sharply distinguish cognitivism—concerned with whether concepts have the possibility of referring (successfully) beyond themselves and ‘encoding’ knowledge—from realism, and acknowledge that even if we have established that our evaluative concepts are unitary, we leave it open as to whether they refer to anything, thus making an evaluative error theory an obvious and live possibility. This option certainly has its attractions, not least because cognitivism and realism *are* different. But why would writers have slipped into talking about features and properties every so often? Perhaps because there is a tendency to think that evaluative concepts’ legitimacy as referring concepts makes sense only if one thinks that they can be and generally are used successfully. This is not to say that an evaluative error theory is not still a serious contender. But it is true that many feel awkward about it, not least because it aims to show as false such a widespread and seemingly essential way of thinking and speaking. Indeed, one might say that evaluative thinking has so many important aspects to it that it seems implausible to think that all of them are dodgy such that the whole is bogus.¹⁷

This leads, then, to a second way of viewing what we have. Perhaps we are being too harsh here. The conclusion of the overall argument might be better expressed as saying that our use of evaluative concepts strongly implies that we must take seriously the idea that corresponding evaluative features are, in some sense of the term, real. This need not commit us to the claim that evaluative features are as ontologically serious and proper (whatever this means) as, say, the features and properties of a supposed final scientific theory. Rather, it invites us to explore further the question of what 'real' means in this sense, and how we can make sense of the idea of real evaluative features that are real from a perspective of human evaluators; of how we can explain that there is something about the world to which we are responding rather than our evaluative categorizations being something that are **(p.90)** wholly a product of our 'gilding and staining'.¹⁸ Obviously, even if the shapelessness hypothesis works, there is still much work to do in this vein, and important work at that as failure on this point will probably undermine the whole hypothesis. I will expand on these comments in my final chapter. All I wish to state is that we should not reject the argument out of hand simply because it seems to magic, by mere sophistry, some ontological rabbit out of a conceptual hat. What we can reject out of hand are those that talk exclusively of 'features' and 'properties' and who think the argument is clearly and uncontroversially an argument that establishes a metaphysical conclusion.

(f) What is the precise aim when using the shapelessness hypothesis? Here is a distinction between two readings of it. Should nonseparationists be trying to prove, from their philosophical armchairs, that outrunning does and will occur and, hence, that separationism is false? Call this the *strong version* of the shapelessness hypothesis. Or should nonseparationists claim merely that there is a reason or some reasons to think that when we carry out the necessary empirical investigation of our concepts, we will find the shapelessness hypothesis to be correct and, hence, we have reason to doubt the truth of separationism? Call this the *moderate version*. In other words, our distinction is this: when we empirically investigate how evaluative concepts work, either we will confirm what we have already shown to be true, or we will confirm what we suspected to be true.

I think neither version is correct, but later I argue, more positively, that a third option has a chance of working. In brief, the first two readings of the hypothesis assume that empirical work will definitely show that evaluative concepts are shapeless with respect to descriptive concepts. The third reading denies this: we will probably never show anything definitive in this regard. A better characterization of the hypothesis states that we are justified in supposing, in any case and after some empirical work, that the evaluative could be shapeless with respect to the descriptive. I argue that this gives some support to

nonseparationism, although probably not definitive, knock-down support. I provide more detail later.

Whether or not one thinks these two readings are defensible, it is worth noting that both the strong and the moderate versions can be found in the core writings on this topic. For example, in McDowell (1979), §4 McDowell seems to imply that the argument shows conclusively that noncognitivism, that is separationism, cannot be correct.¹⁹ His supporters are similarly bold.²⁰ On the other hand, in **(p.91)** McDowell (1981), p. 144, he thinks that the argument makes it only “reasonable to be sceptical about” separationism (that is, noncognitivism). I think this phrase, and other such phrases in the rest of the section, are meant as they stand and are not academic ‘hedgies’. Similarly, Wiggins, in Wiggins (1993b), §§IV–VII, thinks that he has not shown conclusively that Peter Railton’s naturalistic, reductionist realism is impossible, but only that we should be sceptical about its chances.

For completeness’s sake, let me state that I have not found my third option in the literature.

One last point. In introducing the argument we might wish to say things such as ‘according to nonseparationists, there *will be no* descriptive match to the evaluative concept’ or ‘any such recharacterization *will fail*’. But, after reflection on these two readings, we might say that before we do any empirical work we should state that ‘there *will almost certainly be no* descriptive match...’ and ‘any such recharacterization *will almost certainly fail*’. Or, once we have considered my third reading, we might say something else.

This links to my last point in this section, which provides us with one reason for initially preferring the moderate version.

(g) Should we construe the shapelessness hypothesis as an a priori claim or an a posteriori claim?²¹ This can be a misleading question. Clearly the claim cannot be a wholly a priori one. We cannot plausibly claim what the relationship between evaluative concepts and supposed descriptive counterparts is likely to be, let alone show what it is, through theoretical reflection alone on the nature of evaluative concepts. We have to draw on our experience of how evaluative concepts are used in order to support the hypothesis, no matter whether it is construed moderately or strongly. But saying that the claim is an a posteriori one might mislead. We might think that we can prove the claim to be true simply by going through all of the evaluative concepts that are used, or at least a central stock of them, and showing that the phenomenon of outrunning is common. Clearly this would be difficult to do to **(p.92)** say the least: there are a lot of such concepts and outrunning seems to be something that will involve an awful lot of investigation.²²

What seems to be misleading here is the assumption that we have only empirical types of justification matched with a desire to prove the strong version to be true. But nonseparationists have not gone in for such methods and, given the difficulty of proving the strong claim, even by empirical methods, this seems right. What they typically do instead is offer some examples drawn from real-life experience, such as my chocolate example, and from that reflect on the nature of evaluative concepts generally. Clearly this sort of method will not provide enough evidence for the strong version, and if we did think that this is what nonseparationists are trying to do it would be easy to dismiss their argument.

Assuming that they are not wholly misguided in what they are attempting to do, perhaps we should construe matters along the following lines: from description of limited experience, and reflection drawn from such experience about the nature of evaluative concepts, nonseparationists are aiming to show that it is likely that, if thorough empirical work were done, we would find that no, or no central, evaluative concept could be recharacterized in the manner suggested. This is clearly an expression of the moderate version.

These seven notes touch on some deep issues—levels of description, ontology, the distinction between a priori and a posteriori investigation—and, while making some positive points, for other points I have done no more than advertise them as worries and bracket them to the side. With such a subtle, sometimes obscure, wide-ranging argument this is inevitable. I hope that the reader forgives what bracketing there has been; this is necessary so that I can set up the discussion and assess the hypothesis directly. (I also hope the reader forgives the length of these notes.) With that said, then, let us now return to the main flow of my discussion. How might a more detailed exposition of outrunning proceed?

5.5 Outrunning

One idea to bear in mind as we consider outrunning is that proponents of the shapelessness hypothesis have never based their claim on any supposed epistemic inadequacy of humans. The focus is on the nature of evaluative concepts. Something about them, no matter how intelligent and imaginative humans are, is such that they cannot be captured correctly in descriptive ways by us, or are unlikely to be so.

The (supposed) phenomenon of outrunning is something that occurs because there is a gap between the extension of an evaluative concept and the extension entailed, or encoded by, some descriptive recharacterization of that concept (**p. 93**) given in some list. What is required is some consideration of how large those extensions will be.

Imagine, for argument's sake, that there is only a finite number of ways, be it five or 20,005, in which actions get to be kind. Could outrunning then occur?

Assuming that we do not have recourse to the epistemic inadequacy of humans,

and assuming that we are dealing with humans who have a fair amount of time and are diligent, there seems no reason in principle to imagine that we could not produce a list that captured the finite number of ways in which actions get to be kind, even if that was a very large number. Thus, in order for the claim of outrunning to be an interesting challenge we have to assume that there is an infinite number of ways in which actions get to be kind. We can assume, for now, that evaluative concepts are infinitely complex in this way. I will examine this claim later.

Let us think instead about the list of descriptive clauses. Of course, it is highly plausible to claim that the lists that everyday humans can produce will have only a finite number of clauses, and we cannot ignore this. If KIND, say, is infinitely complex, we will not be able to capture it. But, again, this might well indicate only humans' epistemic limitations. Is there anything else to say here?

Imagine, again for argument's sake, that by some cosmic fluke humans as they are could produce lists with an infinite number of clauses. How they do so is crucial. We should recall that we are not interested solely in the descriptive capturing of evaluative concepts, but in whether this can be done 'from a nonevaluative point of view'. To illustrate, let us return to our outsider and introduce another figure, the insider. The insider is, by definition, a typical and mature user of some evaluative concept and so, in our imagined scenario, she would have the ability to convert her understanding of some evaluative concept into a complete capturing of descriptively characterized clauses. This should not unduly trouble nonseparationists. For a start, separation of thin evaluative element from descriptive feature in individual cases may be common.²³ When I judge something to be kind, I can nearly always focus on a feature or features that make it so. For example, I can say why someone's action was kind by pointing out that she gave up her seat on the bus for someone else who needed it, and approve of her action because it contains—or simply is—this. Separation in individual instances is no worry here; the whole debate is about whether we can make such a theoretical separation for the whole of the concept. Clearly the insider is converting her already existing evaluative understanding into descriptive terms, just as I can do in the bus case. The only difference between the insider as I have just imagined her and myself is that she has the fluky ability to produce lists with an infinite number of clauses. She can make the individual separations for the whole of the concept and offer a complete translation of the concept into descriptive language, something that is certainly beyond me.

(p.94) We now need to ask whether an outsider—who can produce lists with an infinite number of clauses—can do the same as the insider. We should tread carefully. In order for the issue to remain clear we need an outsider to remain an outsider. We cannot have an outsider doing what anthropologists typically do in real life. She cannot try to imagine what it is like for an insider, to pretend to be her, to draw on her own stock of evaluative concepts to understand the concepts

of the insider's community, and so on. If we do not keep to that then we lose the point of the debate. A nonseparationist could rightly protest that our scenario does not show that the evaluative is shapeless with respect to the descriptive. What it is far more likely to show, it seems, is that if the 'outsider' (as we might now label her) has seemingly been successful in understanding the insider, then her evaluative concepts were probably not so different from the insider's in the first place and she is turning herself into an insider.²⁴

We can keep to this injunction, then, but this need not mean that the outsider is at a complete loss. Perhaps she meets a friendly insider, follows her round for a while and observes how she uses a certain concept. The outsider notes down the various descriptive features of actions that the insider categorizes using the concept under investigation. Presumably, however, this will happen only for a while, and the outsider will have a list with only a finite number of clauses. The question is, given that she has the ability to produce an infinite number of clauses if needs be, will she be able to extend this list and capture the rest of the concept descriptively?

With the ground prepared we can now see that there is some chink left for the separationist to exploit that normally goes unnoticed, although I think that, in the end, it offers little support. It seems that our outsider could produce a full and correct descriptively characterized list, but only through pure chance. That is, we put our outsider on the spot and she magically produces the correct infinite list by some stab in the dark.

However, this logical possibility provides only limited support. It seems highly unlikely that such a list could be produced with no prior evaluative understanding, even ignoring the fact that we are asking for the production of an infinite list. I worry what the status of this unlikelihood is given that we are dealing with an infinite number of kind actions. (My intuitions go fuzzy here regarding probabilities and infinitude, as I imagine other people's do.) But I am content to leave this response aside. At the least, separationism's truth looks debatable if it has only this possibility on which to fall back.

A nonseparationist might object. Why allow separationists this chink to exploit? After all, it seems crazy to imagine that such a list could be produced. But I think that after a moment's reflection our nonseparationist would realize that the outsider could strike lucky. However, she might continue and wonder, more generally, whether this **(p.95)** present discussion has been set up correctly. This lucky outsider would not understand kindness, so why think that she could produce such a list? She has not 'mastered the concept' after all. Considering this worry gives me a chance to return to §5.4(a). It is unfair for nonseparationists to state that when such a list has been produced by an outsider, separationism will be vindicated only if she is able to explain why the various clauses appear on the list rather than merely report that the presence of

such features justifies a certain judgement; that she is able to say why the presence of features *a*, *b*, and *c* make an action kind, while the addition of feature *x* renders the action cruel; that she is able to explain why the action with features *a*, *b*, and *c* is a canonical example of its type; and so on. Being able to comment in such a way seems to be part of what it is to have evaluative understanding of the concept at issue. But there is no reason to expect that the outsider will be able to comment in this way, since the outsider is being challenged to do something without evaluative understanding. Why think that she can produce the list with no understanding and expect that, from such a position, evaluative understanding over and above the ability to capture the concept's extension will then follow? How is full evaluative understanding to be magicked from none? This sets the bar too high for separationists, surely. This is why the debate should be restricted to discussion of the extension of concepts. That is enough of a challenge anyway.

Something deeper might motivate separationists. So far we have been discussing disjunctive lists. Some nonseparationists might question whether we can seriously think that such things legitimately represent KIND. I have little sympathy with this move.²⁵ As we have just seen, even if we do not normally think of evaluative concepts in these terms, it seems possible for an *insider* to produce such a disjunctive list, be it finitely or infinitely long. That is as legitimate as it needs to be for our purposes.

I am being hard on nonseparationists here. Even if we acknowledge that our outsider can *have* and *produce* a correct list, if she does produce a correct list she does so only by good fortune. The worries that I imagine some nonseparationists airing show us starkly how lucky the outsider has to be. After her travels with the friendly insider have finished, the remaining number of ways in which actions get to be kind have to be made up by the outsider, or they have to pop into her head, or similar. It is, I hope, clear both that this is possible, but also how extremely unlikely it is. Indeed, additionally, it seems that the real worry is with descriptions popping into the outsider's head, and it is not so important whether the list that has to be produced is infinite or just a very, very long finite one.

The debate could proceed from this point with us discussing other things about the points of view of the insider and the outsider, and whether this can be used to nonseparationism's advantage. I will do this later. For now, let me recap this section. We have shown that in order for the claim of outrunning to convince, we need to **(p.96)** imagine that kindness comes in an infinite variety of forms. If we do that, we need to ask whether someone could capture it nonevaluatively. Even if someone has the ability to produce infinitely long lists, she can do so 'normally' only if she is an insider. If she is an outsider, she can do so only by pure chance, and this gives little support to those that oppose the shapelessness

hypothesis. We now have to ask whether we have reason for thinking that supposed evaluative concepts are infinitely complex.

5.6 A Prejudice

Let me comment briefly on my phrasing, for clarification. I have talked of evaluative concepts being ‘infinitely complex’ and, more strictly, of there being an ‘infinite number of ways in which actions get to be of a certain evaluative sort’. This is in contrast to there being an ‘infinite number of actions of a certain evaluative sort’. There might be an infinite number of kind actions, but the nonevaluative feature or features that are crucial to their being kind might come in only a limited number of forms. In which case, there might be no reason in principle why humans could not capture what it is for something to be kind in nonevaluative ways. What needs to be established is not just that there are, or are likely to be, an infinite number of kind *tokens*, but that there are, or are likely to be, an infinite number of kind *types*.

What reason have we for believing that outrunning will occur? Let us start with the strong version of the shapelessness hypothesis. Recall that, in this case, the conclusion nonseparationists are aiming to show is:

- (A) Evaluative concepts cannot be recharacterized in descriptive terms unless one has full evaluative understanding of them.

Recall that (A) was earlier supported, in §5.3, by the positive light in which nonseparationists saw things:

- (B) Evaluative concepts are essentially ‘human-laden’ (in a special way): they reflect our interests which receive expression in ways that can be codified only in evaluative ways.²⁶

But what reason have we for believing (B), and (A) for that matter? At this point in our discussion all we have is (C):

- (C) There is an infinite number of ways in which actions get to be a certain evaluative way. For example, there is an infinite number of ways in which actions get to be kind.

(p.97) But to what can we point to support this claim? I can think of nothing except the chocolate example and similar cases. Recall that we supposedly conclude that the value of the action could always alter following the addition of new features.²⁷ But this assumption seems motivated *only because* we assume that the evaluative cannot be recharacterized in wholly descriptive terms, or that ethical concepts are essentially human-laden and reflect our interests that are expressed in uncodifiable ways. Indeed, we are assuming that evaluative concepts are special concepts where outrunning occurs, as opposed to other concepts—such as ‘is a line’—where we assume this does not happen, since we

assume that there are only a finite number of types of way to exemplify the concept, even if there are infinite tokens.²⁸ All that we have standing against our accepting that there is only a finite number of ways in which actions get to be kind is some pessimism about strategies involving descriptive recharacterizations. If this is true, then nonseparationists who employ the shapelessness hypothesis are guilty of begging the question.

That is one way of expressing that there is an unjust prejudice at work. A different way is this. Instead of accusing nonseparationists of smuggling their conclusion into the premises, we might worry that (A), (B), and (C) are merely different ways of phrasing *the same* idea and, hence, none can be used in support of the other two. In the terms of the present debate, what it is for something to be noncharacterizable in wholly descriptive terms is just for it to be essentially human-laden. Similarly, 'nonrecharacterizability' is just an easier way of saying 'there is an infinite number of ways that an action can get to be kind, say, and hence it cannot be represented in descriptive terms'.

So the strong version of the shapelessness hypothesis is really only an expression of the (controversial) initial anti-separationist hunch. We certainly do not have an *argument* here. Talk of outsiders trying to understand the value of various actions involving the giving or withholding of chocolate might make the anti-separationist hunch more vivid, but does nothing to strengthen it or add to it.

Well, that is the strong version of the hypothesis. What of the moderate version? We might think it is in better condition. Claiming only that evaluative concepts are *likely* to resist recharacterization in descriptive terms commits us to less than the strong version; we could be wrong about the definite claim, but the balance of reasons still favours us being right in advance of doing some investigation. If the moderate version seems good, then the onus shifts to separationists, which is no mean feat.

However, this is not quite right. Our rejection of the strong version exposed the fact that our evidence for believing it was only the initial anti-separationist hunch. **(p.98)** It is not as if we have acquired only a little evidence aside from belief in nonseparationism, and concluded that it is too little to base so strong a claim on. It is that we have no evidence beyond the anti-separationist hunch. With that in mind, the moderate version is in no better condition. Of course, the weaker claim allows for the possibility that evaluative concepts might be captured from a wholly descriptive perspective. But we are still, then, saying that the phenomenon of shapelessness is more likely than not. However, what justifies this? Only again some thumbnail sketches of various evaluative concepts whose characterization is infected with anti-separationist bias.

Some might think I am being harsh on the employment of the shapelessness hypothesis here, and specifically the moderate version. After all, many might feel the force of the anti-separationist hunch and they might think the thumbnail sketches fairly true to life. (I do, as it happens.) But some have intuitions that go the other way. Opponents might instead feel the force of the thought that scientific work over the past centuries has explained various phenomena in all manner of ways. Parts of scientific investigation embody the hope that one can explain phenomena that seem united as a type only at some higher level of description and which are disparate and seemingly unfathomably complex at some lower level of description. And, relatedly, science has explained the unified nature of phenomena at lower levels that at higher levels seemed disparate, and will continue to do so. Even if nonseparationists cannot convince their opponents, they might need to offer more to convince neutrals who, as yet, might be caught between both intuitions.

As I have said, the hypothesis can be rehabilitated a little. I am being hard here since I want a defence of the anti-separationist view to have a better chance of standing up to critical scrutiny. Shifting simply to the moderate claim invites the worries that (i) we still have only prejudiced reasons for believing the supposed likelihood; and (ii) one could easily reject the claim based on opposing prejudices. Nonseparationists who wish to use the shapelessness hypothesis against separationism need to think a little harder.

5.7 A Third Option

There is a third way we can understand the aims that lie behind the shapelessness hypothesis.

What the strong and moderate versions of the shapelessness hypothesis share is that both make claims about what we will discover when we investigate how evaluative concepts work. We can claim from our limited experience either that something is or is likely to be the case. What they both leave unquestioned is the epistemic position of the people doing the investigative work and what they will and should think when a lot of that work is done.

So what if we consider that? Consider the outsider again. After she has finished following the insider around she has a finite list of clauses. We then challenge her to **(p.99)** predict how an insider will view a sample of new actions that we will present. We can imagine that the sample will be a mix of actions that have many of the same features of previously judged examples, as well as those that have very few. Based on previous thoughts we can accept that there is a possibility that the outsider will get every case correct. But how confident will she be of doing so and how confident will we be in her abilities?

The answer depends in large part on how bright she is. If she is dim and slow-witted, then she might stumble along attempting to make her judgements, and sometimes get it right and sometimes get it wrong. She might not reflect on this

and simply shrug her shoulders when she goes wrong. If she is brighter, then her experience might teach her that she is not doing as well as the insider and that this change of scenario has exposed her as being less than competent with the concepts under investigation. If she is brighter still she might reflect on her experiences and imagine cases such as the chocolate example. (Or perhaps she is simply knowledgeable and has read about shapelessness.) We might imagine that seeds of doubt are sown in her mind. She might, first, doubt that she will ever be able to capture the concept under investigation descriptively. But, second, on reflection she might revise that for the (better) doubt that she could capture the concept in this way, but that she will never be able to tell if she has done so. She will always wonder if a configuration of nonevaluative features is possible that does not appear on her list but which is such as to be deemed kind, say. I think it plausible to say that our outsider's confidence in her ability with the evaluative concepts under investigation will diminish, possibly significantly. And I take it that this will reflect our confidence in her abilities, given our previous thought about how likely it is for her to get things right every time.

What position are we in when we judge? If we follow through this train of thought we can imagine that seeds of doubt are sown in our minds also. We have been introduced to the shapelessness hypothesis, made vivid by some examples. We might think, 'Well, that could happen to me and the concepts that I use, and any new ones that I try to understand. Perhaps I won't be able to latch onto an exhaustive descriptive pattern. Or [the better doubt] even if I can, perhaps I won't know that I have.' It seems that if this train of thought is correct, we should start to be unsure about our concept use and lose confidence in our abilities. A different way of putting the idea is this. Before we started to doubt we might have considered ourselves to be insiders rather than outsiders, that is if we could have accepted this distinction without buying into all of the doubts. But now, after reflection, we might not be so sure whether we are insiders or outsiders. Insiders are people that pretty much understand their concepts.²⁹ They can be confident that their extensions are pretty much consistent. Even if they get some individual examples wrong, they can be **(p.100)** confident that they will understand why that is, after time and reflection anyway. They might question their use of a concept on an occasion; they might debate with others and change their mind. But this is from a base of being confident with the concept and related evaluative concepts overall. Yet perhaps we are not like this. Perhaps we are more like outsiders. Perhaps we might come across some new cases and fail by some margin to get things right and, further, be ignorant of our failings and fail to realize that someone could challenge what we think.

But this train of thought seems pessimistic. An interesting contrast is provided by the fact that many of us *are* confident in how we use our evaluative concepts. Certainly we might get things wrong every so often but, as I remarked just now, that is consistent with being an insider. We do not normally think of ourselves as dim or reckless when it comes to our use of evaluative concepts. We can

participate in everyday evaluative discourse and can argue and reveal ideas in ways that people find agreeable and unsurprising. Indeed, furthermore, we normally think that we are able to understand other people and their initially alien concepts. Anthropological research is based on such confidence.

It could be that we are being dim or reckless. Perhaps we adopt an air of confidence because we prefer to be optimistic, even if this has no basis in reality. But that seems a little implausible. At the very least, I could imagine a neutral agreeing with what has been said so far.

Why is this bad for separationists? If we have confidence in our concept use, then it shows that we have found some pattern of items in the world that we categorize in the same way, and it shows that we are happy that we have, pretty much, immediate access to the (rough and ready) contours of the pattern, such that we could consistently extend it to new cases. If the shapelessness hypothesis has any power, then the thought will be that for evaluative concepts this pattern will figure in our deliberations strangely if we think of it, on reflection, as a descriptive, nonevaluative pattern, as separationists suppose. We may not have latched onto it, and even if we do, we will not know that we know it; we cannot conceptualize it as 'the pattern of kindness' if separationism is correct. So how can our everyday confidence in our concept use persist? Why is our confidence justified? This looks like a curious state of affairs, and suggests a strange state of mind.

This contrasts with the nonseparationist thought that the pattern is evaluative. We might not be able to articulate the whole pattern in nonevaluative ways, but we seem to be fairly confident in our application and understanding of kindness, say, as the pattern of kindness. Or, in other words, the 'something' that links all and only all the kind things is the feature of kindness, or the fact that they are kind, or some other, similar phrasing. We are able to latch onto this pattern with none of the bother that separationism seems to entail.

Hence, we can provide a mirror claim to that given for the strong and moderate versions. The precise aim of the shapelessness hypothesis is to claim that the evaluative *could* be shapeless with respect to the descriptive. The difference between **(p.101)** this and the moderate claim, with its 'likely' or 'strongly likely', is that we will never be able to know whether shapelessness is a real phenomenon, whereas the moderate version says that it is likely that empirical work will show the hypothesis to be correct. This epistemic point should make us question whether our natural, everyday confidence in our concepts is undermined by the separationist account of evaluative concept use. Cases such as the chocolate example are not designed to justify something being the case, either to us now or once we have done the necessary empirical work. Rather, they get us to think about whether we could ever know that the necessary

empirical work was complete and whether we could show conclusively that appropriate descriptive characterizations were forthcoming.

How might separationists challenge this? They could argue, first, that we are deceiving ourselves and that our confidence is misplaced. This is a possibility, although condemning most people like this does not seem an attractive strategy. Besides, there are other more interesting responses, (a)–(d).

(a) One obvious response—perhaps *the* obvious response—is to agree that we are confident in our use of evaluative concepts and, hence, agree that this is probably because we are picking out some pattern. However, separationists can challenge and ask why this cannot be a descriptive pattern. The idea from above is that we cannot capture and articulate such things. But, goes the response, the existence of descriptive patterns and the articulation of them are separate issues; it might be that we can articulate such patterns only feebly at most.³⁰ So it might be that separationists cannot prove that there are suitable descriptive characterizations available, but it might also be that nonseparationists cannot prove that there are not.

Can nonseparationists respond? It is true that they cannot conclusively prove that such descriptive characterizations are not forthcoming. But nonseparationists could adopt a piecemeal strategy and attempt to convince neutrals. They could give a battery of examples such as the chocolate case. Then they could alter the descriptive features of each a few times to show how the applicable evaluative concepts might change. By going through this process they cannot show that it will happen every time, mainly because of the nature of the debate: ‘infinite or finite?’ But they can show that it can happen a fair amount, in each family of cases. They could then move the discussion on. It is certainly true that they cannot prove that this process will not stop. Yet, given that examples have been continued some way, then perhaps the onus is on separationists to show why we should continue to believe what they say. If we have an awful lot of continuation, why not think that the default is to imagine it will continue unless proved otherwise? In effect, what nonseparationists do is shift our argument so that they are not trying to show that separationism is wrong, but to argue that the onus is on separationists to prove otherwise. This might be enough to convince a neutral to back **(p.102)** nonseparationism, at least as a ‘safety-first’ option. Perhaps this onus-shifting move is the best way of articulating the force of examples such as the chocolate case.

But it must be said that this is no knock-out argument, even if separationism does not emerge victorious either. (If nothing else, my discussion shows this *contra* all commentators on the debate.) This line of thought may do little to persuade separationists; I am not sure how neutrals will respond. That alone should incline us to look elsewhere for a way to defend nonseparationism and query separationism, although there are a few other thoughts I have let slip in

this chapter that require questioning anyway. And, of course, it affects what we say in the overall discussion of how important this strategy is in showing separationism to be incorrect.

Before we get ahead of ourselves, though, what other separationist responses might there be?

(b) A separationist might wonder about the chocolate case and other examples.³¹ I have provided only a snapshot of how this case might go. We could argue about how long that case could continue, but let us imagine it could continue a lot. More interestingly, a separationist might ask whether the new examples would be that surprising, or rare, or cause us to rethink what we have been doing previously with the concept. After all, that seems to be where these examples bite. In short, the challenge is to think whether we could summarize an everyday evaluative concept descriptively based on some examples, and from that be confident that nothing too surprising will then emerge. If so, our confidence will be enhanced.

The response to this is to recall some previous thoughts. Think back to the outsider. She merely notes down the descriptive information that has gone before. Her future judgements are a function of this. It is no part of this noting down that she is able to discern which features of a case justify the application of the relevant concept, unless the insider tells her. Similarly, given my set up, she will be at a loss to notice that a feature pops up more times than others or, at least, she will be at a loss to explain what, if any, evaluative significance is carried by this statistical fact. With that in mind we can say that she will be surprised by a lot of things that to us, as everyday users, would be unsurprising. For example, some insiders start to talk about kindness with reference to chocolate being shared between children. But then they start talking about teeth and pain. And then they start to talk about tears and upset children. And then the insiders are not so bothered that the children are upset because the thing that is causing the upset is trivial (which is then further specified). But now the insiders become more curious because they learn that the thing causing the upset is not so trivial because of some further thing (again, to be specified). And so on. It could be that at no stage are we, as everyday users, surprised. But the outsider might well be. And, I think, this reveals a theme of my discussion.

(p.103) I have tried to be fair-minded when dealing with separationism, particularly on the issue of ‘mastery of a concept’. The bar cannot be set too high. But here we reveal the limits of the separationist interpretation. Simply because separationists’ ambitions for the outsider are just for her to follow and articulate the extensions of concepts, it seems unlikely that such an outsider will be confident that she can continue on her own, since the features themselves will not reveal any pattern. This could be what the whole debate turns on: the rival conceptions of what an evaluative concept is; when push comes to shove:

something *sui generis* or something that can be characterized in other terms. According to the former conception of evaluative concepts, many new features and situations will not be surprising. But, in accordance with the latter, every new situation, no matter how trivially different it seems to us as readers of this book, has the potential to be surprising to users. Or, in other words, the challenge to separationists is that separationism characterizes us all as being outsiders.

Of course, we start as philosophers by thinking about what our everyday use is like. Perhaps the idea of shapelessness might not get off the ground unless we found that new situations came along that surprised us with unexpected features. But I reckon that is fairly common. It is certainly common when we are first learning to use a concept: one's first case of a cruel action that is also kind can be a revelation. Similarly, working out exactly what sorts and mixtures of furniture, clothing, and musical style are kitsch or classy can be surprising. But this phenomenon applies even to mature users. Such changes in concepts (or, rather, conceptions) do not, I think, mean that we should be low in confidence in our use of evaluative concepts. Indeed, an awareness that you might not have got all of it right and have room to grow can add to your confidence. The key is that one is recognizing patterns in the instances that one is picking out using an evaluative concept, one can manipulate it and can connect it with other concepts, and so on. None of this is going on in the mind of an outsider.

(c) Recall that I said, in Chapter Two, that it was never part of the classic presentation of the disentangling argument that separationism should reflect our phenomenology. Separationists might argue that our rejection of their position is driven by worries about their theory not reflecting everyday phenomenology. After all, we have a case where we supposedly feel confident in our everyday evaluative concepts that their theory says we should not have. But, separationists might claim, we should not dismiss a theoretical treatment of a phenomenon if that treatment does not accurately reflect the phenomenology of it.

I think that that final claim is right. A mismatch between theory and phenomenology does not and should not spell the end of a theory straightaway.³² However, what sort of mismatch do we have here? It is not just that the phenomenology is not accurately reflected in the theory. We have the theory and phenomenology standing **(p.104)** opposed: the theory says that we are picking up on a descriptive pattern when we categorize evaluatively, while the phenomenology not only is, supposedly, free of such patterns, but one could never be sure that one had captured such a pattern even if one had. Even then we might say that in some cases this does not dissuade some philosophers from adopting certain theoretical positions. (Certain approaches to inductive knowledge come to my mind here.) But we might want to say that if a separationist raises the issue of phenomenology, she should be prepared to

argue that there are clear benefits, and even clear benefits overall, for adopting her position despite the drastic mismatch between theory and phenomenology. Yet, although it may have some *prima facie* merits, we have already seen, in the previous chapter, reasons to worry about separationism, and in the next chapter we will encounter some more. So, a defence based on short-circuiting the supposed phenomenological motivation for our worry is suspect. And this is so particularly because the opposing position, nonseparationism reflects the phenomenology pretty well and continues to do so after theoretical reflection on the precise matters discussed in this chapter.

(d) One last discussion in this section introduces a more complicated response. I promised earlier I would address how this argument worked against complex separationism. The choice of label reflects something that seems to be an advantage here. We have a more complex analysis of evaluative concepts, with some evaluative element being used within some general descriptive element. This is advantageous because we are supposing that evaluative concepts are complex and so we may be able to capture them better. But this is a false hope. The supposition on the third reading of the shapelessness hypothesis (and similarly with the other two come to that) is that there is some reason to think that the evaluative is so complex that it cannot be separated into component parts. Any attempt to make a separationist analysis more complex will do nothing to stop the scepticism that we have now, finally, captured the concept. And note that when it comes to details, Elstein and Hurka's analysis of DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE included just one role for some evaluative element to affect the concepts' extensions, and INTEGRITY included just two. This is hardly ramping up the complexity of the analysis very much.

In a similar vein we can close off an earlier avenue. I do not see how making the thin evaluative element thicker than a PRO or a CON will help fend off this challenge. We are thinking about nonseparable or 'uncapturable' complexity. Even if we make the evaluative element more specific (yet not so specific as to make us worry that we have a thick concept introduced on the sly), I am unconvinced that this will do the required work. There will still be an *assumed* gap between the materials and the extension of the evaluative concept, and that is all that is needed to generate the worry I have voiced.

But in returning to this position we can see a different challenge emerge. Recall that in §5.4(d) we reflected on the relationship between shapelessness and disentangling. Perhaps thick concepts are shapeless, but what drives the shapelessness of the thick is only the shapelessness of the thin and, so, thick concepts can still be **(p.105)** disentangled.³³ This seems to be an option only for cognitivist-separationists: their noncognitivist cousins will not want to say that thin concepts, such as PRO or GOOD are shapeless. I take it, crucially and to repeat, that what has been said about kindness goes for goodness: the

chocolate case and many others will work in the same way for the thin and the thick.

So what of cognitivist-separationists? They might be happy with PRO and GOOD being shapeless (or, rather, 'appearing to us to be shapeless because we can never be sure that we have captured their shape nonethically'), and happy for (disentangled) thick concepts to be shapeless but only in virtue of their thin, evaluative element. This might be a victory of sorts for the McDowell-Wiggins nonseparationists, but at most a half-victory, and almost certainly a moral defeat.

A response to this brings us back to earlier ideas. We need some reason to think that thin concepts should be conceived as being conceptually prior at this point, and we saw that even if separationists were not definitely wrong about this matter, there is a large question mark hanging over their position. We can extend things a little here also. The specific position under consideration right now is the idea that thick concepts are shapeless only because thin elements within them are shapeless. What is the motivation for that view? If we think that the chocolate case will carry on changing such that we will carry on switching our judgements about its variations from good to bad and back again, then why not think that the cause of the changing in the case of the thick is the same as with the thin, rather than the cause being only the thin itself? All of the features mentioned in relation to the chocolate case—dental health, learned behaviour, being upset, features that are trivial (perhaps the upset is because the chocolate bar is the child's favourite), features that are not (it is the child's birthday; the bar reminds them of a relative they hardly see)—seem to be intimately connected with kindness in this example in a way that is the same as in the case of goodness. Although not a cast-iron, unquestionable point, it seems telling that when we justify something as kind or cruel or brave or mean we look and consider the features themselves in a way that is unmediated by whether these features are good- or bad-making. Is it so obvious that the thin should be assumed to be conceptually prior? There may be no further way of expressing this point. But maintaining the opposite view—that only the thin is shapeless—seems to me to maintain a theory for its own sake, despite the evidence to the contrary.

I think there are too many question marks hanging over this envisaged retreat. If we were to accept that the thin is shapeless, it seems justifiable to accept that the thick is too. Of course, we could deny that the thin is shapeless. Or, as a reminder, we could deny that we will ever be certain that the thin was not shapeless. But the chocolate case and others like it, married with the argument earlier in this section, seem to favour our holding out against this, at least as a safety-first option. The onus is on **(p.106)** those that oppose the nonseparationism of evaluative and descriptive content to provide clear and unambiguous arguments that either show that evaluative concepts, thin and thick, are shapely with respect to the descriptive, and that we can know when

we have a correct analysis; or show that the thin is shapeless, while the thick is not.

There are worries with this proposed retreat, then, such that we can confidently dismiss this avenue.³⁴ But we should not forget my earlier cautiousness. The disentangling argument, with its employment of the shapelessness hypothesis, does not deliver a knock-out blow to separationism. This position might still be correct. The most we can say, even if we accept that no separationist counter that I have considered works, is that we can never know if separationism is correct and that this scepticism does not chime with the state of mind that separationism suggests.

I am inclined to think that there is a tension between our normal state of mind and that suggested by separationism. Yet, I am prepared to think that others will disagree. Furthermore, there is lack of directness about this argument: it is a suspicion, but separationists might push the point that I earlier sidelined and argue that we should not be as confident as we are. Or, if we insist on such a confidence, then that simply shows that there *is* some nonevaluative pattern to our evaluative categorizations.

Aside from these points, we can now see that the two strategies we have thought about—the one that concentrates on the *genus* and conceptual priority, and the one that concentrates on the shapelessness of the *differentia*—work together, and not just because we have two parts of the *genus-species* model in play. They work also because at various points, as we have just seen, we are left questioning whether, for example, the thin *genus* really is prior. Furthermore, then, separationism is left with question marks hanging over it, even if there is no decisive victory against it.

5.8 Conclusion and a Pause

In this chapter we have dissected in lengthy detail one of the key arguments, if not *the* key argument, that has been raised by nonseparationists against separationists over the past thirty or so years. The claim is that the evaluative is shapeless with respect to the descriptive; no descriptive-only analysis of evaluative terms and concepts will work. Putting it in the terms I have favoured in this book, there is a grave suspicion that the *differentia* cannot be specified such that we can conclude that thick concepts are *species* concepts.

I have raised doubts about the shapelessness hypothesis and disentangling argument. I do not think it works as it has normally been given. A third way of understanding it has merit but, as an overall move against separationism, both this strategy and the first may leave us wanting more. There is no point in my discussion (**p.107**) where we can say with confidence that separationists should be worried and that nonseparationists can claim victory. We have not really got

to the heart of some of the debate against separationism. It feels as if there is more to uncover about thick concepts.

The argument of this chapter revolves around the idea that we cannot reduce the evaluative to the descriptive. The strategy employed takes these two types of thing and shows they are different. But that sort of strategy assumes that we have two distinct types of thing in the first place. As I expressed in Chapter One, one of the reasons thick concepts were originally a focus of such interest was that they held out a hope for some thinkers that it was not so clear that the evaluative and the descriptive were different, or if there were clear examples in each camp, it was not so clear where the one domain stopped and the other started. In the next chapter we think about that idea.

Before that, a pause. I have said that I wanted to understand the terrain and get under the skin of separationism in the first few chapters. Much of my tone may have been negative. However, we have uncovered a number of positive ideas. Here I list the major ones as they will help ease us into Chapter Six.

(i) In Chapter Three I started to make the case for evaluative flexibility. We saw that it may seem odd to postulate a large number of separate concepts, such as ELEGANT-PRO and ELEGANT-CON, when we can just have one concept, ELEGANT, that holds within itself more than one 'pointed evaluation'. In Chapter Six I return to this idea and show how it connects with nonseparationism.

(ii) In Chapter Four I argued for the idea that concepts that are typically labelled as thin can come in a range of thicknesses, or at least can be more or less specific than one another. PRO is different from GOOD and RIGHT. GOOD is different from ETHICALLY GOOD and AESTHETICALLY GOOD, not just in content but in specificity. Yet it is not unreasonable to think of all of these examples as thin or as 'simply' evaluative. If so, then it seems as if it is reasonable also to think that we should investigate more the notion of what it is for something to be evaluative, given that all of these examples are treated as evaluative concepts.

(iii) Although suggestive only, in Chapter Four we saw that 'no prioritarianism' might be at least as viable and plausible a position as both thin and thick prioritarianism.

(iv) Finally, we have just seen that nonseparationists may make no convincing headway, ultimately, if they argue only that evaluative and descriptive conceptual content are intertwined in some way that suggest they cannot then be separated. The emphasis here is wrong. Nonseparationists need to focus on questioning the assumption of there being a split or separation in the first place. If they do this they open up a different way of defending their view and of characterizing the evaluative. **(p.108)**

Notes:

⁽¹⁾ This chapter is a shortened version of Kirchin (2010a); that article is around 21,000 words. For those interested in a comparison, in this presentation the central argument remains at the same length, but I do not have as much textual exegesis of the papers by Blackburn and McDowell, I have deleted some notes, and I have deleted material at the end of the article on reductionism. However, this chapter, for obvious reasons, situates the debate more explicitly in the wider debate about thick concepts; I comment on the relative importance of the shapelessness debate in that debate. Despite these differences, I have not changed my philosophical views significantly since writing the article, although I do emphasize here that in the final analysis the argument is not wholly convincing. That is because, in this book and unlike in the article, I am able to contrast it with a different argumentative strategy, namely that which comes in Chapter Six.

McDowell's main discussions of disentangling and shapelessness are in McDowell (1979), (1981), and (1987). Blackburn responds to McDowell in Blackburn (1981) and (1998), chapter 4 §§2–5. Wiggins discusses the hypothesis in Wiggins (1993a) and (1993b), which respond to Railton (1993a) and (1993b). My original motivation for writing on this topic was to make sense of what is, frankly, a difficult idea that receives little detailed exposure. For example, the following mention or briefly summarize the shapelessness hypothesis, and all accept it more or less without question: Dancy (1993), pp. 84–6; Hurley (1989), p. 13; McNaughton (1988), pp. 60–2; and McNaughton and Rawling (2003), pp. 24–5, to which Lovibond (2003) is a reply (Lovibond discusses shapelessness at pp. 6–8). Two notable detailed discussions and criticisms of the shapelessness hypothesis are Lang (2001) and Miller (2013), §10.1.

⁽²⁾ Recall an earlier footnote in Chapter Three, note 2: a *differentia* may be united with either PRO or CON, thus creating two different concepts. Again, although I speak of a unique *differentia*, I have this corrective in mind throughout.

⁽³⁾ As Blackburn (1981), pp. 180–1 agrees. Notice that in order to concentrate on the shapelessness hypothesis we assume that concept use is consistent across individuals at different times and, if need be, across communities.

⁽⁴⁾ Talk of 'the something' might suggest a particular, isolatable thing, although we will see that nonseparationists should not think in this way at all.

⁽⁵⁾ Despite their claim that ethical judgements are expressive of some noncognitive attitude, most modern noncognitivists still wish to accommodate ethical value, truth, rationality, and the like. This is motivated partly by their aversion to ethical relativism. They could confine themselves to claiming that ethical judgements function as expressions of attitude and not care about

'consistency' in any sense. They would then not face any objection motivated by disentangling and/or shapelessness, but their position would be suspect precisely because they had not tried to accommodate this notion. This point extends from ethics and noncognitivism to evaluative elements and separationism.

(⁶) This is a common strategy. See McDowell (1979), §4 and Wiggins (1993b), §§IV–VII. There is no concrete example in these passages, but the idea I present is clearly expressed.

(⁷) For example, see Wiggins (1993b), §§IV–VII, where Wiggins speaks of the 'interest in the value V', by which he means some human interest; and see McDowell (1981), especially §2, where this idea is part of the whole point of the piece.

(⁸) See McDowell (1981), p. 145; McDowell uses 'mastery' in just this way.

(⁹) I discuss the phrase more and defend my whole argumentative set-up in more detail in Kirchin (2010a), §6.

(¹⁰) Some may shy away from speaking of a concept's meaning, preferring to say that terms alone can have meaning. I hope my slide here does not offend too greatly. The overall point is unaffected by it.

(¹¹) For those who do not quite get the importance of this, we can distinguish, it seems, quite sharply between a term's (or associated concept's) meaning, and the things to which it applies. We can know the one, or believe we know the one, without knowing or articulating the other. So, for example, I can identify and apply FURNITURE to various items of furniture, possibly without being able to supply a clear and exact definition of 'furniture'. Similarly, I can have a clear and confident idea of how to apply SCOUT without knowing, or being aware of, all of the scouts and being able to list all of their various features. But, beyond that sharpness, which surely *can be* and *is* exemplified by a number of examples, we may get some grey area. In some cases we may be able to get at the intension only by reflecting on the extension.

(¹²) This point relies on my view about the evaluative, on which I elaborate in Chapter Six.

(¹³) An exception, which explains things neatly, is Roberts (2011). (Roberts also cites Dancy (2006), p. 128. Dancy points out that McDowell's shapelessness point may apply beyond evaluative and normative concepts to any 'resultant' concept which applies in virtue of the application of other concepts.) Roberts focuses on McDowell. She agrees that he was not writing about the thick specifically, but argues that there is a way of developing his thoughts so that there is a second sense of shapelessness that may (initially) apply only to thick

concepts. (The first sense is that which I develop in the main text.) In short, she imagines us sharply distinguishing the content of a concept from the things in virtue of which it applies, in the manner I suggested earlier. There may be many types of thing that are kind, but what KIND is may not encapsulate all (descriptive) aspects of all those things, or even those aspects in virtue of which the term 'kind' applies. Indeed, continues Roberts, KIND may be such that it does not encapsulate any non-evaluative descriptive content. So, even when we apply it in *one* case, there may be no way to disentangle the evaluative from the descriptive: all the 'descriptive' content is infused with the evaluative, if one continues to talk in this *faux* language of two distinct contents. But, as she admits, crucially this sense of shapelessness applies also to thin concepts, for the content of GOOD, say, seems likely to differ from the descriptive aspects of the good things in virtue of which the label applies. We are, therefore, back to trying to find some difference such that the hypothesis applies only to thick concepts—which does not seem to be achievable—and back to separating the disentangling argument from the shapelessness hypothesis as I do in the main text.

(¹⁴) I have suggested that some thin concepts are less thin than others. But (i) separationists may disagree and, anyway (ii) the point in the main text at least applies to PRO and CON.

(¹⁵) See again note 13. Even Roberts admits that her second sense of shapelessness applies equally to thin and thick concepts.

(¹⁶) McDowell frequently moves between concepts and features in McDowell (1981) for instance, although the features in question are often 'theoretically massaged' with the thought that they are, broadly, response-dependent in some fashion. Wiggins, although more careful in his writings, also moves between 'subjective responses' and associated properties in Wiggins (1998), essay V.

(¹⁷) See Kirchin (2010b) for an argument along these lines.

(¹⁸) See McDowell (1983) for a discussion of this topic. McDowell is responding to Williams' thoughts, located in Williams (1978) for example, about the 'absolute conception of reality'.

(¹⁹) One referee for OUP suggested that my third option *is* expressed by McDowell, perhaps with this phrase in mind. I disagree, although in the broad narrative of this book this exegetical disagreement is secondary. The phrase I quote comes from the following context: we have not yet conducted any empirical work and so we can be sceptical now, but we assume that such work can be done and that the truth will out when we do this. As we will see, my third option is different from this.

(²⁰) Sometimes it is hard to discern to what a writer is committed if they have not made explicit the distinction that taxes us, in this case that between the moderate and strong versions. However, despite their qualifications (such as “it may be the case that”), I reckon that Dancy (1993), p. 76 and McNaughton (1988), p. 61 can be read as siding with the strong claim. McNaughton and Rawling (2003), pp. 24–5 are bolder. They assume, for argument’s sake, that noncognitivism is defeated by the ‘pattern problem’ and that there exist normative facts.

(²¹) This sub-section is directed against Miller (2013), §10.1, esp. pp. 245–9. Miller goes wrong in failing to distinguish between moderate and strong versions, although it is clear that he thinks that nonseparationists (that is, cognitivists) put forward a strong version. He dismisses the shapelessness hypothesis because he thinks that McDowell—in advocating the strong version—has wrong targets. On Miller’s construal those that argue using the shapelessness hypothesis will be successful only if we assume that separationists (that is, noncognitivists) claim that by conceptual a priori reflection alone one can prove that descriptive recharacterizations of evaluative concepts are possible. But, as he points out, separationists do not claim that. They claim that empirical work and substantive evaluative theorizing will reveal that evaluative concepts can be recharacterized in this way. And no a priori argument will work against that: we need empirical research to counter it. But if we introduce the moderate version, we can see that nonseparationists’ aims can be different and their position less easy to dismiss. Thus, I go into more detail than Miller does about the ensuing debate between the two sides.

(²²) I draw out exactly how much in the following section.

(²³) However, my line of argument in Chapter Six casts doubt on what we can class as a descriptive feature and a descriptive concept.

(²⁴) As advertised, I investigate the possibility of anthropology in Chapter Eight.

(²⁵) At least in the context of this debate. In Chapter Six I think about what it is to characterize using only descriptive, nonevaluative language.

(²⁶) I include the caveat in parentheses since arguably all concepts are ‘human-laden’ in the sense of reflecting our interests. The claim relevant here is that the human-laden nature of evaluative concepts results in uncodifiability with respect to the descriptive.

(²⁷) Which, of course, would result in slightly different actions each time. We are concerned with the value of the general action type of giving chocolate.

(²⁸) This comparative judgement is here for illumination of the evaluative case. We could challenge the claim about ‘is a line’ and worry about rule-following

generally. That does not strictly affect the claims about evaluative case: is there or is there not uncodifiability here?

(²⁹) Even if we cannot articulate the necessary and sufficient criteria of application of a concept, or even get close, we might be able to apply the concept well enough, and manipulate it and reason about it in individual cases.

(³⁰) See Blackburn (1981), p. 167. I comment on this in Kirchin (2010a), pp. 11–12.

(³¹) Here I respond to a nice point from Daniel Elstein.

(³²) See Kirchin (2003a) where I argue that ‘phenomenological arguments’ *alone* in metaethics cut no ice. Moral phenomenology is useful only when allied to certain metaphysical, epistemological (etc.) arguments.

(³³) Thanks to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to comment on this idea.

(³⁴) In Kirchin (2010a), p. 23 I discuss this avenue in a little more detail.

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