THICK DESCRIPTION REVISITED: TANNER ON THICK CONCEPTS AND PERSPECTIVALISM IN VALUE PHILOSOPHY

Commentary by Anna Bergqvist

ANNA BERGQVIST is Lecturer in Philosophy at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her principal research interests are aesthetics and moral philosophy. She has published on aesthetic and moral particularism, thick evaluative concepts, moral perception, narrative ethics, art interpretation, philosophy and museums and selected issues in philosophy of language and mind. She is co-editor of *Philosophy and Museums: Ethics, Aesthetics and Ontology* (Cambridge University Press, 2016) and *Evaluative Perception* (under contract with Oxford University Press). She also works on the intersection between value philosophy and philosophy of medicine, currently preparing a monograph on particularism in medical epistemology.

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I. INTRODUCTION

AS IS WELL KNOWN G.E. MOORE HELD that the thin moral property of intrinsic goodness is neither reducible to, nor constituted by, natural properties but that it supervenes or is determined by natural properties, and that we know which things are intrinsically good by means of intuition. To many philosophers, R.M Hare and Bernard Williams included (who both hold that thin concepts are not 'world-guided'[1]) this is too extravagant. They find it doubtful whether any scientifically respectable view of the world can allow for properties other than natural ones. Hare sought to make progress with the familiar qualms about Moore's non-naturalism about thin evaluative concepts by drawing a distinction between descriptive and evaluative predicates. Philippa Foot, by contrast, sought to make progress by reversing the order of explanation or analysis between general and specific value-terms. She argues that thin evaluative concepts should be understood in terms of substantive value-terms, the thick ones, where the latter are seen as inherently evaluative concepts that, if we want to say so, pick out "first-order" moral properties. In his remarkable 1964 article 'Examples in Moral Philosophy', Michael Tanner questions the terms upon which the argument between Hare and Foot have been premised in a way that calls forth another category that is precluded by the traditional dichotomy between fact and value, between objective and subjective.

Hare holds that there are no rules governing what can count as a thin moral concept because, at the descriptive level, there is nothing in common between all the things that we call good; no set of descriptive properties provides sufficient conditions for the use of thin evaluative terms such as 'good' or 'bad'. For both Hare and Stuart Hampshire, what unifies assertions of thin deontic and evaluative concepts as moral judgements is instead to be found in the prescriptive or 'commendatory' function of (thin) moral terms; they express our pro-attitudes towards certain actions.[2] To assent to an imperative, in turn, is to prescribe action, to tell oneself and others to do the corresponding action. However, this does not mean that assertions of goodness are merely non-cognitive expressions of approval. On

1. Bernard Williams (1979) maintains that thick evaluative concepts are "world-guided", in as much as the thoughts and judgements expressed by utterances involving terms such as 'elegant', 'garish', 'integrity' are candidates for truth and falsity. At the same time thick evaluative concepts are also held to be "action-guiding", in the sense that, as Williams puts it, 'they are characteristically related to reasons for action. If a concept of this kind applies, this often provides someone with a reason for action' (Williams 1979: 140.) William's caveat about the action-guidance or practicality of thick evaluative concepts is arguably due to his reasons internalism: S has a reason to only if there is a "sound deliberative route" from S's "actual motivational set" M to (intention to) do the action. On this reading, thick evaluative concepts provide reasons only for those who endorse it (the value it may be used to ascribe) as part of one's "insider" evaluative outlook.

2. Here is how Hare (1972) expresses his position in relation to Geach's (1956) attack on the descriptive-evaluative distinction also for the most general term such as 'good' (which Geach holds is always attributive, never predicative, because one can never know what it is for an object to be good without knowing what kind of object it is): "I maintain that the meaning which is common to all the instances of the word's use cannot be descriptive and that this common meaning is to be sought in the evaluative (commendatory) function of the word." (Hare 1972: 33).

Hare's analysis, the content of judgements involving thin moral terms is found, not in their extension (which is held to be empty), but in the functional role they play in expressing our belief about the desirability of doing certain actions and not others. Foot's attack on Hare (in her 1961 paper 'Goodness and Choice' and also in her 1958 piece 'Moral Beliefs') is that a judgement cannot be identified as a moral judgement simply on the basis of formal characteristics such as universalisability and prescriptivity. Instead, she holds goodness to be tied to human flourishing. Focussing on substantive thick concepts such as *rude* rather than the thin, Foot argues that what is common is simply that all good things are 'of the kind to perform their function well' (1961: 68-59); as she argues in her (1972), moral evaluations are "hypothetical" in the sense that they serve an end – human flourishing – and will not be considered as reason-giving by those who do not share this end.

In discussing the methods that Foot employs against Hare in her attack on the separation of descriptive and evaluative judgement, 'the fashionable relating of "goodness" to "choice"' (Tanner 1964: 195), Tanner aims to elucidate just why the disputants have gone wrong, which is so much more satisfying than the simple demonstration that they are wrong. His central claim is that the search for some paradigmatic feature (or meaning-rule) of moral judgement as such should never have been begun since its outcome is irrelevant to the question as to whether there are such rules. The explanation is indirect, and proceeds via the positive suggestion in response to Hampshire (who argues that there are no rational evaluations in aesthetics because there are no general aesthetic principles) that moral argument be modelled on aesthetic evaluation, rather than the other way round. Tanner writes:

> ...if someone were to ask, "But in accordance to which general principles is art to be evaluated?" in the tone of voice of one who has worked through many treatises on aesthetics without finding any satisfaction, the best answer would be *tu quoque* about morality. Not that general principles aren't to be had there, but perhaps a fairer estimate and a deeper understanding of their role and importance, at this stage, would come from studying aesthetic argumentation, and then comparing moral argumentation with it, than from the reverse process, which we are all used to (Tanner 1964: 92).

Tanner does not elaborate on the suggestion that moral argumentation be viewed through the lens of aesthetic argumentation in his 'Examples in Moral Philosophy' essay. But both the wider context of the article as a whole and the philosophical context of the time (notably the arrival of Frank Sibley's (1959) seminal work 'Aes-

thetic Concepts' a few years earlier), suggest that what is needed is precisely a re-assessment of what rational responsiveness to reasons might, in general, be taken to be in value philosophy.

In what follows I will discuss the importance of Tanner's work for the general problem of moral relevance, and the significance of the first person in ethics.

II. UNIVERSALISABILITY AND THE PROBLEM OF RELEVANCE

Hare's (1965) disagreement with neo-Aristotelianism is complex but the feature that Tanner singles out as the most fundamental aspect in the dialectic between Foot's naturalism and Hare's universal prescriptivism ("anti-naturalism", but not of Moore's sort) is Hare's position that a "conceptual apparatus" is something that one adopts, and that adopting such an apparatus is distinguishable in principle from adopting a *moral* view, thus construed as a system of moral principles (Hare 1965: 187). As R. M. Beardsmore (1969) notes, Hare's view of morality involves a Kantian-like notion of universalisability applied to some prescriptive standard that we hold in a way that allows the speaker to *choose* her own standards, so long as we are prepared to hold it for everyone in principle.[3] Such universalised standards serve as a basis for prescriptive statements of the form "x is good" (translated as "do or choose x"). Focussing on Hampshire (1967), who held a similar view of moral judgement but rejected it for aesthetics, Tanner argues that this picture of morality involves a confused assimilation of generality and universality. He writes:

> It is only if one is thinking of [general moral commonplaces] as paradigms of moral judgements that one is able to say, "Anyone who moralizes necessarily generalizes" and mean by that more than that anyone who makes a judgement on a certain situation is committed to making the same judgement on any exactly, or relevantly, similar situation. If one does *not* mean more than that, one is merely stressing the rationality of moral judgement, in the sense that one is demanding that they be consistent. And from the demand for consistency in morality nothing follows as to the difference between moral discourse and other forms of rational discourse, of which aesthetic discourse may be a member; quite the contrary – the universalisability-criterion assimilates, it does not differentiate (Tanner 1964: 191).

Universalisability, the move from the particular case to all cases that are similar in relevant respects, needs to be distinguished from generality because the latter is thought to be a degree concept. Don Loeb (1996) argues that generality, the move from the particular case to the broad sort that *includes* the particular case, is a degree

3. Hare's use of the practical syllogism differs from that of Kant because, unlike Kant's Categorical Imperative, we are not constrained by what abstract reason allows in selecting our standards on Hare's analysis.

concept because it involves '…a measure of the relative range of application of a moral principle' (1996: 80-81). Universality, on the other hand, is different, because it does not involve reference to the particular circumstances from which it emerges (such as the agent making the judgement); one can hold a principle to be universal ' … if it can be stated without the use of any proper names or indexicals' (Loeb 1996: 81). This does also seem to be Tanner's position. In discussing Bernard Mayo's (1958) distinction between moral relationships and personal relationships, for instance, he argues that judgements on personal relationships can usually be made without explicit reference to the "uniqueness of the other person" (Tanner 1964: 193), but this does not mean that the judgements do not in fact concern personal relationships. Hence, there is no good reason to say that personal relationships fall outside the scope of morality.[4]

In questioning the default assumption that morality must depend on general principles, Tanner's position could be read as an early formulation of moral particularism, although this reading is not mandatory; as noted by Julia Driver (2012) and many others, everyone can agree that a feature's reason-giving force depends upon context. The key question is *how* context enters into the equation. One option is to adopt a standard contextualist view and say that a concept's *standards of application* can vary depending on the circumstances, where the role of context is to provide an epistemic filter whereby some, but not all, possibilities can be properly ignored. This is a standard way in which the problem of relevance has been understood (see e.g. Dancy 2004). What more needs to be said?

Well, one thing that needs to be said is that it is notoriously difficult to articulate precisely what makes a possibility sufficiently remote for it to be properly ignored (or not). The reason is that such judgements are typically made against a background of presuppositions about what is constant between circumstances in which the relation of normative support between, e.g., chastity and goodness does not hold and situations in which it does hold. We rely on background assumptions all the time in navigating the world. It may be true that if you strike a dry, well-made match, it will light. As with other generics and "for the most part" generalisations, the claim that this would be so is not rendered false by the fact that if you remove the oxygen, then the struck match will not light. Tanner's point, I think, is that moral relevance is context-dependent and that its context-dependency affects notions to which it is conceptually linked like that of criterial status in ethics and aesthetics, thus understood factively as yielding knowledge. Others have made similar claims (McDowell (1998), Dretske (1971),

4. For further discussion and defence of this claim see, e.g.. Driver (2003) and De Gaynesford (2010).

Travis (2005)). So what are the implications of this for the problem of moral argument with which we started?

III. TANNER'S METHOD

Earlier I suggested that, in recommending that moral argument be understood by comparison with aesthetic evaluation, Tanner urges us to move beyond a certain view of what an argument *must* be like for it to count as rational. Tanner's conception of the wider possibilities for philosophical argument on the subject-matter of ethics can, I think, be brought into sharper focus by comparison with Wittgenstein's idea of a 'perspicuous representation' as being a key aspect of the task of philosophy as he sees it: offering a model of comparison that 'earmarks the form of account we give, the way we look at things' (*PI* §122) in order to achieve a 'clear view' of that which is troubling us (*PI* §133). However this does not mean that there is some single philosophical method through which this is achieved. On the contrary, Wittgenstein presents the philosopher with an *open-ended* range of conceptual tools and techniques that can be used in a variety of different ways, including (but not limited to): offering 'objects of comparison' and presenting 'alternative pictures'; pointing out particular 'family resemblances' and 'neglected aspects' of our language; grammatical analysis of our use of language in practice, and so on. The real task at hand is to discern which method is the most *pointful* in each context of critical appraisal for attaining clarity and revealing meaning – to which "*whatever it takes*" would be the only answer to give in the abstract.[5]

Now, in terms of what (what we may think of as) Wittgenstein's method looks like in practice, one is reminded of Sibley's (1983) notion of a 'perceptual proof' in aesthetic evaluation.[6] The focus of Sibley's discussion is Michael Scriven's (1966) scepticism about what he calls the 'independence requirement' for aesthetic evaluation. The independence requirement is a demand on rational (aesthetic) thought that 'we must be able to know the reason or reasons for a conclusion without first having to know the conclusion; otherwise we can never get the reason as a means to the conclusion' (Sibley 1983/2001: 115). In its strongest form, the independence requirement demands that reasons must be *logically prior* to aesthetic verdicts (as opposed to temporally prior in perception). Like Wittgenstein before him, Sibley does not attempt a refutation of the sceptic by way of showing how the independence requirement could be met. Instead he effectively uses the strategy of offering a 'perspicuous representation' of art criticism by pointing to the way it is actually practised to show that aesthetic evaluations stand in no need of external validation. He

5. The meaning of the notion a 'perspicuous representation' is controversial within Wittgenstein scholarship. Read and Hutchinson argue that the notion of a perspicuous representation is not to be understood as a way of seeing things and there cannot be multiple perspicuous ways of seeing the rules of 'our grammar'; any difference we might perceive between multiple perspicuous representations of an area of our grammar is merely a difference in how they are selected and arranged, something that *can* vary depending on the purpose of the investigation. (In this respect, perspicuous representations are seen as 'additive', in as much as we can combine multiple perspicuous representations of a thing's parts in order to gain a perspicuous representation of the whole.) Whether or not this is the best representation of Wittgenstein's position falls beyond the scope of this paper. I am inclined to agree with Gregory Currie (1993) (who in turn follows John McDowell) that a *representation* (as used in ordinary contexts) that transcends any point of view seems incoherent, but I cannot argue for this claim here. For further discussion see, e.g., Moore (1997), Baker (2006), Read and Hutchinson (2008).

6. Sibley first introduced the notion of a 'perceptual proof' in his seminal (1959).

writes:

> How a critic manages by what he says and does to bring people to see aesthetic qualities they have missed has frequently puzzled writers. But there is no real reason for mystification. […] What mainly is required is a detailed description of the sorts of things critics in fact do and say, for this is what succeeds if anything does; the critic may make similes and comparisons, describe the work in appropriate metaphors, gesticulate aptly and so on. Almost anything he may do, verbal or non-verbal, can on occasion prove successful. To go on to ask how these methods can possibly succeed is to begin to ask how people can ever be brought to see aesthetic (and Gestalt and other similar) properties at all. (Sibley 1965/2001: 38).

Thus, for Sibley and Wittgenstein, there is no *one* method of how we ought to do philosophy, but rather we employ a range of different tools that fit the task at hand; *whatever it takes*.

What Tanner has to say about this is found primarily in his symposium-piece 'Objectivity and Aesthetics' (1968) (which is a response to Sibley's account of aesthetic concepts as taste concepts on a par with secondary qualities) and his treatise on Nietzsche (1994). As Derek Matravers (2003) points out, Tanner's problem with art is that, in engaging with artworks that endorse alternative moral outlooks, 'we sometimes find ourselves fictionally assenting to moral properties we think are actually false' (Matravers 2003: 101). A central feature of Tanner's treatise on Nietzsche, in turn, is the recognition that moral philosophers, when presenting themselves as studying a specific issue in moral philosophy, are in fact always relying on background beliefs about the world that are, themselves, *contestable*. Here is the conclusion that Tanner (1964) draws from contestability in relation to Foot's neo-Aristotelian response to Hare:

> …whether we are confronted with a concept to which the family-resemblance treatment is appropriate, not only as regards the observable properties which the object designates […], but also as regards the function which it fulfils or the purposes it serves […], then there might arise legitimate differences as to which things instantiate the concept better than others. […] A dispute about whether one thing is better than another, which is unsettlable, when we have all the information about the things themselves, must become a dispute about the purposes which those things serve; a dispute, in other words, about ends, and thus about the nature of the beings who have those ends. And neither Mrs. Foot nor anyone else has done much more to show that her account of knives or plants works there (Tanner 1964: 197-8).

One sometimes hears the objection that Foot's adherence to Wittgenstein's descriptivist methodology

(which is also found in Aristotle's naturalism) 'leads her to a kind of critical social theory' (Hacker-Wright 2013: 150). Hacker-Wright (2013: 150) argues that, although she has substantive disagreements with Hare and other consequentialists, 'in representing her work as a morally neutral, conceptual project of uprooting "intruding" philosophical theories', Foot appears vulnerable to the criticism that moral disagreement can stem from a difference in worldview questioning the very conceptual foundations of a given moral outlook – an objection that Iris Murdoch raised against Hare in her 1956 symposium piece 'Vision and Choice in Morality'. This is precisely Tanner's worry with Foot's argument; the extent to which her arguments are taken as definitive may itself depend on whether her audience shares her substantive moral commitments as well as implicit views of other matters. As Tanner rightly notes, Hare need not deny Foot and Austin's (1961) claims about there being specialised thick moral concepts. What he rejects is the idea that such concepts may be tied to the *conception* of what the situation is – tied to it in the sense that understanding what normative purport a moral situation has might be unattainable to people who rejected or withheld certain evaluative concepts. Tanner writes:

> All that Mrs. Foot succeeds in showing is that, given the meaning of certain evaluative terms, and granted that we are prepared to employ them at all, then we are not entitled to apply or withhold them in accordance with our chosen criteria. But Hare's point is prior to this: it is about our preparedness to make certain evaluations in the first place; or about, if you like, what our moral vocabulary is to be. Mrs. Foot's argument only operates, given a moral vocabulary. But implicit in her argument, and occasionally explicit too, is the much more important and dubious claim that we have no choice as to what to account as harms and benefits. (Tanner 1964: 198).

Tanner (1994) makes the point that individuals are rarely asked to fictionally assent to *single* moral statements; rather, moral statements come in the expression of a comprehensive worldview, a vision of the actual world that shapes precisely what one takes to be salient and not in moral disagreement. Tanner's point, if I am right, echoes Iris Murdoch's (1956) view that fundamental moral disagreements may be more a matter of differences in structure of competing visions, such that one party cannot even see how the other 'goes on' to apply the term in question to new cases, or what might be the point of doing so. This, I maintain, is also the key to the conclusion Tanner draws from his discussion of Hare and Foot, that "we need to study the structure of a whole system of morality in order to understand the postulated relationships between fact and value, and basic and derived values, which are to be found in it, rather

than studying isolated statements or fragmentary arguments which might occur within several quite different total moral outlooks" (1964: 199). Crucially, worldviews are *comprehensive* outlooks on reality, an unruly mix of evaluative and non-evaluative claims in complex interaction as a whole. To illustrate, consider the difference in structure between a Nazi outlook upon the world and that of a Christian vision. As Matravers notes, while a Nazi worldview 'will include a raft of claims about genetics and history, and views about the sublimation of individual goals to the greater destiny of the state, a Christian worldview will include claims about historical events, together with views concerning the primacy of faith, hope and charity' (2003: 101).

Once we take seriously the suggestion that the morally relevant facts cannot be accessed except *through* some perspective, an alternative to the conceptual map with which we started begins to emerge. On the new model, 'objectivity' is no longer treated as an opposite, mutually exclusive, category to that of the 'subjective' and 'particular' aspect of the discerning moral judge. And the reason is that moral judgement (and the worldviews of historical individuals more generally) is no longer theoretically construed as mere *opinion* to be checked against universal moral standards but rather the very means for giving a verdict on alternative sources and balancing their relevance to the particular case at hand.

I end with some concluding remarks about the wider significance of the present picture in elucidating the use of concepts such as value and perspective more generally.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have argued that the emphasis placed on context that is present in both Tanner's and Murdoch's accounts of value experience as always already structured by the concepts and parochial sensibilities at one's disposal effectively declares content-involving (and so rationality-involving) phenomena in human life to be inseparable from point or purpose. Nothing is valuable from 'the point of view of the universe'; value is always *value for* us (Dancy, 1993: 162). Tanner himself seems to assume that the emphasis on point or purpose must presuppose that facts about the valuer enter into the reflective explanation of the truth conditions of ethical or aesthetic claims in ways that render them radically perspectival. But this conclusion is premature: the general idea that evaluative claims are 'perspectival' is ambiguous between a number of readings that we should be careful to distinguish.

One option is to say that content and human-involving interests are interdependent: neither can be understood except in connection with the other. As Alan Thomas puts it, 'we respond to value and yet everything relevant to our subjective [human] perspective can bear on the process of evaluation and hence what those eudaimonistic values mean *for* us' (2012: 150). Thomas (2012) maintains that the correct way to conceive of this value is, indeed, presuppositionally. It does not enter into the truth conditions of an evaluative claim that such claims are relativized to the human standpoint.[7] By contrast, the picture that troubles Tanner opens the door to something more: to the prospect that we can see value content as *determined* by independently specifiable conceptual frameworks, patterns of attention, or on a larger scale, generic socio-political cultural narratives that are discernible in public discourse. In so far as the promise of a reappraisal of Tanner's account lies in such a reduction of meaning/value to a perspective, it is a new paradigm I think we should resist. And the reason is that we should distinguish conditions on the valuing subject from conditions on the associated value.

Such reorientation of focus makes available a distinctive mode of criticism, in which claims to 'objective' meaning *in* conceptual frameworks are criticised not as false *per se*, but as failing to yield the insight about the problem of objective meaning it was the point of those claims to provide. The conceptual framework of one's 'life-world' can reveal (or obfuscate) the object's meaning, it does not determine the object's meaning. To think otherwise would be to conflate what is represented with the representation.

To make good this claim we may follow the basic tactic of Adrian Moore's (1997) defence of 'absolute representations', representations that can be added without danger of conflicting points of view, and distinguish between the conditions of the production of a representation on the one hand and 'the role that the representation can play in such process as indirect integration' on the other (Moore 1997: 89). The central claim would be that the perspectivalness of the *production* of a representation, expressive of an answerable stance upon the world that (at least in the evaluative case) includes the history of whatever conceptual apparatus that is used in it, has no effect on the stance-independence of the latter.[8]

Just how we should best understand the relation of the parochial to that of an absolute conception of the world is something that I leave open for future work. The claim here is simply that the "producer" of an evaluative representation has a point of view *operative* in producing it; the context of the agent *betrays* a stance

upon the world. This preserves a critical stance, in as much as we are now in a position to hold that the *route* to ethical truth will be stance-dependent, shaped by one's conceptions, and yet think of competing conceptual frameworks as offering different perspectives on the object of inquiry – without thereby reducing meaning and truth to a perspective.[9]

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