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On Eklund on Foot

Debbie Roberts

Introduction

According to Eklund (2011, 2017), Foot's view of thick concepts is both intuitively appealing and incorrect. Attending to where and how her reasoning goes wrong, he argues, can generate an account of thick concepts that overcomes two puzzles: the puzzle of 'seeming sufficiency' and the puzzle of 'emptiness'.

There is some ambiguity, to my mind, concerning exactly what Foot's view is. This has to do with how she understands the notion of the descriptive. If she means 'descriptive' to be equivalent to 'non-normative' (or 'non-evaluative') then I think Eklund has presented her view correctly, but it is puzzling that he finds it intuitively appealing, and he misidentifies where her reasoning goes wrong. If she has a more complicated notion of the descriptive in mind, then Eklund fails to present her view correctly.

I proceed as follows: I outline Eklund's interpretation of Foot in §1. In §2 I explain why I think there is ambiguity in her use of the notion of the descriptive, ambiguity which allows for two different interpretations of her view, and I explain what these two interpretations are. The second interpretation gets us closer to what is, in my view, the correct account of the thick. Nonetheless, it still falls short. I explain why this is so in §3. In §4 I put forward an account of thick concepts that avoids the shortfall, and I show how this view solves Eklund's puzzles of seeming sufficiency and of emptiness.

1. Eklund on Foot¹

Eklund begins by noting that sometimes thick concepts are used in arguments that aim to show that normative sentences can be analytically entailed by descriptive sentences, contrary to the Humean 'no ought from an is' dictum. This is famously what Foot aims to show in her 1958 "Moral Arguments". Foot presents this argument against what she calls "breakdown theory" in ethics. This is the view Foot attributes to non-cognitivists – she has Hare and Stevenson in mind. According to breakdown theory, despite the fact that moral judgments seem in need of justification, for they are judgments for which reasons must be given, it is always an open question whether someone ought, rationally, to accept those reasons, unlike in the epistemic case. On this view, two people may consider all the same facts and one come to the conclusion that 'x is good' and the other 'x is bad', and both conclusions can be equally well founded.

Against this, Eklund notes, Foot presents the example of "rude", pointing out that RUDE is an evaluative concept (normative, in Eklund's broad sense), but it is a concept that can only be used where certain descriptions apply. It is clear, Eklund goes on, that Foot holds that the satisfaction of the relevant descriptive conditions is not merely necessary but is sufficient for the applicability of "rude". According to Foot, "[t]he right account of the situation in which it is correct to say that a piece of behaviour is rude is, I think, that this kind of behaviour causes offense by indicating lack of respect".² Foot labels these descriptive conditions O, and asks what the

¹ Eklund's discussion of Foot occurs in both his 2011 paper and his 2017. The latter is based on the former. I focus mainly on the latter discussion Eklund (2017), p. 171-176.

² Foot (1958), p. 102.

relation is between the assertion that O is fulfilled and the statement that a certain piece of behaviour is rude – R:

Can someone who accepts the proposition O (that this kind of offense is caused) deny the proposition R (that the behaviour is rude)? I should have thought that this was just what he could not do, for if he says that it is not rude, we shall stare, and ask him what sort of behaviour is rude, and what is he to say?³

It is Foot's view that as a conceptual matter, anything that satisfies O falls under the concept RUDE. Since the concept is normative, we can conclude that if something falls under it then it is bad and is to be disapproved of. This allows Foot's argument against the breakdown theory in ethics. It also, according to Eklund, provides a way to distinguish thick and thin concepts: if a concept is thick then there is some substantive descriptive concept from which that thick concept analytically follows.

While Eklund thinks that there is something intuitively attractive about Foot's outlook, he also thinks that it must be rejected, and that it must be rejected because of the existence of objectionable thick concepts. I come to this argument shortly.

Eklund's official assessment of Foot's view in the main text is puzzling. In a footnote to his exposition of Foot's view he says, in passing, something which suggests that Foot's view, at least on the standard interpretation, is (1) not intuitively attractive and (2) that the reason we should reject it occurs at an earlier stage, before we even get to problems with objectionable thick concepts:

Even unclarity to the side, one may reasonably doubt whether Foot here has found an analytically sufficient purely descriptive condition for the applicability of "rude". Here is one worry. Does "causes offense by indicating lack of respect" mean *actually causes offense* or *would cause justifiable offense*? If the latter, then the condition is not descriptive. If the former, it fails to be extensionally adequate.⁴

This assessment is both correct, in my view, and damns Foot's entire argument.⁵ To be extensionally adequate, Foot needs O to be normative. Thus, she has failed to give us an argument which shows that normative sentences can be analytically entailed by descriptive (non-normative) sentences, and her argument against the breakdown theory fails.

I come back to this issue below. For the moment, though, we need to consider Eklund's argument concerning objectionable thick concepts. These are concepts that somehow misevaluate, presupposing or embodying values that ought not really to be endorsed. A common example, taken from Gibbard (1992) is that of LEWD. Another plausible example is CHASTE. Eklund notes that the existence of objectionable thick concepts presents problems both for Foot's argument against breakdown theory and for the account of thick concepts that it implies. If a thick concept C is thick because there is some substantive descriptive concept D such that 'x is C' follows analytically from 'x is D' then anyone who accepts that the relevant descriptive condition is satisfied for LEWD or CHASTE is thereby analytically committed to holding that x is lewd/chaste and that x is pro tanto bad. This is, as Eklund points out, an unacceptable conclusion. Finding LEWD and CHASTE objectionable is precisely to hold that "x is pro tanto bad" does not follow at all from whatever the relevant description condition is.

³ Foot (1958), p.103

⁴ Eklund (2017), p. 172

⁵ If this is the correct interpretation of her argument.

So, Eklund concludes, Foot's argument must go wrong. However, he thinks that this generates a puzzle, the puzzle of "seeming sufficiency":

There is something highly intuitive about what Foot is saying when she insists that sometimes the satisfaction of purely descriptive conditions is sufficient for thick concepts to apply. How can this be accommodated, even while, in the light of the problem of objectionable thick concepts, we cannot actually accept either Foot's argument against the breakdown theory or the corresponding account of what distinguishes thick concepts from thin ones?⁶

Foot's argument also goes wrong, Eklund holds, in what it does say about the phenomenon of objectionable thick concepts. For she allows that it is possible for someone to refuse to accept that an action is rude despite having admitted that it was O. This is made possible, she holds, for:

Calling an action "rude" is using a concept which a man might want to reject, rejecting the whole practice of praising and blaming embodied in such terms as "polite" and "rude".... The only recourse of the man who refused to accept the things which counted in favour of a moral proposition as given him reason to do certain things or take up a particular attitude would be to leave the moral discussion and abjure altogether the use of moral terms.⁷

Eklund claims this is a lack of nerve on Foot's part, a lack of nerve that opens the door to a "second-order" breakdown theory. Moreover:

If there is cause for lack of nerve, Foot's concession doesn't go far enough. If "x is D" ...really analytically entails "x is (pro tanto) bad" via analytically entailing "x is C" ... my refusal to use the relevant thick concepts only amounts to my refusing to give expression to certain truths – that from the fact that x is D it follows that x is (pro tanto) bad. The *facts* don't change!⁸

This points to another problem, what Eklund calls the puzzle of emptiness.⁹ One might read Foot's concession above as the claim that someone who finds the whole practice of etiquette objectionable holds that POLITE and RUDE are empty. Eklund argues that the claim that objectionable thick concepts are empty, that there is really no such thing as lewdness or chastity, is both intuitively implausible and unable to explain all the relevant data. In defence of the charge that such a claim would be intuitively implausible, Eklund invites us to think of behaviours that would be regarded as paradigmatically lewd or chaste. Is such behaviour not lewd or chaste?

[T]ake someone who is a paradigm case of chastity. Is that person not chaste? Of course, if one finds CHASTE objectionable then one will be reluctant to *actually call* any behaviour, no matter how paradigmatically chaste, "chaste". But that is a different matter from the question of whether claims to the effect that such behaviours are chaste would be *true*.¹⁰

As far as explaining all the relevant data is concerned, Eklund notes that the supposed emptiness of objectionable thick concepts would not explain why those who find them objectionable would be reluctant to use them even in embedded contexts.

⁶ Eklund (2017), p. 173.

⁷ Foot (1958), p. 510.

⁸ Eklund (2017), p. 174.

⁹ Eklund (2011) p. 36-7. He stops short of calling it a puzzle in his 2017 discussion.

¹⁰ Eklund (2017), p. 175.

This is, however, a puzzle, for it is intuitively plausible, Eklund holds, that for any positive (negative) thick concept that it is somehow *part of the content* of the concept that if the thick concepts applies then the thing in question is pro tanto good (bad). So, if one holds that the concept in question misevaluates one will be inclined to hold that it is empty.

Eklund uses these puzzles, of sufficiency and emptiness, to motivate his own account of thick concepts, which makes crucial use of *semantic analyticity* and the fact that there can be untrue semantic analyticities. Foot's view is essentially, that "x is O" analytically entails "x is rude" and, further, that "x is rude" analytically entails "x is pro tanto bad". Eklund's move is simply to replace 'analytically entails' with 'semantically analytically entails', which gives him the following account:

For any thick concept, C:

- (i) There is some substantive descriptive concept D such that "x is D" semantically analytically entails "x is C"
- (ii) If C is positive (negative), "x is C" semantically analytically entails "x is (pro tanto) good" ("x is pro tanto bad").¹¹

On this view, these entailments are "somehow part of the content of C". It is not the view that the entailments are actually the case. This solves both puzzles. The worry about sufficiency was exactly that on the one hand it is intuitively plausible that thick concepts have sufficient descriptive conditions and on the other that this could not be the case because of the phenomenon of thick concepts: when the descriptive condition is satisfied it is manifestly not the case that the behaviour in question is therefore pro tanto good (bad). Semantic analyticity allows us to have our cake and eat it too – we can explain why it is intuitively plausible that is x is D, x is C and pro tanto good (bad) while at the same time it being possible that x is objectionable and so not actually pro tanto good (bad). And the emptiness issue goes away too. We can happily say that there can be false but semantically analytic entailments associated with a thick concept. But since the reference of an expression is what comes closest and close enough to satisfying the meaning constitutive for the expression, so long as there is some non-empty referent that is close enough – D perhaps – then objectionable thick concepts can be non-empty.¹²

2. *Two notions of "the descriptive"*

I now want to take a step back from the intricacies of thick concepts and return to the context of Foot's discussion of "rude". There is in Foot's article an ambiguity which allows for two different interpretations of her argument. Now, my main concern here is not to determine what Foot actually intended. It may be that the standard interpretation is correct on that front. But the ambiguity at least points towards a different view, and one which can help us make sense of the thick.

The standard interpretation of what is going on in "Moral Arguments", as presented above, is that Foot takes herself to show that descriptive, non-evaluative premises can analytically entail evaluative conclusions. In this standard interpretation the very notions of the descriptive and evaluative are not ever in question. However, this argument is typically presented context-free.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 176.

¹² Ibid.

Once we attend to that context we see that some of what Foot says suggests that the terms “descriptive” and “evaluative” as she uses them in the “rude” argument are being used *as her opponents would use them* and that perhaps she doesn’t herself endorse their understandings of these terms.

On the standard interpretation, Foot’s argument is vulnerable to the objection that Eklund mentions in passing in his footnote. She hasn’t identified a descriptive sufficient condition for the application of rude. But on the new interpretation just suggested it is not obvious that this objection applies.

What are the remarks which suggest this other interpretation? Towards the beginning of her article, and before the “rude” argument, Foot has a discussion of naturalist and non-naturalist views in ethics. She includes non-cognitivists in the non-naturalist camp for she takes them to be continuing Moore’s project, which, in turn, she understands as a form of Hume’s claim concerning the impossibility of deducing “ought” from “is”. Foot agrees with Frankena and Prior that Moore’s project fails because it degenerates into a truism. Moore aimed to show that goodness was a non-natural property, not to be defined in terms of natural properties, but a natural property tended to become “one not identical with goodness”, and the naturalistic fallacy that of identifying goodness with “some other thing”.¹³

Where the non-cognitivists come in is in attempting to escape the truism by identifying some independent factor, a reason why all “naturalistic” definitions failed. This was provided by the theory that value, especially moral, terms have a special function (e.g., expressing and inducing attitudes, commending, prescribing) and that such terms cannot be defined by words whose meaning is merely “descriptive”. This immediately threatens to fall into a similar trap as Moore’s argument does, for the problem becomes how to define the “descriptive”:

This discovery tended to appear greater than it was, because it looked as though the two categories of fact and value had been identified separately and found never to coincide, whereas actually the factual or the descriptive was defined by exclusion from the realm of value. In the ordinary sense of “descriptive” the word “good” is a descriptive word and in the ordinary sense of “fact” we say that it is a fact about so and so that he is a good man, so that the words must be used in a special sense in moral philosophy. But a special philosopher’s sense of the word has never, so far as I know, been explained except by contrasting value and fact. A word or sentence seems to be called “descriptive” on account of the fact that it is *not* emotive, does *not* commend, does *not* entail an imperative, and so on according to the theory involved.¹⁴

However, Foot then accepts, for the sake of argument that the non-cognitivist really has identified some characteristic, *f*, essential to evaluative words. It follows that nothing without that feature can be identical to an evaluation. But, she then asks, what follows from this about the relation between premise and conclusion in an argument designed to support an evaluation? For all that has been shown, she says, it might be possible for a premise, or set of premises, that is not *f* to entail a conclusion which is *f*. And this is precisely what she sets about showing using the example of “rude” which, by the non-cognitivist’s lights, counts as an evaluative word.

All the above suggests to me that it is possible that Foot is operating here with conceptions of the “evaluative” and of the “descriptive” which she attributes to the non-cognitivist. The “rude”

¹³ Foot (1958) p. 505.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 506

argument is supposed to show that a descriptive premise can entail an evaluative conclusion *on the non-cognitivist's conception of the evaluative and the descriptive*. This does not mean that Foot herself necessarily endorses the way in which the evaluative and the descriptive have been carved up here.

The right account of the situation in which it is correct to say that a piece of behaviour is rude is, according to Foot, that this kind of behaviour causes offence by indicating lack of respect. On the current interpretation, what she assumes is that Stevenson and Hare must endorse that "causes offence by indicating lack of respect" is descriptive and descriptive in their sense (i.e., non-evaluative because lacking in feature *f*). It does not follow, however, that Foot herself has to accept that it is descriptive in the sense of being non-evaluative according to her own conception of the evaluative. Foot is not a non-cognitivist.

It is important to note what she says immediately after offering the sufficient descriptive condition for the application of "rude":

Sometimes it is merely conventional that such behaviour does indicate lack of respect (e.g., when a man keeps his hat on in someone else's house); sometimes the behaviour is naturally disrespectful as when one man pushes another out of the way.

These remarks suggest to me that Foot's answer to Eklund's question "Does 'causes offense by indicating lack of respect' mean *actually causes offense* or *would cause justifiable offense*?" would be the latter. It is only behaviour that does actually *indicate lack of respect* that is cause for offense and so rude. And, given her argument, she must at least be assuming that Stevenson and Hare will accept that 'indicates lack of respect' is descriptive (non-evaluative). And, indeed, the general characterisation of this view, that thick terms involve a non-evaluative description to which the special feature *f* has been attached is how non-cognitivists at the time understood thick terms.

It is less clear though that Foot herself understands 'indicates lack of respect' to be descriptive in the non-evaluative sense. As well as the context already pointed to, where she is calling into question the non-cognitivist's notion of the descriptive and then explicitly saying she is assuming their view for the sake of the "rude" argument, there are two further reasons for thinking she may not be.

The first concerns her discussion which follows the "rude" argument on the interconnectedness of certain concepts. The point of considering the "rude" example was to show that there can be the strictest rules of evidence (i.e., analytic entailment) even where an evaluative conclusion is concerned. Foot understands the non-cognitivist views she is targeting to be offering "private enterprise theories of meaning" for moral terms. Against this she takes herself to have shown, using "rude", that one cannot invent one's own rules for the applicability of evaluative terms. What counts as evidence is not a personal decision. Anyone who uses moral terms must abide by the rules for their use, including rules about what shall count as evidence for or against the moral judgment concerned. Moreover, for all that has yet been shown to the contrary these rules could be entailment rules. The considerations which count as evidence in the moral case, according to Foot, she expresses in terms of evaluative concepts (my italics):

I do not know what could be meant by saying that it was someone's duty to do something unless there was an attempt to show why it *mattered* if this sort of thing was not done. How can questions such as "what does it *matter*?", "what *harm* does it do?", "what *advantage* is there in...?", "why is it *important*?" be set aside here? ...How exactly

the concepts of *harm, advantage, benefit, importance*, etc., are related to the different moral concepts, such as rightness, obligation, goodness, duty and virtue, is something that needs the most patient investigation, but that they are so related seem undeniable, and it follows that a man cannot make his own personal decisions about the considerations which are to count as evidence in morals.”¹⁵

This reveals, in my view, that Foot takes the criteria for the use of moral terms to be evaluative criteria. Now, one might think that even if this is the case, this marks a difference between her discussion of “rude” and her discussion of moral terms. But I’m not sure that this is so. Just as she is careful to point out that there are many ways one might indicate lack of respect (but that we do not decide for ourselves what indicates lack of respect) she notes that we don’t get to decide for ourselves what counts as harm, benefit, advantage etc.¹⁶ She is possibly anticipating here that the non-cognitivist may disavow “indicating lack of respect”, “harm”, “benefit” etc., as being descriptive and so pointing out that the private enterprise theory of meaning is not applicable for these terms either.

This brings me to the second reason for thinking that she may not herself hold her opponents’ notion of the descriptive as non-evaluative. This reason concerns something mentioned by Bernard Williams in a footnote to one of his discussions of thick concepts in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Williams has been discussing the non-cognitivist view that thick terms involve a non-evaluative description to which the special feature *f* has been attached. Against this, he makes point that if this were the case, an outsider would be able to pick up the extension of the term without even imaginatively engaging with its evaluative point, and that this is implausible. In the footnote, Williams notes that this idea is basically Wittgensteinian, and one he first heard expressed by Foot and Murdoch in a seminar in the 1950s.

I think that this gives us some evidence for thinking that Foot would not have endorsed the view that “rude” should be understood as analysable into a non-evaluative descriptive component and an evaluative component. To be sure, she does think that Hare and Stevenson must understand it that way, and that they must hold that “causes offense by indicating lack of respect” is non-evaluative. Perhaps she thinks that this is their only option for terms of this sort, given their view of the evaluative and the descriptive.¹⁷

3. *Analytically sufficient descriptive conditions*

I take the above to be sufficient to show that there is ambiguity in Foot’s notion of the descriptive. On the standard interpretation, Foot’s argument against the breakdown theory and the implicit account of thick terms both fail because, as Eklund says in her footnote, she has failed to give us a non-evaluative analytically sufficient descriptive condition for the application of “rude”. But what about the new interpretation? What does this mean for her argument, and for the account of thick terms?

As far as the argument against the breakdown theory is concerned, the non-cognitivist can take the route Foot anticipates (see above) and deny that ‘causes offence by indicating lack of respect’ is descriptive. That is, the non-cognitivist should hold that the concept of respect and

¹⁵ Foot (1958), p. 510.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 511.

¹⁷ If this is so she is wrong about this. Non-cognitivists could endorse a more complex account of thick terms, they can allow that there is further evaluation embedded in the descriptive component for example. Cf. Hurka and Elstein (2009).

what indicates a lack thereof is evaluative and so too to be given the non-cognitivist treatment. The same approach should be taken for the specifically moral thick terms, like “kind”, “cruel” and the like which will plausibly contain embedded evaluations like “harm” and “benefit”. Whether or not this is a successful reply to Foot’s argument will depend on whether Foot is correct that the private enterprise theory of meaning cannot be invoked for “respect” or “harm” or the like. I will not pursue this point here.

I want to turn instead to the account of thick terms that is implied by the new interpretation of Foot’s argument.¹⁸ To put this account in general terms, this is that a thick term holds together a thin evaluation (pro tanto good or bad) and a description, where the description is itself at least partly evaluative. We might take this to be offered as a recipe for the analysis of thick terms. On the new interpretation, “causes offense by indicating lack of respect” is not non-evaluative. But is it actually analytically sufficient for “rude” and thus “pro tanto bad”?¹⁹

Suella Braverman’s rhetoric concerning refugees attempting to enter the United Kingdom can be accurately said to “cause offense by indicating lack of respect”. For example, her infamous description of desperate people crossing the channel in small boats as “the invasion on our southern coast”. But it would seem an equal cause for offense to call Braverman’s rhetoric “rude”. The gravity of the lack of respect, and the scale of offense warranted are too great for the complaint to be that the rhetoric is “rude”. Moreover, many moral wrongs can be accurately described as “cause for offense by indicating lack of respect” and it would be a mistake to call such wrongs “rude”, a mistake to do with the lack of appreciation of the gravity of the offense.

Nonetheless, “causes offense by indicating lack of respect” does seem necessary for the application of “rude”. The trouble is that in turning it into something sufficient, to specify exactly what sort of offence and what sort of indication of lack of respect is required, we need to draw on our understanding of “rude” itself. It must be the right sort of causing of offence by indicating lack of respect, where the right sort is the rude-making sort. It cannot be the pro tanto bad-making sort for that would again allow in a whole host of moral wrongs which are not properly called rude.

The same points can be made if we consider moral thick terms, like virtue and vice terms.²⁰ One might plausibly think, for example that “cruel” could be analysed as “causing some person harm (prudential bad) out of desire or indifference”. However, for one thing this does not sufficiently discriminate between “cruel” and “brutal”. For another, not just any kind of harm nor any kind of desire or indifference will count. It must be the right sort of harm and the right sort of desire or indifference, i.e., the cruel-making sort. And where does one even begin with an analysis of “kind”? Kindness is pro tanto good, but just what is the evaluative descriptive condition that indicates what is pro tanto good supposed to be? Presumably kindness has to do with the conferring of sort of benefit or advantage with appropriate motivations, but this doesn’t discriminate between kindness and generosity. It is tempting to reach for terms like “considerate” or “compassionate”, but these are more plausibly closely related terms rather than the (evaluative) descriptive component of an analysis of “kind”. Again, it seems like the benefit and the motivations must be of the right kindness-making sort.

¹⁸ Foot is not offering an account of thick terms in general, it’s worth saying. And may not even be taking herself to offer an analysis of the term “rude”. So, I’m taking of her argument ‘implying’ such an account in a loose sense.

¹⁹ It is not, which is a further problem for her argument against the breakdown theory.

²⁰ See Roberts (ms.)

4. *Sufficiency and Emptiness*

If the second interpretation of Foot is correct, the account of thick terms it yields moves in the right direction, in my view, for it allows that the descriptive component of thick terms is itself evaluative. Where it goes wrong, however, is in holding that this component can itself be fully specified in independent terms, i.e., without using the relevant thick term itself. The idea that there can be analytically sufficient descriptive conditions for the application of thick terms is a chimera, even if we allow that those conditions are not non-evaluative.

The same holds regardless of whether we take these conditions to be analytic or semantically analytic. The above points count against Eklund's account of the thick as well. But then what are we to say about puzzles of sufficiency and of emptiness?

As a reminder, Eklund expresses the puzzle of sufficiency as follows:

There is something highly intuitive about what Foot is saying when she insists that sometimes the satisfaction of purely descriptive conditions is sufficient for thick concepts to apply. How can this be accommodated, even while, in the light of the problem of objectionable thick concepts, we cannot actually accept either Foot's argument against the breakdown theory or the corresponding account of what distinguishes thick concepts from thin ones?

The intuitiveness Eklund talks of here, is I think explained by the fact that as a matter of fact the way we operate in the world is with a conception of the descriptive that is evaluative. "Causes offense by indicating lack of respect" is descriptive, but it is not non-evaluative. Moreover, for this condition to be sufficient for the application of "rude" it must be that the lack of respect is of the right, rude-making sort. But then, what are we to say about objectionable thick concepts? If these are terms that misevaluate, are we not forced on this view which has evaluation in the description to make the implausible claim that objectionable thick terms are empty? It is helpful, at this point, to borrow some terminology from the contemporary debate about the thick. We can think of there being evaluation in two places in thick terms. There is the evaluation *in the description* (or, perhaps better which *is* the description), which much of my discussion has been about. But there is also what we can call the *global* evaluation, the assessment of description as pro tanto good or bad.²¹ To find a thick concept objectionable is to hold that the global evaluation misevaluates. It is to think that there is rude behaviour but not judge that it is any the worse for it. They might nonetheless be reluctant to use the term "rude" because of its typically conveying that the behaviour is therefore pro tanto bad.²² The emptiness puzzle is not a puzzle, or a problem, for this view then either.

Conclusion

I have argued that Eklund correctly diagnoses a problem for Foot's view, at least on the standard interpretation, when he notes that she has not actually provided an analytically sufficient non-evaluative descriptive condition for the application of rude. However, it is not entirely clear that the standard interpretation is correct. Foot may have been assuming her opponents view of the descriptive in her argument, a view she does not herself endorse. This alternative way of thinking

²¹ Cf Hurka and Elstein (2009).

²² Whether this is conveyed pragmatically or whether the connection to "pro tanto bad" is best understood as semantically analytic, or something else, is not something I take a stand on here.

about the descriptive component of thick terms opens the way to an account of the thick which is more plausible – thick concepts are more specific evaluative terms.

One issue which now arises concerns the class of thick terms. Will all terms which have been called thick fit the ‘more specific evaluative terms’ model? As Eklund himself notes “[a] fully general account of thick concepts may be a chimera”.²³ If one thinks of thick terms as those which hold together evaluation and description, then the list of thick terms will be very long and will include slurs, certain complex predicates like “good torturer”, and even certain paradigmatically non-evaluative terms like “painful”. This understanding of the thick may be useful for some purposes, but it is plausible that there are subclasses within this broad class of the thick.

It is a question for investigation which terms are thick in the sense in which I have argued “rude”, “kind” and “cruel” are. It is plausible that many if not all virtue and vice terms will fall into this subclass. It is these I contend, that are the ones likely to have interesting implications for metaethics.

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²³ Eklund (2011), p. 32