

Do Thick Concepts Provide Reasons for Action?

An Empirical Study

Judith Martens & Pascale Willemsen

Suppose a good friend says the following thing to you: “What you did yesterday was very rude”. How would you feel upon hearing this statement? What do you believe your friend intended to communicate? You probably understand that your friend considered your behaviour offensive, hurtful, or disrespectful. You might further understand that your friend disapproves of your behaviour and considers it wrong for being offensive, hurtful, or disrespectful. And you might even understand that, because of this disapproval, your friend wants you to behave differently in the future. In contrast, suppose that your friend had instead uttered the following sentence: “What you did was bad”. While you can infer her disapproval towards your behaviour, you might have problems to see why exactly your behaviour was disapproved of. “Bad” does not provide such information. Saying that someone is rude, on the other hand, conveys both evaluative and descriptive information as to why or in virtue of what the behaviour is evaluated in this way. Terms and concepts which are a unity of evaluation and description are called *thick ethical terms and concepts* (Eklund 2011, Väyrynen 2019), such as “rude”, “friendly”, “honest”, “manipulative”, “cruel”, or “compassionate”. Other evaluative terms and concepts which merely evaluate, such as “bad”, “good”, “permissible”, “right”, “wrong”, are called *thin ethical terms and concepts*. Both types of concepts stand in opposition to *descriptive terms and concepts* whose function it is to merely provide information on what the world is like, yet not to evaluate, such as “round”, “rectangular”, “blonde”, “Australian”, etc.

In this talk, we present the results of two experimental studies on the use of thick concepts in ordinary language and on how they relate to reasons for actions. More specifically, we investigate whether statements containing thick terms provide reasons for action and motivate speakers and addressees of a moral statement to change their behaviour or stick to it. The idea that thick concepts are action-guiding goes back to Bernard Williams, and many philosophers have followed his reasoning. While this is a quite plausible and seldomly disputed assumption, no empirical evidence has been offered in its support. *In this talk we present empirical evidence on whether laypeople understand statements containing thick terms as motivating, reason-giving, and morally evaluative.* In addition, we also present data on an even more fundamental, yet never empirically tested assumption, namely that thin concepts are action-guiding as well. Many philosophers believe that thick concepts gain their action-guiding potential from the evaluation they share with thin concepts. The experimental design we developed helps us test this hypothesis as well. *Second, we present evidence on whether there is a difference between thick concepts and thin concepts to the extent to which they are action-guiding.* Assuming that philosophers are correct in claiming that both thin and thick concepts are action-guiding, it is still an open and never empirically investigated question whether thin or thick concepts are more action-guiding. Similarly, it is still an open question whether positively or negatively evaluating concepts provide stronger reasons for actions. Such evidence would yet go a long way in understanding evaluative language and their role in moral psychology.