1. Introduction

Is the evaluative shapeless with respect to the non-evaluative? Or, in words more specific though less elegant, does our supposed rational and non-capricious use of evaluative concepts show that things categorized using them are not united in appropriate ways that are non-evaluative?

In this paper I revisit a famous argument — arguably the signature argument — given by certain cognitivists against certain noncognitivists, and in particular, I consider an idea supposedly key to its success. The argument is often referred to as the disentangling argument, and the key idea I term the shapelessness hypothesis. They received expression and attention during the 1980s and beyond, primarily through the writings of John McDowell and David Wiggins.¹ Since then they have often been referred to, but rarely detailed and defended in full.² Indeed, speaking frankly, someone new to these thoughts might think their expression somewhat obscure and wonder why some treat them as articles of faith.

I have a number of aims. First, I lay bare what the argument and

¹. McDowell’s main discussions are in his (1979), (1981), and (1987), collected in his (1998). Simon Blackburn responds to McDowell in his (1981) and (1998) ch. 4 §§2–5. Wiggins discusses the hypothesis in his (1993a) and (1993b), which respond to Peter Railton’s (1993a) and (1993b). Those familiar with the debate will know that McDowell, Wiggins, and those influenced by them are often referred to as ‘sensibility theorists,’ and will also know that Blackburn and Railton are of different metaethical persuasions: Blackburn works in the noncognitivist tradition, whilst Railton is a type of naturalistic, reductionist realist.

². For example, the following mention the shapelessness hypothesis and give varying lengths of summary, but all accept it more or less without question: Dancy (1993), pp. 84–86, Hurley (1989), p. 13, McNaughton (1988), pp. 60–62, and McNaughton and Rawling (2003), pp. 24–25, to which Lovibond (2003) offers a reply and discusses shapelessness at pp. 193–195. Two notable detailed discussions and criticisms of the shapelessness hypothesis are Lang (2001) and Miller (2003) §10.1. I distinguish my thoughts from Lang’s and Miller’s at notes 31 and 26 respectively. Broadly, whilst the three of us think, for different reasons, that the hypothesis is suspect, they think that typical argumentative strategies that employ it go wrong, whilst I am more optimistic.
hypothesis are, at least as traditionally presented, and what ideas should be invoked in order for the hypothesis to be seen as initially convincing. I also outline what form of noncognitivism the argument directly connects with, something hitherto ignored as far as I am aware. I do this in §2 and §3. Secondly, I expose a significant problem for this cognitivist train of thought in §4: the hypothesis itself, and the strand of the disentangling argument that uses it, may amount to no more than a question-begging cognitivist prejudice. Although I raise this problem, the reader should be aware that my sympathies lie with cognitivism and I believe that the hypothesis retains some attraction despite this and other worries. Hence, a third aim of mine. In §5, I attempt to rehabilitate the argument against this form of noncognitivism so that it might be at least good enough to convince neutrals. I also consider how the argument might be used against another form of noncognitivism. In §6 I reflect on one idea that crops up occasionally, ‘mastery of a concept’, and then I conclude in §7.

2. The Argument and Hypothesis Summarized

Here is an account of the argument that, I believe, is faithful to its traditional presentation.

Cognitivists believe that evaluative and normative concepts are genuine concepts. (Often the debate is run in terms of ethical concepts, and I follow that tradition here.) A genuine concept, in the sense meant here, is, roughly, a concept that picks out a feature of the world that, in some sense of the term, is real. (I return to the relation between concepts and features below.) Furthermore, the content of the concept directly links to and exhausts the nature of the feature in question; or, better, we cannot pick out the nature of the feature in question without using the concept. If we did not have such a concept, we would be cognitively the poorer. For example, the concept of kindness picks out kind things, and if we did not have the concept we would not be able to pick out such things, and only such things, as united in this interesting way. In contrast, noncognitivists traditionally do not think that ethical concepts are genuine concepts in this sense, although we might understandably use them as everyday convenient shorthand. They do not think that ethical judgments are best construed as attempts to describe ethical features of the world. Rather, such judgments should be seen as expressions of attitude towards a non-ethical world, or commands to act, or similar. (From now on I talk of expressions of attitude alone.) To cut a long story short, noncognitivists, or at least one influential sort, claim that supposed ethical concepts, such as kindness, selfishness, and bravery, could be separated into two elements: some non-ethical concept that captured all instances of the ethical concept, and an attitude towards those instances (or, slightly differently, an attitude towards the non-ethically construed feature or features, rather than the whole instance, that justified the non-ethical concept’s being applicable). Hence, although we might use such concepts all the time, and do so perfectly understandably, they are not strictly genuine concepts for they do not pick out genuine features that in some sense exist; there are, strictly, no kind things. Rather, things ordinarily labeled as such are better conceptualized in other ways that truly reflect their nature, namely some non-ethical description with some attitude attached. The separation envisaged by noncognitivists has always been construed as something theoretically possible. There is no question

3. I detail two worries in notes 30 and 35.

4. This is cutting a long story short. For one thing, the construal of both elements could become complex, as my remark in parentheses suggests. For another, the cognitivists in which I am interested target construals of ethical concepts that state there are two elements. But although this retains great interest, it simplifies what noncognitivism is and could be. I address this point shortly in the main text. One last point. The supposed separable evaluative element or elements could be given a noncognitivist treatment. This is the original context of the debate and I follow this line for simplicity. But such elements could be given a cognitivist treatment. See the opening remarks in Elstein and Hurka (2009). By ‘cognitivist’ in the main text I am referring to a ‘non-separationist’ position: we do not have two or more elements that combine and that can be separated. Instead, to speak abstractly, we have a single unitary concept that has a number of aspects. Both the labels of ‘cognitivism’ and ‘non-separationism’ apply to McDowell and Wiggins, and I refer to this latter idea occasionally.
that noncognitivists need to defend the idea that our ethical reactions feel, phenomenologically, separated in this manner.

Cognitivists motivate their claim that ethical concepts are genuine concepts by introducing the disentangling argument, which is designed to show that noncognitivism cannot accommodate a crucial aspect of our everyday conceptual practices. The argument starts simply. We divide situations and actions into different conceptual categories: these things are kind whilst 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 an ethical concept, such as kindness, and furthermore something (probably the same thing) that distinguishes them from other things grouped together using different concepts, such as selfishness. 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 the “something” that connects all and only the things deemed kind. This move is premised on the fact that both sides are attempting to make sense of our conceptual practices. Cognitivists argue that neither of the two elements—stuff picked out using non-ethical concepts, and attitudes towards such stuff—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 ethical feature of kindness, something that we are picking out using a (genuine) concept.

We will consider each of these two elements in turn in a moment. Later on I will also clarify what sorts of evaluative concept—thin or thick—we should be thinking about in relation to these two elements, and how and what this means for the relation between disentangling and shapelessness. But a couple of times I have mentioned “one sort of” noncognitivism, and this requires clarification right now. The influential and standard form of noncognitivism is as stated: a non-ethical element (the stuff or the conceptualization of that stuff), and some attitude towards that element. This version is found in the writings of C. L. Stevenson, R. M. Hare, and Simon Blackburn. In this version, as standardly portrayed, we have some wholly discrete non-ethical concept that supposedly fully determines the examples in which we are interested, the non-ethical detail being sufficient to pick out all of the examples itself. An attitude to such examples (or the conceptualization that picks out such examples) is then added and can easily be subtracted. One complication. In this version there is something rarely noted explicitly, namely, that the addition of some attitude might narrow down the applications of the concept. (Hence my “supposedly” qualifier to “fully determines” just now.) For example, some non-ethical concept by disentangling and/or shapelessness, but one’s position would be suspect precisely because one had not tried to accommodate this notion.

5. As Blackburn (1981), pp. 180–181 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.

6. Despite their claim that ethical judgments 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. One could confine oneself to claiming that ethical judgments function as expressions of attitude and not care about their “consistency” in any sense. One would then not face any objection motivated

7. In three paragraphs’ time, beginning “With the important caveat made …”, Readers uninterested in the niceties of different versions of noncognitivism might wish to jump ahead.


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will pick out all the tidy things, but we might approve of only a subset of them, since there are some we disapprove of and some we view indifferently. The same might — might — be the case with ethical concepts, particularly if one thinks that there is flexibility of attitude here: we might approve of some kind things and disapprove of others. That said, when asking what helps to pick out examples of a concept, the influence of the attitude (no matter how many attitudes are associated with a concept) is treated as secondary. Why? Because the different attitudes help only to make divisions within the already established and fully located boundaries of the concepts’ extension. At most we have one simple extra stage — the addition of one attitude — that narrows the application of the concept. And for some concepts perhaps there is only one attitude anyway, making things even simpler. Even if one thinks that a variety of attitudes helps to create different sorts of (related) concept, such as kindness-pro and kindness-con, and one therefore thinks that the attitude has a symbolically key role to play in determining the extension of these more specific concepts, it seems obvious to consider what links these clearly related concepts and makes them part of a close-knit family. The something that links them will be something non-ethical, not attitudinal, and one can plausibly conclude that it is the non-ethical element that is playing the chief role in locating the sorts of thing that we are after.

In contrast to all of this, another important version of noncognitivism will deny that the non-ethical element will be so overwhelmingly important in influencing the specific boundaries of various important ethical concepts. Our attitudes have more of a role to play. In general terms this is because the non-ethical element taken on its own will be insufficient to establish the boundaries of the concept in which we are interested, beyond something very general. At this point, theorists might offer different accounts of how exactly attitudes combine with the non-ethical content to establish the boundaries. Here is one illustration. The previous version assumes that the non-ethical element will provide specific detail of what it is for something to be distributively just, say, with an attitude of approval given to the fully formed example of such a thing given at the end. Instead, we should realize that attitudes themselves will help to make some very general version of this concept more specific. So, an initial analysis of ‘x is distributively just’ could be ‘x is good (approval evinced), and there are non-ethical features X, Y, Z (to be further specified) that distributions have as distributions, or in virtue of their distributive shape, such that x has X, Y, and Z, and X, Y, and Z make any distribution that has them good (approval evinced)’. Two political philosophers — John Rawls and Robert Nozick, say — might know the general ballpark in which they are debating; they can both agree that something is a distribution and that it is ripe to be considered as just, but disagree on the particular features that make a distribution a just one, that is, Rawls and Nozick offer different Xs, Ys, and Zs. How do attitudes enter, aside from the explicit points in the analysis? Well, Rawls and Nozick do not just pick out any old features. They pick out those features that will make distributions good ones; that is, they approve of the features. So, on this noncognitivist analysis, attitudes are helping to determine the extension of the concept because they are necessary to specify the boundaries of the concept in the first place, and are not introduced at some later date when pretty specific boundaries are already in place. Theorists who have developed accounts of this general sort include Allan Gibbard, Stephan Burton, and Daniel Elstein and Thomas Hurka.

I do not here discuss whether either or both of these broad versions of noncognitivism are cogent and plausible with respect to matters other than disentangling and shapelessness. Nor do I discuss whether noncognitivism is

9. Blackburn has emphasized this as a virtue of his account.
10. From the point of view of the argument to come, one extra stage will not matter as the whole process will be easy to ‘codify’; our attention is focused on the supposed uncodifiability of the nonethical side.
these two versions are as distinct as they are assumed to be, although there is a question to push concerning the exact influence of attitudes. For sake of argument, let us assume that they are distinct. What I do claim, and what is important for the narrative of this paper, is that the first version is the more influential one — deservedly so because of the simple and strong picture it offers. It is, for example, the first, main, and perhaps only version that upper-level undergraduates are exposed to. It is also clear that this is the version of noncognitivism that McDowell and Wiggins have in mind; indeed the main statements of their argument predate the most interesting work on the other version. For simplicity’s sake, I will run the argument by using ‘noncognitivism’ to stand for the influential position that is traditionally given and targeted. If nothing else, because of the predominance of the target, the argument should hold our interest. As advertised, later on I briefly consider how the argument affects the other version of noncognitivism.

With the important caveat made about which sort of noncognitivism the argument focuses on, let us take each of the two elements introduced earlier, starting with attitudes. A traditional, minimal, hooraht (or boo) will be insufficient to pick out all and only all the examples of an ethical concept, for we hooraht many, many things and this alone is insufficient to distinguish the kind from the just, nor will it distinguish the kind from the sublime or the humorous. The debate might proceed with noncognitivists arguing that less minimally conceived types of response, characterized non-ethically of course, are sufficient to distinguish the various sorts of supposed ethical feature from each other and from other types of evaluative feature. \(^{12}\) Cognitivists can counter by asking whether any meater, non-ethical characterizations are forthcoming that are sufficient to allow one to draw all the distinctions one needs to draw. \(^{13}\) Perhaps the only way to pick out the attitude associated with all and only all things deemed kind is by using the concept of kindness, but that is ruled out since we are attempting to derive this concept from our reactions, not use it to pick out those reactions in the first place. \(^{14}\)

From now on I am going to focus on the other side of things, that is, on the non-ethical part of the concept. It is at this point that the shapelessness hypothesis is introduced. We could specify that all kind actions have the same non-ethical feature in common, and, hence, we can characterize kindness as simply being this one feature (and the same for all selfish actions, just actions, and so on). Now, this is possible, but many find it implausible. Just think about the various types of kind action there are: opening doors for people, telling the truth, telling a “white” lie, giving someone some sweets, refraining from giving sweets for some other reason, and so on. Not only is there a wide variety of non-ethical features that go to “make up” a kind action; many kind actions have no, or no ethically relevant, non-ethical features in common. It seems that we will move quickly beyond the idea of there being a single non-ethical 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 non-ethical features that might make an action kind and that the concept of kindness has to be flexible enough to apply quite widely.

And then we have the killer thought. Supposedly, ethical features are shapeless with respect to the non-ethical features that constitute them. That is, if one were to try to find a pattern between all of the sets of non-ethical features that constitute kindness, without trying to view things from an ethical point of view (or the correct ethical point of view), one would not be able to see it.

We can put these ideas slightly differently to develop a thought that will be the focus of my discussion. \(^{15}\) It is plausible to say that one could


\(^{13}\) For hints of this idea see McDowell (1987), especially §4.

\(^{14}\) As Miller (2003), pp. 81–88, points out, there is an assumption here that no such non-ethical characterization will be forthcoming. But he suggests, fairly, that future experimental psychology might provide one. He says, p. 85, that at best cognitivists show that there is some explanatory space to be filled. A more sympathetic reading, which I find attractive, has this thought placing an explanatory onus on noncognitivism. This takes us to the distinction I make later in this section, in (v).

\(^{15}\) This is a common strategy. See McDowell (1979), §4, and Wiggins (1993b),
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 learnt or bad behavior entrenched from such a short-lived action). We can easily imagine that situations can get 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 our concept of kindness might outrun any non-ethical characterization one could give of the actions deemed kind. I will refer to this throughout simply as “outrunning”.

Why is this bad for noncognitivists? They wish to identify “something” that connects all and only all the kind actions. Imagine we have to compile a disjunctive list of non-ethical features that constitute the various kind actions one has encountered. (For clarity, one’s list will comprise non-ethically characterized clauses, which in turn are composed of descriptions of different features, and these clauses are supposed to correspond to actions and situations. For example, one such clause might be, ‘If non-ethical features \(x\), \(y\), and \(z\) are all present then the action is kind.’) This list will merely be, by definition, a sum-

16. The debate is predicated on the idea that the specific conception of kindness, say, current in a community is a function of the actions that it deems kind. Whether this is the correct way to think of concepts (and conceptions) is debatable, but challenging it would help neither side so I will let it pass.

17. For example, see Wiggins (1993b), §§IV–VII, where he 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.

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features of various items deemed to fall under some ethical concept that one had encountered previously, then this would not match the extension of that concept.

So ends the simple — albeit lengthy — expression of the argument. However, even after a presentation this simple, there are seven issues, I think, that need addressing straightaway. (i) 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, so far at least, all that the debate is concerned with is the extension of ethical concepts. 18 I will offer one reason to support setting matters up in this way in §3, and return to the phrase ‘mastery of a concept’ in §6.

(ii) Note that I gave no thought as to what ‘level of descriptions’ are appropriate when considering the characterization of the non-ethical features that compose ethical items. Are we supposed to imagine re-characterizations 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? In the context of this argument, traditionally no thought is given to this question. The shapelessness hypothesis is assumed to be correct for any level of description one chooses. 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.

(iii) 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, but there is a glaring hole.

So far I have mentioned the distinction between thin and thick concepts only in passing, although the examples I have used, such as kindness and selfishness, are traditionally thought to be thick. In brief, the distinction is typically, although not exclusively, drawn so that thin concepts, such as goodness and rightness, are thought to have evaluative content alone, whereas thick concepts combine in some fashion both evaluative and descriptive content. Although normally not commented on, the examples traditionally given when presenting the shapelessness hypothesis were thick concepts, and the main motivation for developing it seemed to be to show that such concepts could not be disentangled into their (supposed) component parts since there are no component parts to begin with.

There is a strange, hardly remarked-upon aspect to the whole debate. 19 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 that there can be. But, if that is the case, then the connection between it and the disentangling argument requires clarification. If thin concepts involve evaluative content alone, then there are no supposed parts to disentangle.

There is a fair amount to unpick here. For example, we might wonder whether this is the best way of drawing the distinction between


19. An exception, which explains things neatly, is Roberts (unpublished). (She also cites Dancy [2006], p. 128, who 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. I will not pursue that idea here as it will take me too far afield.) 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 distinguishes the content of a concept from the things in virtue of which it applies. There may be many types of thing that are kind, but what kindness is may not encapsulate all (descriptive) aspects of all those things, or even those aspects in virtue of which the label kindness applies. (I accord with this throughout, despite my emphasis on all the things that ethical concepts are supposed to apply to.) Indeed, continues Roberts, the concept of kindness 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, this sense of shapelessness applies also to thin concepts, for the content of goodness, say, seems likely to differ from the descriptive aspects of the good things in virtue of which the label applies. We are then back to trying to find some difference such that the hypothesis applies only to the thick, and back to separating the disentangling argument from the shapelessness hypothesis as I do in the main text.
the thin and the thick. We might also worry, as part of this, whether there is a sharp distinction in the first place. Furthermore, even if we agree that there is a sharp distinction, not only might we think that the thickness of thick concepts comes in degrees; we might also think, controversially, that thin concepts come in degrees of “thickness” also.\footnote{On this last point, the concepts of goodness and rightness are both thought to be canonical thin concepts, but they are different: they apply differently and have different content. Most of modern normative ethics makes little sense without distinguishing them. For the point in the text, crucially both seem “thicker” than a thin form of ethical approval. Furthermore, ‘ought’ might — might be thicker than ‘rightness’ if we think that whereas the latter picks out only the thing that should be done, the former involves some notion of being able to do the thing also. Similarly, ethical approval and aesthetic approval are both thicker than mere liking. And so on. I think that thin concepts do vary in their “thicknesses”, but believe we can still maintain a distinction between the thin and the thick. (See my [ms.]) Clearly in going down this route, the possibility of disentangling in the case of many thin concepts bar the very thinnest becomes a live option, but to keep matters simple I refrain from pursuing this point.} I leave these interesting and delicate matters aside. What I will say is this. 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 evaluative concepts. (So, to make clear, I reckon that an example like the chocolate case, or that example itself, could be run with the same outcome for the concept of goodness.) But we need to adjust the traditional set-up and say that in the case of thin concepts, if shapelessness is proved, then we cannot disentangle any supposed evaluative and descriptive content. In the case of thin concepts, 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 similar to that reached in the case of thick concepts, namely, that thin concepts should be thought of along cognitivist 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 — that is agreed on all sides to be shapeless, namely, thin evaluative content. 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.

What should be emphasized, however, is that my prime interest in this paper 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 find something in that distinction or elsewhere that supported the anti-noncognitivist 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 regard to the supposed phenomenon of shapelessness will be hard.\footnote{(iv) What of the shift made from concepts (and terms, and the like) to features (and properties, and the like)? The argument 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 while retaining the same extension. We then conclude that there must really exist corresponding features that the original concepts pick out. This last move seems a little wild. Why think that anything about human concept use implies, let alone entails, anything ontological?

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 one could do. First, having noted the worry we could be strict}\footnote{I refrain from pursuing this point.}
with ourselves and previous writers. Perhaps all that we have is an argument for 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 legitimate along cognivist lines, 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 distinct. 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 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 moral thinking has so many important aspects to it that it seems implausible to think that all of them are dodgy and that the whole of morality is bogus.23

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 ethical concepts strongly implies that we must take seriously the idea that corresponding ethical features are, in some sense of the term, real. This need not commit us to the claim that ethical features and properties 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 ethical 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 ethical categorizations’ being something that are wholly a product of our “gilding and staining”.24 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. For reasons of space I do not aim to undertake such work here. 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 who talk exclusively of “features” and “properties” and who think the argument is clearly and uncontroversially an argument that establishes a metaphysical conclusion. In brief, the argument is best understood as an argument that moves from our conceptual practices to a tentative conclusion about the reality, in some sense, of the things supposed. That conclusion works even if we distinguish cognitivism from realism, assuming that we think that acceptance of the former leads us to take seriously a provisional acceptance of the latter.

(v) What is the precise aim of using the shapelessness hypothesis? Here is a distinction between two readings of it. Should cognitivists be trying to prove, from their philosophical armchairs, that outrunning does and will occur and, hence, that noncognitivism is false? Call this the strong version of the shapelessness hypothesis, or just the “strong version” for short. Or should cognitivists 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 noncognitivism? Call this the “moderate version”. In other words, our distinction is this: when one empirically investigates how ethical concepts work, either one will confirm what one has already shown to be true, or one will confirm what one suspected to be true.

23. See my (2010) for an argument along these lines. The short criticism given in the main text is not the end of the matter, of course. Just think of atheistic criticisms of religious belief that many accept.

24. See McDowell (1983) for a discussion of this topic. McDowell is responding to Bernard Williams’s thoughts, located in his (1978) for example, on the “absolute conception of reality”. 
I think neither version is correct, but 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 ethical concepts are shapeless with respect to non-ethical concepts. The third reading or understanding 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 ethical could well be shapeless with respect to the non-ethical and, I argue, this is enough to support cognitivism. I provide more detail later.

Aside from the question of which is the more defensible version of the first two readings, 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 §4 of his (1979), McDowell seems to imply that the argument shows conclusively that noncognitivism cannot be correct. His supporters are similarly bold. On the other hand, on p. 144 of his (1981), McDowell thinks that the argument makes it only “reasonable to be sceptical about” noncognitivism. I think this phrase, and other such phrases in the rest of the section, are meant as they stand and are not academic “hedges”. Similarly, Wiggins, in §§IV–VII of his (1993b), thinks that he has not shown conclusively that Peter Railton’s naturalistic, reductionist realism is impossible, but only that we should be skeptical about its chances.

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

One last point on this thought. My set-up was deliberately sloppy. So, in saying things such as “according to cognitivists, there will be no non-ethical match to the ethical concept” or “any such re-characterization will fail” we might say, after reflection on these two readings, that before we do any empirical work, we can state that “there will almost certainly be no non-ethical match” and “any such re-characterization will almost certainly fail”. Or once we have considered my third reading, we might say something else.

This links to the next question, which provides us with one reason for initially preferring the moderate version.

(vi) Should we construe the shapelessness hypothesis as an a priori claim or an a posteriori claim? This can be a misleading question. Clearly the claim cannot be a wholly a priori one. One cannot plausibly claim what the relationship between ethical concepts and supposed non-ethical counterparts is likely to be, let alone show what it is, through theoretical reflection alone on the nature of ethical concepts. One has to draw on one’s experience of how ethical 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. One might think that one can prove the claim to be true simply by going through all of the ethical 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 say the least: there are a lot of such concepts, and outrunning seems to be something that will involve an awful lot of investigation.

26. This sub-section is directed against Miller (2003), pp. 249–253. Miller goes wrong in failing to distinguish between moderate and strong versions, although it is clear that he thinks that 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 who argue using the shapelessness hypothesis will be successful only if we assume that noncognitivists claim that by conceptual a priori reflection alone one can prove that nonethical re-characterizations of ethical concepts are possible. But, as he points out, noncognitivists do not claim that. They claim that empirical work and substantive moral theorizing will reveal that ethical concepts can be re-characterized 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 cognitivists’ aims might well 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.

27. I draw out exactly how much in the following section.
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 cognitivists have not gone in for such methods
and, given the difficulty of proving the strong claim, even by empiri-
cal 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 ethical concepts gen-
erally. Clearly this sort of method will not provide enough evidence
for the strong version, and if we did think that this is what cognitivists
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 ex-
perience about the nature of ethical concepts, cognitivists are aiming
to show that it is likely that, if thorough empirical work were done, we
would find that no, or no central, ethical concept could be re-charac-
terized in the manner suggested. This is clearly an expression of the
moderate version.

(vii) Do noncognitivists embrace shapelessness, in fact, as some
might suppose? On this, it is worth quoting at length a key passage by
Blackburn in which he responds to McDowell and where he christens
the hypothesis.

Let us suppose for a moment that some group of human
beings does share a genuine tendency to some reaction
in the face of some perceived properties or kinds of thing.
Surely it need not surprise us at all that they should know
of no description of what unifies the class of objects elic-
itng the reaction, except of course the fact that it does
so. We are complicated beings, and understand our own
reactions only poorly. Now suppose the outsider, who
fails either to share or understand the reactive tendency,
cannot perceive any such unifying feature either. Then
he will be at a loss to extend the associated term to new
cases, and there will be no method of teaching him how
to do so. To take a very plausible candidate, it is notori-
ously difficult or impossible to circumscribe exactly all
those things which a member of our culture finds comic.
Any description is likely to have a partial and disjunctive
air which would make it a poor guide to someone who
does not share our sense of humour, if he is trying to pre-
dict those things which we will and will not find funny.
This may not be a merely practical matter: there is no a
priori reason to expect there to really be a unifying fea-
ture. Let us describe this by saying that the grouping of
things which is made by projecting our reactive tendency
onto the world is shapeless with respect to other features.
The puzzle then is why McDowell sees shapelessness as
a problem for a projective theory [for our purposes, non-
cognitivism]. The necessary premise must be that a reac-
tive tendency cannot be shapeless with respect to those
other features which trigger it off, whereas a further cog-
nitive ability can pick up features which are shapeless
with respect to others. But why? Do we really support a
realist theory of the comic by pointing out the complexity
and shapeless nature of the class of things we laugh at?
On the contrary, there is no reason to expect our reac-
tions to the world simply to fall into patterns which we
or anyone else can describe. So the plight of the outsider
affords no argument against a Humean theory.28

Blackburn goes wrong here. It is certainly true that we might find it
difficult to say what it is for something to be kind, or funny. It is diffi-
cult to be perceptive and articulate about our ethical concepts. But this
thought does not connect with the kernel of McDowell’s (and Wig-
gins’s) challenge (which we have yet to assess, of course). His chal-
gen is whether the ethical can or cannot be codified in non-ethical

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Simon Kirchin

ways and, hence, whether there is some non-ethical pattern that judges pick up on when categorizing things ethically and which justifies their judgments as non-capricious. On pain of giving up their noncognitivism, or the bedrock assumption that there is something that justifies our ethical categorizations, McDowell claims that noncognitivists have to assume that there is some non-ethical pattern that we react to, even if everyday judges cannot articulate it, as he might readily admit. In other words, Blackburn accepts that ethical concepts might appear to everyday judges as being shapeless and hopelessly messy, but he cannot accept shapelessness as McDowell means it: he must admit that there is some non-ethical pattern, albeit one beyond our everyday ken, on pain of giving up the bedrock assumption. Of course, Blackburn might respond by saying that he obviously does not want to give up on this assumption and wishes to explain how our reactions or attitudes are non-capriciously consistent. Perhaps he might worry as to whether we need to assume in the first place a pattern of (ethical) things to which we are taken to be responding in order to make sense of these concepts. This seems a good worry for a noncognitivist to have. Still, the challenge is that there has to be a pattern amongst our reactions or attitudes even if we cannot describe it and even if we do not assume at the start that these reactions are responses to some (evaluative) thing. (Note that Blackburn — with “The necessary premise …” — seems to assume that if you go in for patterns of reactions, it has to be patterns of reactions towards a thing. But that is not the starting, bedrock assumption, as I understand the argument, but instead an ontological way of putting the conclusion.) So the choice facing Blackburn is either to assume that there is a pattern and to explain its existence from within a noncognitivist perspective, or to give up on the bedrock assumption. I can just about imagine a noncognitivist giving up on the bedrock assumption when it comes to our reactions to things as comical. But a modern noncognitivist, given they do not wish to embrace ethical relativism, will not make this move for ethical concepts. They will want to hold on to the thought that our reactions and concepts based on them are consistent and justifiable. And whether or not we can articulate what it is that makes them consistent, McDowell argues that there has to be such consistency and it is that which noncognitivists have trouble in explaining.

Having said that, we will return to Blackburn’s comments, since thoughts about articulation connect with my argument in §5.

These seven notes touch on some deep issues — levels of description, ontology, the distinction between a priori and a posteriori investigation — and whilst 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 we can set up the discussion and assess 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?

3. Matters Finite and Infinite

In my summary, the key idea was outrunning. Supposedly, our ethical concepts (or, alternatively, the ways in which things get to be a certain ethical way) outrun a list of non-ethically characterized clauses that are supposed to capture those concepts (or some such clauses that are supposed to capture the ways in which things get to be a certain ethical way).

We should point out immediately 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 ethical concepts. Something about them, no matter how intelligent and imaginative we are, is such that they cannot be captured correctly in non-ethical ways by us, or are unlikely to be so.

With that in mind, we might begin by asking whether it is possible for outrunning to occur even though there are only a finite number of ways, be it five or 20,005, in which actions get to be kind or bad, say. One way in which reality could outrun one’s list is that one has some incorrect clauses. But this could be corrected with more investigation.
and thought. Similarly, one can correct the defect of too few clauses with due diligence and imagination, even if one has many clauses to add. Assuming that we do not have recourse to the epistemic inadequacy of humans, there seems to be no reason in principle to imagine that one 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 one has to assume that there are an infinite number of ways in which actions get to be kind. We can assume, for now, that ethical concepts are infinitely complex in this way. I will return to examine this claim later.

Let us think instead about the list of non-ethical clauses. Of course, it is highly plausible to claim that everyday humans can produce lists that have only a finite number of clauses, and we cannot ignore this fact. If kindness, 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, for argument’s sake, that by some cosmic fluke humans as they are could produce lists with an infinite number of clauses. But how they do so is crucial. We should recall that we are interested not only in the non-ethical capturing of ethical concepts but in whether this can be done “from a non-ethical 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 ethical concept and so, in our imagined scenario, she would have the ability to convert her understanding of some ethical concept into a complete capturing of non-ethically characterized clauses. This should not trouble cognitivists. For a start, separation of attitude from feature in individual cases is common. 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 one can make such a theoretical separation for the whole of the concept. And, secondly, the key thought is whether such overall separation can be done from a non-ethical point of view. Clearly the insider is converting her already existing ethical understanding into non-ethical 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. So she can make the individual separations for the whole of the concept and offer a complete translation of the concept into non-ethical language, something that is certainly beyond me.

We can pause here and reflect a little. We might distinguish the conceptual content itself — the content of kindness in this case — from the things it applies to, and the conditions in which it applies.29 Cognitivists, I presume, will want to do this. “Giving up a seat on a bus” does not seem to be part of the conceptual content of the concept of kindness. However, assuming, as we are, that there is no simple and specific non-ethical translation of kindness and other evaluative concepts because of the great variety of application, what cognitivists are partly doing in making the challenge they make is to say that when it comes down to it, when we push everyday convenient usage aside, a nocognitivist is committed to thinking that the content of the supposed genuine concept of kindness amounts to no more than a collection of all the instances of its application given non-ethically (plus some attitude suitably included). And this is so even if ordinary users do not conceptualize it like this to themselves. Of course, noncognitivists might argue that we can give a short non-ethical summary of kindness that covers all the instances; so talking of the content’s being simply some “non-ethical disjunctive list” is too extreme, even if push is coming to shove. They might offer, for example, ‘actions that pay attention to the needs and wants of others and act positively towards them’ as a way of defining kindness. But this sort of definition seems too broad-brush and covers other concepts (bravery, rightness, justice,

29. See again n.19 and Roberts’s distinction.
and many more). Hence the need to be more specific, and hence the challenge that noncognitivists are committed to the content’s (really) being some long disjunctive list.

With that point made, we can 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 ethical concepts to understand the (supposed) ethical 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 cognitivist can rightly protest that our scenario does not show that the ethical is shapeless with respect to the non-ethical. What it is far more likely to show, it seems, is that if the “outsider” (as we might now call her) has seemingly been successful in understanding the insider, then her ethical concepts were probably not so different from the insider’s in the first place and she is turning herself into an insider.30

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 non-ethical 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 need be, will she be able to extend this list and capture the rest of the concept non-ethically?

With the ground prepared we can now see that there is some chink left for the noncognitivist 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 non-ethically 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 ethical 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, noncognitivism’s truth looks debatable if it has only this possibility on which to fall back.

A cognitivist might object. Why allow noncognitivists 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 cognitivist would realize that the outsider could strike it lucky. However, she might continue and wonder, more generally, whether this 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 §2(i). It is unfair for cognitivists to state that when such a list has been produced by an outsider, noncognitivism will be vindicated only if she is able to explain why the various

30. We might state, briefly, that the conceptual difference between the outsider and the community she investigates is some function of the concepts the outsider draws on, how long it takes her, how many are in the anthropological team, and so on. It will be familiar to most philosophers that thoughts in this whole area have been influenced by Davidson’s work and the ensuing discussion. See Davidson (1984), especially essays 9 and 13. This leads to a related question, but one that I do not explore here. To what extent do anthropologists have to hold sincerely the attitudes that are embodied by the ethical concepts they investigate in order to capture those concepts’ extensions? One challenge to cognitivists might be that if their train of thought is correct, then it seems that the answer to this question is “wholly” or, at least, “a great deal”. One really does have to think a certain thing “taboo”, say, or “schmaboo” in order to understand the concept. But this seems false, not only as a report of anthropological practice but also as a report of our everyday understanding of those who hold fairly similar views to our own. Further discussion of this point would explore what cognitivists can say about the imagining and pretending state of mind that seems necessary for such understanding.
...whether the list that has to be produced is infinite or just a very, very long finite one.31

The debate could proceed from this point with a discussion of other things about the points of view of the insider and the outsider, and whether this can be used to cognitivism’s advantage. I will do this later.

31. Lang (2001), pp. 202–4 raises a problem for the shapelessness hypothesis that I do not think bites. He worries that introducing the outsider does nothing to support the cognitive claim — specifically, McDowell’s claim — that disentangling cannot happen. Imagining an outsider being puzzled by an insider’s use of some ethical concept Lang says, “But why is the outsider’s puzzlement evidentially relevant here? McDowell’s argument suggests that, if the outsider could perform the disentangling manoeuvre, then he could predict the extension of the concept in question. Since the outsider cannot predict the extension of the concept, therefore he cannot perform the disentangling manoeuvre. The argument takes the form of a modus tollens” (p. 203.) Lang then goes on to worry that the first, conditional premise is false and this is shown by Wittgenstein’s rule-following considerations, ironically so given how much McDowell relies on them. It is false, says Lang, because if an outsider is presented with instantiations of an alien ethical concept, and if we imagine that he can perform some disentangling maneuver, then it does not seem as if he could extend the concept to new instances, and this is shown by the rule-following considerations themselves. (That is, by the phenomenon of outrunning.) To my mind, Lang’s set-up is wrong. There are two ways of thinking about the ‘conceptual separation’ referred to. First, one can separate a concept overall. To my mind, this is what the disentangling manoeuvre, so named, is all about. If one can disentangle a concept into its component parts then this just means (in part) that one can correctly extend the concept indefinitely by being guided by nonethical features alone. Or, in other words, Lang is wrong to say that we can imagine an outsider’s being able to disentangle whilst imagining that she cannot extend the concept. In my view, we do not have here two activities that can be possibly separated: a disentangling activity and a concept-extending activity. But Lang obviously thinks that they can come apart, and then claims that the conditional is false. Why does he think this? I think it is because he has in mind a second misunderstanding of ‘conceptual separation’ where the disentangling concerns some individual items deemed to fall under the same concept. I have already mentioned this in the text (with the bus case) and claimed that this phenomenon can be accepted by cognitivists. Now, assuming cognitivists are on the right lines, if an outsider has disentangled a few examples of kind actions, perhaps helped by an insider, then clearly this need not mean that she can extend the concept correctly to all future cases. That is why Lang thinks the conditional is false. But, as I say, this second construal of disentangling is a bad way of putting the key point at issue. In fact, Lang’s conditional is true. So McDowell and other cognitivists should not worry here, and we should rethink our set-up, as I do in the main text, to show how the outsider’s imagined puzzlement is relevant.
For now, let me recap this section. We have shown that in order for the claim of outrunning to convince, we need to imagine that kindness comes in an infinite variety of forms. If we do that, we need to ask whether someone could capture it non-ethically. 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 who oppose the shapelessness hypothesis. We now have to ask whether we have reason for thinking that supposed ethical concepts are infinitely complex.

4. A Cognitivist Prejudice

Let me comment briefly on my phrasing, for clarification. I have talked of ethical concepts being “ininitely complex” and, more strictly, of there being an “infinite number of ways in which actions get to be of a certain ethical sort”. This is in contrast to there being an “infinite number of actions of a certain ethical sort”. There might be an infinite number of kind actions, but the non-ethical 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 non-ethical ways. What needs to be established, for the shapelessness argument to work, is not 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 cognitivists are aiming to show is:

A. Ethical concepts cannot be re-characterized in non-ethical terms unless one has full ethical understanding of them.

Recall that (A) was earlier supported, in §2, by the positive light in which cognitivists saw things:

B. Ethical concepts are essentially “human-laden” (in a special way): they reflect our interests, which receive expression in ways that can be codified only in ethical ways.

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 ethical way. For example, there are an infinite number of ways in which actions get to be kind.

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. But this assumption seems motivated only because we assume that the ethical cannot be reduced to the non-ethical, or that ethical concepts are essentially human-laden and reflect our interests that are expressed in uncodifiable ways. Indeed, we are assuming that ethical concepts are special concepts where outrunning occurs, as opposed to other concepts - such as ‘is a monarch’ - where one might assume this does not happen, since one might assume that there are only a finite number of ways of exemplifying the concept, even if there are (potentially) infinitely many tokens. All that we have standing against our accepting that there is only a finite

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32. 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 ethical concepts results in uncodifiability with respect to the non-ethical.

33. 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.

34. This comparative judgement is here for illumination of the ethical case. One might well challenge the claim about ‘is a monarch’. At some levels of description and for some aspects there are only a few ways to be a monarch (male or female; by victory or bloodline). But once we begin to think hard, we might be able to pick many - perhaps infinitely many - ways in which one can be a monarch, and this will in turn cast doubt on whether the distinction between finite types and infinite tokens assumed here is so rigid. That, however, does not strictly affect the claim about the ethical case that is our focus: is there or is there not uncodifiability here?
number of ways in which actions get to be kind is some pessimism about strategies involving non-ethical re-characterizations. If this is true, then cognitivists are guilty of begging the question.

That is one way of expressing that cognitivists are unjustly prejudiced towards their own view. A different way is this. Instead of accusing cognitivists 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 non-characterizable in non-ethical terms is just for it to be essentially human-laden. Similarly, “non-re-characterizability” is just an easier way of saying “there are an infinite number of ways that an action can get to be kind, say, and hence it cannot be represented in non-ethical terms”.

So the strong version of the shapelessness hypothesis is really only an expression of the (controversial) initial cognitivist 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 cognitivist hunch more vivid, but does nothing to strengthen it or add to it.

What of the moderate version? We might think it is in better condition. Claiming only that ethical concepts are likely to resist re-characterization in non-ethical terms commits one to less than the strong version; one could be wrong about the definite claim, but the balance of reasons still favors one’s being right in advance of doing some investigation. If the moderate version seems good, then the onus shifts to noncognitivists, which is no mean feat.

But this is not quite right. Our rejection of the strong version exposed the fact that our evidence for believing it was only the initial cognitivist hunch. It is not as if we have acquired only a little evidence aside from belief in cognitivism, and concluded that it is too little to base so strong a claim on. It is that we have no evidence beyond the cognitivist hunch. With that in mind, the moderate version is in no better condition. Of course, the weaker claim allows for the possibility that ethical concepts might be captured from a non-ethical perspective.

But one is still saying that the phenomenon of shapelessness is more likely than not. However, what justifies this? Only again some thumbnail sketches of various ethical concepts whose characterization is infected with cognitivist bias.

Some might think I am being harsh on cognitivism here, and specifically the moderate version. After all, many might feel the force of the cognitivist hunch and 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 explain phenomena that are disparate and seemingly unfathomably complex at some lower level of description. 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 cognitivists 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. I am being hard here since I want a defense of cognitivism to stand up to critical analysis. 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. Cognitivists need to think a little harder.

There is a further problem. It is clear that the shapelessness hypothesis owes a lot to Wittgenstein’s rule-following considerations and the ensuing discussion. This should be no surprise, given that two of the key papers on shapelessness, Blackburn (1981) and McDowell (1981), centre on this. The worry is how and whether cognitivists can confine the phenomenon of shapelessness to concepts that we find kosher, be they ethical or otherwise. This worry is sharpened by thinking about the ontological worry I discussed in §2(iv). It is all very well saying that we have to take seriously the idea that acts of kindness are real, in some sense. But do we want to be committed in the same way to features associated with various slang terms employed by social groups, terms that come and go with every passing fad? These seem clear examples of concepts that have shape but only on their own terms. And what
5. 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 ethical 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.

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 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 of weird philosophical examples made up simply to illustrate some whimsical thought? We might worry about certain conceptions of taboohood implying that taboohood is a real feature, but we might worry even more if things are thought to be really “schmaboo,” even if the ‘in some sense’ qualifier is appended. It is not enough for cognitivists to say that this challenge ignores the original context of the debate, which was confined to everyday, normal evaluative concepts. We require reasons for separating the kosher from the dodgy, and unless we have that we might be “ontologically profligate.” This would undermine the whole strategy that employs the shapelessness hypothesis.

The problem I consider in this paper is left untouched by this worry. Even assuming we have criteria for distinguishing the kosher from the dodgy, what reasons can be given to show that supposed suitable candidates from amongst the kosher concepts really are shapeless in the way envisaged? However, let me state one general strategy that cognitivists might use to distinguish kosher concepts from dodgy ones. They might argue that one cannot ignore the history of how concepts are used. Some concepts stick around for a long time and seem integrated into our conceptions of ourselves as social, ethical beings. With more work the concepts of kindness and selfishness might prove more fundamental than most slang concepts.
not be so sure whether we are insiders or outsiders. Insiders are people who pretty much understand their concepts. They can be confident that their extensions are pretty much consistent. Even if they get some individual examples wrong, they can be 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 ethical 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 fairly pessimistic. An interesting contrast is provided by the fact that many of us are confident in how we use our ethical 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 ethical concepts. We can participate in everyday ethical 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 party agreeing with what has been said so far.

So, why is this bad for noncognitivists? 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 ethical concepts this pattern will figure in our deliberations strangely if we think of it, on reflection, as a non-ethical pattern, as noncognitivism supposes. 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 noncognitivism 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 cognitivist thought that the pattern is ethical and evaluative. We might not be able to articulate the whole pattern in non-ethical ways, but we seem to be fairly confident in our application and understanding of kindness, say, as the pattern of kindness.

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 ethical could be shapeless with respect to the ethical. The difference between 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 noncognitivist account of concept use. Cases such as the chocolate example are not designed to justify something’s actually 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 non-ethical characterizations were forthcoming.

How might noncognitivists challenge this? They could argue, firstly, 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, (i)–(iv).

(i) One obvious response — perhaps the obvious response — non-
cognitivists can make is to agree that we are confident in our use of ethical concepts and, hence, agree that this is probably because we are picking out some pattern. But they can challenge and ask why this cannot be a non-ethical pattern. The idea from above is that we cannot capture and articulate such things. But, goes the response, the existence of non-ethical patterns and the articulation of them are separate issues; it might be that we can articulate such patterns only feebly at best. (Recall the quotation from Blackburn in §2.) So it might be that noncognitivists cannot prove that there are suitable non-ethical characterizations available, but it might also be that cognitivists cannot prove that there are not.37

How can cognitivists respond? I think there is no killer, knock-down argument available here. (And that goes for both sides. If nothing else, my discussion shows this, contra all commentators on the debate.) But I do not think we have a scoring draw either. It is true that cognitivists cannot conclusively prove that such non-ethical characterizations are not forthcoming. But cognitivists 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 non-ethical features of each a few times to show how the applicable ethical 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. But given that examples have been continued some way, then perhaps the onus is on noncognitivists 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 we do is to shift our argument so that we are not trying to show that noncognitivists are wrong, but to argue that the onus is on them to prove otherwise. This might be enough to convince a neutral to back cognitivism, at least as a “safety-first” option. Perhaps it is this onus-shifting move that is the best way of articulating the force of examples such as the chocolate case.

(ii) This leads on to a further challenge.38 A noncognitivist might wonder about the chocolate case and other examples. 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 noncognitivist 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 ethical concept non-ethically 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 non-ethical information that has gone before. Her future judgments 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, ethical 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 children being upset. 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

37. I stand by my earlier claim that Blackburn misses the intended target in his quoted comments. However, what he says there connects with my rehabilitated argument.

38. Here I respond to a nice point from an anonymous referee.
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 paper. I have tried to be fair-minded when dealing with noncognitivism, particularly on the issue of ‘mastery of a concept’. The bar cannot be set too high. But here we reveal the limits of the noncognitivists’ interpretation. Simply because their 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 ethical 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 ethical 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 article, has the potential to be to users. That is, the challenge is that we are characterized by noncognitivists 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 one is 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. A personal example, expressed at a general level. My wife and I come from families that differ somewhat in their emotional responses to events, interpersonal relationships, general outlook on life, and more trivial patterns of domestic organization. I find myself, even now, being occasionally surprised at what things can count as being kind (and mean) and find myself reflecting on specific instances in relation to my general view of kindness, and back again, every so often. 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 one might not have got all of it right and have room to grow can add to one’s 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.

(iii) Recall that I said that it was never part of the classic presentation of the disentangling argument that noncognitivism should reflect our phenomenology. Noncognitivists might argue that our rejection of their position is driven by worries about their theory’s not reflecting everyday phenomenology. After all, we have a case where we supposedly feel confident in our everyday ethical concepts that their theory says we should not have. But, noncognitivists 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 the final claim of the previous paragraph is right. A mismatch between theory and phenomenology does not and should not spell the end of the theory straightaway. 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 opposed: the theory says that we are picking up on a non-ethical pattern when we categorize ethically, whilst 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 noncognitivist raises the issue of 39. See my (2003), 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.
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 as is familiar to many, although noncognitivism has some appealing features, such as those relating to motivation and disagreement, there are plenty of other ways in which it comes unstuck according to many commentators, in ways that do not depend on phenomenological considerations. (For example, the Frege-Geach problem.) So a defense based on short-circuiting the supposed phenomenological motivation for our worry is suspect. And this is so particularly because the opposing position, cognitivism, reflects the phenomenology pretty well and continues to do so after theoretical reflection on the precise matters discussed in this paper.

(iv) One last discussion in this section that will introduce a more complicated response. I promised earlier I would address how this argument worked against that other version of noncognitivism introduced in §2. The key, extra thought with this version is that some attitude or attitudes will make more of a difference to the boundaries of the concepts’ extension than envisaged according to the standard version of noncognitivism. So we have a more complex analysis offered of any ethical concept at issue. This seems to be good news, for we are supposing that ethical concepts are complex and anything that helps us to reflect this will allow us 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 ethical is irreducibly complex. Any attempt to make one’s analysis more complex will do nothing to stop the skepticism that we have now, finally, captured the concept. And note that when it comes to details, the particular, initial analysis we considered for distributive justice included just one role for attitudes to affect the concepts’ extensions, the approving of those Xs, Ys, and Zs. This is hardly ramping up the complexity of the analysis very much.

Indeed, further to all of this, imagine we bring back the question of the “thickness” of the attitude and start working with more than minimal hoorahs and boos. The combination of such fuller attitudes with some non-ethical description, and the retention of some minimal attitudes, might make the analysis of any ethical concepts even more complicated, and perhaps go a little way more to reflect their (supposed) irreducible complexity. Yet there will still be the issue that we cannot be sure that we have fully captured the supposed complexity of an ethical concept with non-ethical resources, even with more materials at our disposal. If you are inclined towards cognitivism and my argument from above, this should not change your mind.

But in returning to this position we can see a different challenge emerge. Recall that in §2(iii) 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 disentangled.\footnote{Thanks to an anonymous referee for encouraging me to comment on this idea.}

There are two main responses to this. First, this fallback position may not help noncognitivists of either stripe, particularly if they are fairly traditional and conventional, for they will not want to give up and say that we should be cognitivists about thin ethical concepts. They might be happy with the expression of hoorahs, but not so happy with goodness being a genuine concept. 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. Secondly, however, something trickier appears over the horizon. In earlier notes (4 and 11) I indicated that recent work on thick concepts has shown that one could provide a “separationist” (my term) account of thick concepts, where we separate, roughly, their evaluative and descriptive elements. It is a further question how the evaluative element is characterized: primarily, we can be cognitivists or noncognitivists about it. We have just seen off the separationist-noncognitivists. But what of their cognitivistic cousins? They might be happy with goodness and rightness being cognitivistically characterized and shapeless (or, rather, “appearing to us to be shapeless because we can...
never be sure that we have captured their shape non-ethically"), 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 cognitivist, but at most a half-victory, and
almost certainly a moral defeat.

A full response on this point will take us far afield. We might ask,
again, whether the thin and thick can be so clearly divided. Even if we
do assume they can be, we might query the overall picture behind this.
Roughly, thick concepts are conceived as being a product of two ele-
ments: independently existing and conceptually prior thin conceptual
content plus "finitely complex", codifiable descriptive content (which,
when we have codified it, we can be confident we have done so).41 We
need some reason to think that thin concepts should be conceived as
being conceptually prior. After all, it seems that we use thin and thick
concepts equally, they are equally illuminating, both will have connec-
tions between themselves and other concepts of equal strength and
complexity overall, and so on. Even if, say, we as young children learn
thin concepts before thick ones — and that is not obviously true — then
we might ask whether this should affect the issue of conceptual prior-
ity when assessing how concepts are used by mature users of concepts.
Perhaps there is no reason to think of the thin (or the thick) as con-
ceptually prior, so perhaps we should assume that neither is. There
is, obviously, more to say here, on behalf of both sides and on what
"conceptual priority" means in the context of this debate. But having
exposed this as a question mark hanging over this response to those
that do not wish to see the thick disentangled, we can go beyond it
and ask what the motivation is behind the assumption that whilst thin
concepts are shapeless, their thick cousins are shapeless only insofar
as they include some prior existing and separable thin element. If one
thinks that the chocolate case will carry on changing such that we will
carry on switching our judgments about its variations from good to
bad and back again, then why not think that the cause of the chang-
ing 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, learnt behavior, being
upset, features that are trivial (perhaps the upset is because the choco-
late bar is the child’s favorite), 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, un-
questionable 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. There may be no further way of expressing this
point. But maintaining the opposite view — that only the thin is shape-
less — seems to me to maintain a theory for its own sake, despite the
evidence to the contrary.

Further, we do not just have to deal with kindness in relation to
goodness; there will be all the other thick ethical concepts, not to men-
ion other thick concepts such as sublimity and tastiness that will have
some connection with (non-ethical) goodness. How, on this picture,
are the concepts of kindness and the rest related to the concept of
goodness? Do we have a set of codifiable descriptive features added to
the infinitely complex concept of goodness to give us kindness? This
seems unlikely. Perhaps we have some descriptively encoded informa-
tion that tells us just which of the good-making features are those that
make the action kind. But then we are back to saying that kindness in
toto is just finitely complex, which goes against our present assump-
tion that it is shapeless. Perhaps the finite descriptive information tells
us which good-making features, or sets of such features, are irrelevant
to something being kind. The problem here is that if one takes away a
finite number from an infinite number then one is still left with an in-
finite number. (Unlike my earlier confession, I have a strong degree of
confidence about my intuition about this sort of "infinity calculation".)

I think there are too many question marks hanging over the

   41. See Elstein and Hurka (2009) again as representative of this picture, although
they do not think that thin concepts are shapeless. (The remark in paren-
theses is my addition to reflect my argument.) Criticism of the idea of "con-
ceptual priority" can be found in Hurley (1989), ch. 2, continued by Tappolet
(2004). I comment on this whole debate and the issue of conceptual priority
in my (ms).
envisaged retreat. If one accepts that the thin is shapeless, it seems justifiable to accept that the thick is too. Of course, one could deny that the thin is shapeless. Or, as a reminder, one 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 favor our holding out against this, at least as a safety-first option. The onus is on those that oppose the cognitivism and the non-separationism of evaluative and descriptive content to provide clear and unambiguous arguments that: either show that ethical concepts, thin and thick, are shapely with respect to the non-ethical, and that we can know when we have a correct analysis; or show that the thin is shapeless, whilst the thick is not.

6. Brief Comments on ‘Mastery of a Concept’

My main argument has finished. But before I conclude, let me return to the phrase ‘mastery of a concept’ that has appeared a few times, and clarify and extend my thoughts about it.

In order to make a new point, let me introduce a third type of theorist, the evaluative reductionist. (Frank Jackson is the main example I have in mind here.) Typically such reductionists will be cognitivists about ethical mental states and descriptivists about ethical language, but will claim that the properties that people pick out when making (correct) ethical judgments are best understood as being, ultimately, non-evaluative rather than evaluative stuff. In brief, Jackson has primarily argued for this conclusion by thinking about the supervenience of the evaluative on the non-evaluative. He has claimed that every evaluative thing can be redescribed non-evaluatively, and he has also claimed that necessarily co-extensive predicates ascribe the same property. This allows him to reach his conclusion that every evaluative things simply is a non-evaluative thing.43

Recall that cognitivists go wrong if they require noncognitivists to say that outsiders can not only grasp the extensions of ethical concepts but also replicate the ethical understanding that accompanies such knowledge. I argued that it sets the bar too high to ask that outsiders master ethical concepts. The new point is this. Invoking the special idea of mastery of a concept seems to be more in keeping with a particular objection often given against evaluative reductionists.44

Just because two concepts (or predicates, as Jackson prefers) — such as an evaluative and a non-evaluative concept — are necessarily co-extensive, does that mean that we have only one property in play (as Jackson supposes)? Often this worry is made vivid with the following sort of case. The two concepts (or predicates) ‘shape with three and only three sides of the same length’ and ‘shape with three and only three equal internal angles’ necessarily have the same extension. But as some suppose, this does not imply, let alone entail, that we have only one property here. This counter seems motivated mainly by the thought that one might be able to capture some concept’s extension but not understand it sufficiently to enable one to distinguish it from other concepts that are necessarily co-extensive with it (and to...
explain it to others, to isolate the features that ground it, and so on). One might be able to pick out correctly all and only the items to which our concept concerning angles applies. But does one truly understand the difference between angles and sides and, hence, really understand the concept? And this question makes sense (as it seems to, goes the counter) because we rightly distinguish two concepts (or two predicates or properties) in our everyday dealings. This idea translates well to our discussion. We might say that even if an outsider can grasp the extension of an evaluative concept (and knows that she has), she uses non-evaluative concepts and terms only and, hence, is not in a position to explain why certain non-evaluative features often crop up on the list more than others, say, or why some cases are canonical examples. That is, she will not have mastered the concept.

But, to repeat my new point, this thought clearly moves the debate on from the shapelessness hypothesis as I have discussed it, since one is accepting (for sake of argument, possibly) that an outsider can grasp the extension of the concept (and can know that she has), so that one can debate — “reductionism or not?” — what follows once she has grasped it.

We can continue this train of thought. Someone might challenge my set-up and, in doing so, not even address my point about the bar’s being set too high. Perhaps we go wrong by distinguishing the grasping of an ethical concept’s extension from mastering it or, at the least, we go wrong by getting matters round the wrong way. Perhaps one can grasp an ethical concept’s extension only if one has mastered it, and can manipulate it and reason about it in the ways I have often listed. Or, if one prefers, perhaps the grasping of an ethical concept’s extension is possible only as part of one’s mastery of it. If this is right, the whole line of my argument — “the outsider can possibly grasp the extension of an ethical concept, and there is nothing but a cognitivist prejudice that stands in the way of this, so we have to think of a new angle in order to rehabilitate the hypothesis” — is wrong. When arguing against noncognitivism one should realize that grasping ethical concepts’ extensions is of a piece with mastering them (or comes afterwards, or similar). Then one can argue that, obviously, outsiders cannot grasp such extensions for they cannot master such concepts.

But this strategy seems suspect. It all hangs on the idea that, in some way, the grasping of ethical concepts’ extensions is reliant on, or comes after, mastery. How might one argue for this? All that occurs to me is some strategy that cites something such as (B) from §4. One might say, “Simply reporting, correctly, all and only the items that can be categorized using an ethical concept, and doing so from a non-ethical point of view, is not a realistic option. In order to get things right, one will have to latch onto, and even show sympathy with, the aims and interests that go along with the value or values that are expressed in the concept. And if one can do this, one will also, at the same time, acquire the ability to reason about and manipulate the concept in various ways. That is, one will have some mastery of it. So, mastery of a concept and the grasping of the extension of it are part of the same package, because of the value-ladenness of ethical concepts.” But such reasoning begs the question in the same way as before. Whilst it might be true (indeed, it is perhaps a truism) that ethical concepts help to express values, it is a further matter that this implies or entails that one can fully capture the items that are categorized using any such concept only using already existing ethical understanding. After we have carried out some empirical research, it might turn out that someone with none of the relevant ethical understanding for a particular concept can, with some initial help whereby she is shown some examples, latch onto an existing non-ethical pattern that allows her to capture the whole concept non-ethically. Perhaps when we express our values by categorizing things using ethical concepts, we are really latching onto such patterns (and, for noncognitivists, we then express attitudes towards such things, or similar). We require a further thought here, in advance of complicated and very long empirical research, that there are no such patterns. Simply stating the anti-cognitivist thought amounts, again, to no more than a reflection of one’s existing cognitivist hunch. So we should be confident about rejecting this challenge to my overall set-up of the debate.
There is a related issue that I wish only to raise here; I will leave it virtually untouched and ripe for discussion on another occasion. Does my rehabilitated shapelessness hypothesis work against evaluative reductionists? One might initially think it does since both noncognitivists and evaluative reductionists are broadly united in thinking that there are non-evaluative patterns of properties that justify the non-capricious use of our evaluative concepts. But there might be a difference that reductionists can exploit. Noncognitivists add an extra element to their theory: the non-evaluative stuff that (in some fashion) evaluative reductionists see as (really) being the supposed evaluative stuff, is classed as evaluative by everyday speakers and thinkers, according to noncognitivists, only because certain attitudes (probably some interesting, complex group) are taken towards it, or when it warrants certain feelings, or similar. (And from this follows the familiar disagreement about how, essentially, evaluative language functions.) This, I think, crucially involves an appeal to how judges live and judge in the world. Even if the expressing of attitudes is not at the forefront of our everyday phenomenology, noncognitivism places the position of judges, and their response to the world, at the centre of their theory. It seems, then, that my rehabilitated hypothesis seems appealing, if it does, because if puts pressure on the state of mind of judges. Evaluative reductionists, at least those influenced by Jackson, might see a way out here. Although they discuss the predicates and concepts that judges typically use, their position is motivated by more general metaphysical and conceptual theses. We might be drawn to their position through reflection on the nature of supervenience and of what we might conclude from the fact that individual examples of ethical items can all be redescribed in non-evaluative ways. They might not worry too much about whether a person is or is not confident in her use of evaluative concepts. Instead they consider, from some reflection on evaluative concept use, how one should characterize the world metaphysically and what the place of the evaluative is in it. This might be enough of a starting point for them to escape any worries I have created.45

45. However, it might not. The issue will be turn on whether one thinks that the starting point and core of the reductionist position, developed by Jackson anyway, is either (i) the grand metaphysical concerns and intuitions about supervenience, global and otherwise; or (ii) the way in which evaluative and non-evaluative concepts line up in everyday use. Or in other words, how important is it to reflect on the position and concept use of the everyday judge when developing the position? As I understand the position, it is hard for me to decide which of (i) or (ii) is more important; I see them intertwined. So, the extent to which there is wriggle room for reductionists here is hard for me to gauge. I merely advertise the possibility of an option.46

46. Previous versions of this paper have been presented at the Universities of Kent, Leeds, Oxford, and Reading. I am grateful to the following who responded on those occasions or in writing to previous drafts: Tim Chappell, Jonathan Dancy, Edward Harcourt, Brad Hooker, Tom Hurka, Gerald Lang, Mark LeBar, Andy McGonigal, Steve Pethick, Murray Smith, Julia Tanney, and Alan Thomas. (Apologies to anyone I have missed.) I am particularly grateful to two anonymous referees for their comments and to the editors of Philosophers’ Imprint.

References

The Shapelessness Hypothesis

7. Conclusion
In this paper I have shown what is involved in the disentangling argument and focused particularly on the shapelessness hypothesis. I have argued that two ways in which the hypothesis might be used—the strong and moderate version—both fail. But a third option, which focuses on the epistemic position of ethical concept users, has more life. It shifts the onus onto noncognitivists at least, and makes the cognitivism that is associated with the shapelessness hypothesis seem more appealing than if one restricts oneself to understanding it in the strong or moderate ways.46

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The Shapelessness Hypothesis

7. Conclusion
In this paper I have shown what is involved in the disentangling argument and focused particularly on the shapelessness hypothesis. I have argued that two ways in which the hypothesis might be used—the strong and moderate version—both fail. But a third option, which focuses on the epistemic position of ethical concept users, has more life. It shifts the onus onto noncognitivists at least, and makes the cognitivism that is associated with the shapelessness hypothesis seem more appealing than if one restricts oneself to understanding it in the strong or moderate ways.46

References

anyway, is either (i) the grand metaphysical concerns and intuitions about supervenience, global and otherwise; or (ii) the way in which evaluative and non-evaluative concepts line up in everyday use. Or in other words, how important is it to reflect on the position and concept use of the everyday judge when developing the position? As I understand the position, it is hard for me to decide which of (i) or (ii) is more important; I see them intertwined. So, the extent to which there is wriggle room for reductionists here is hard for me to gauge. I merely advertise the possibility of an option.46

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