What Conceptual Analysis May Teach Us

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Introduction: The need for conceptual analysis

Moral thought is concerned with questions about what we owe to each other—what we ought to do, how we ought to live—, and what we may strive for—the admirable, the laudable, the strife-worthy. Answering these questions involves passing deontic or evaluative judgments (that an act is right or a person admirable or a cause strife-worthy), and this can be understood as the art of classification: how to correctly classify acts, persons or state-of-affairs as right and wrong, good, bad, just, honest, upright or courageous? Is using animals for biomedical experiments correctly classified as cruel? Is a prohibition for girls to wear a Burka at school correctly classified as intolerant or is it a measure serving the equality and dignity of women?

In order to classify correctly, we need to understand the meaning and reference of the deontic and evaluative concepts used. I contend that it is the task of moral philosophy to enhance our critical grasp of the meaning and reference of these concepts by helping us to understand their specific nature: what is characteristic or typical about those concepts and the properties they refer to? Understanding the specific nature of concepts and the properties they refer to is one way of gaining a better and more critical grasp of the conditions and implications of their application.

Conceptual analysis is the premier route to coming to understand the specific nature of concepts and their conditions of application. Conceptual analysis is making explicit what is implicit in a proper use of particular concepts. It results in knowledge-that about our knowledge-how. To have mastery of a concept means that one has a set of dispositions to make inferences and judgments along certain lines. For instance, one judges an act to be wrong, which implies that—under certain conditions—the agent is blameworthy, and which also implies that you yourself would be blameworthy if you were to perform that act. Making explicit what is contained in these judgmental and inferential dispositions is the goal of conceptual analysis. The result will be a description of a whole set of what Michael Smith has called ‘platitudes’ that surround an evaluative concept: propositions that hold a priori for the concept and that we—being masters of that concept—treat as plitudinous.1 In other words, we come to master a certain evaluative concept like ‘good’ or ‘laudable’ by treating certain remarks about what is involved and implied in using those concepts as plitudinous.

Such knowledge is a priori accessible to competent users of a concept, which means that by mere reflection we may learn about the presuppositions and implications of a correct use of concepts. Conceptual analysis is a way of systematic elicitation of this

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1 Smith 1994, 29ff.
knowledge. Conceptual analysis systematizes our implicit knowledge about the appropriate application of concepts (e.g. someone is only ‘blameworthy’ if she is responsible for what she did), and in doing so it reveals what is typical of those concepts and the properties they refer to.

**What is a priori knowable about the nature of evaluative and deontic concepts: internalism and relationalism**

Conceptual analysis is more than a simple enumeration of (all) the platitudes surrounding the concept analyzed. It systematizes these platitudes and, therefore, makes it possible for us to learn something about the nature of that concept and the property it refers to. Analogously, it may be that our platitudes about the thinking procedures that we use to scrutinize our evaluative and normative judgments can best be summarized by invoking a coherentist epistemological theory, like a reflective equilibrium theory. Invoking such a theory will not only summarize the platitudes about normative argumentation and justification, it will also inform us about the nature of the argumentation and justification involved.

In systematizing the platitudes surrounding evaluative and deontic concepts there will be some remarks that will strike us as especially central to our understanding of these concepts. These are the platitudes that reveal our intuitive understanding about what is, in general, characteristic for evaluative and deontic concepts (and the properties they refer to). Two characteristics of deontic and evaluative concepts usually strike us a typical.

Firstly, it is striking, that we presuppose some internal or necessary connection between evaluative/deontic judgments and what we are motivated to. We have difficulty in understanding a person who acknowledges a value or disvalue and says “so what?”, for instance a person who says “Yes, I see that this small mountain path is very dangerous, but why would I care about that?” or “Indeed this painting is beautiful, so what?” or “Yes, he is a great philosopher, but why bother reading him…?” or “Yes, the food here is awful, so I really would like to taste it.” Deontic and evaluative judgments must imply taking a certain pro-attitude or contra-attitude that results in particular concordant actions, feelings, volitions, or dispositions. It seems that someone who says: “Yes that is really bad, so what?” has not really understood what it means to judge something bad, she doesn’t seem to grasp the idea of badness or goodness. If someone says, “Yes, I see that what is happening here is an instance of sheer injustice, but why would I care about that?” or “Indeed this is what I owe to you, but, you know, I just don’t bother a bit about that”, we try to explain the felt anomaly by invoking theories about weakness of will or listlessness.

Our experience as participants of the evaluative discourse tells us that these anomalies are indeed anomalous. For competent users of evaluative concepts it is platitudinous that evaluative or normative judgments involve some concordant normative stance. Usually the idea that there is some internal or necessary connection between evaluative/deontic judgments and motivation is labeled as internalism.
At the core of our intuitive understanding of the nature of evaluative properties there is, secondly, the idea that, on the one hand, the instantiation of these properties is dependent on typical human sensitivities and concerns and, on the other hand the judgment whether these properties actually instantiate (e.g., whether a person really is ‘admirable’) is an epistemically objective judgment. So we take it that the instantiation of these properties is in a certain sense ‘subject-dependent’. But the anthropocentricity of these qualities does not deprive them from some sort of objectivity: we know that evaluative judgments are corrigible and that we can make a distinction between what seems valuable and what is valuable. If we deem a work of art ‘beautiful’, we are saying something about that work of art, and we may be correct or incorrect in our aesthetic assessment. Still, the work of art is beautiful for us: it is aesthetically attractive because of typical human sensitivities that our grounded in our physical and psychological make-up. We may label this idea of having both ‘objectivity’ and some ‘dependency relation’ as relationalism.

I will try to show the fruitfulness of some of the techniques of conceptual analysis, by using them to come to a better understanding of this idea of relationalism. Before doing so, I have to be explicit, however, about the available techniques of conceptual analysis and about standards for good conceptual analysis.

**Good conceptual analysis**

My contention is that good conceptual analysis (GCA) must be comprehensive, normative and a priori, and that certain techniques for conceptual analysis are therefore eligible.

First of all, conceptual analysis must be *comprehensive*, (a) by revealing the *content* and *structure* of the network of all the platitudes surrounding a concept that hold a priori for it, resulting in a growth of understanding of how the contents of our judgments involved in applying the concepts hang together; and (b) by producing summaries or *systematizations* that teach us something about the *nature* of a concept and about the *essence* of the properties the concept refers to.

Secondly, GCA must be *normative* by revealing the reasons for the various ways in which our concept use might be said to be sound. It may be that in making explicit what has up to now been implicit, we see that we need to *correct* some of our pre-reflective judgmental and inferential dispositions connected to that concept. It may be that upon reflection we see that there has been some defect in our understanding and use of the concept. For instance, it may be that we pre-reflectively treated evaluative judgments as merely subjective, say as matters of taste. But upon reflection we see that in fact we treat evaluative judgments as statements that can be disputed, as statements that are considered to be right or wrong, and, therefore, not merely matters of taste. Reflection may thus improve our competence as owners of the concept and the network that surrounds it.

Thirdly, GCA must be and must remain *a priori*. This means (a) that a correction of our pre-reflective judgmental and inferential dispositions connected to those concepts should not result in an effective ‘change of subject’ or ‘shift of category’ (e.g. from the
deontic to the empirical). By way of conceptual analysis we bring to light what we consider to be involved in the correct use of concept, not the actual use. Conceptual analysis is, therefore, a normative hermeneutical exercise. It is critical. But at the same time it should be modest in its interpretations. It should read the correct use of a concept from the practice of concept-use, doing justice to the norms that this practice reveals. Conceptual analysis should do justice to the phenomenology of evaluative talk and not discharge this phenomenology as deeply erroneous, for instance by coming up with an error theory that tries to explain why we are mistaken to take evaluative talk at face-value in trying to understand its character. Error theories are never a priori given. The aprioricity of conceptual analysis also means (b) that summarizations and systematizations that reveal what is typical of particular concepts should not fall prey to the mistake (often made by generalizations) of sacrificing crucial differences between particulars in order to attain a general typology. This is what has happened in the course of the philosophical debate about ‘response-dependence’ accounts of value terms. The debate has concentrated on the specific formulation of the biconditional that is said to be a priori knowable as characterizing secondary order concepts, moral concepts, aesthetical concepts and evaluative concepts of all kinds. The term ‘response-dependence’ was introduced by Mark Johnston to point out those concepts that are—as far as their meaning goes—biconditionally connected with more or less immediate and primitive responses, whereas this biconditional connection is a priori knowable.\(^2\) Unfortunately, the comparison with colours and secondary-qualities in general has diminished attention for the crucial differences between the concepts that are putatively to be analysed in a response-dependence manner. This has led to general theories about the nature of, for instance, colours, dispositional properties and evaluative properties of which it is questionable whether these theories are a result of a critical systematisation of ‘folk intuition’. It is dubious whether these theories provide for accounts that are a priori attainable to able users of the concepts analysed.\(^3\)

I contend, that conceptual analysis does not profit from general typologies of the nature of concepts or of the preconditions of mastering those concepts that ignore crucial differences between types of concepts and the particular properties they are referring to. Conceptual analysis has to use piecemeal methods, like the case-method that describes various cases, including various merely possible cases of concept-application to elicit our intuitions about the correct and incorrect application of concepts. Eliciting such intuitions will teach us about the meaning of those concepts, i.e. about the mini-theories that are definitive of their proper use.

Another method conductive to good conceptual analysis is a piecemeal comparison of various types of concepts, with an eye for both differences and similarities. Such a comparison will show, for instance, what exactly can be learned from a comparison of ‘red’ and ‘good’. Let me illustrate such a comparative exercise, by using it to come to a

\(^2\) Johnston 1989, 113–137.

\(^3\) In some cases the accounts may even be strongly reversionary vis-à-vis ‘folk’ intuitions.
better understanding of the ‘relationalism’ that is characteristic of nature of evaluative properties and the instantiation of the properties they refer to.

**Relationalism, semantics and essence.**

Intuitively, it seems that there is some relation between what is normative (what we regard as good, beautiful or admirable etc) and our physical and psychological ‘make up’ that results in typical human sensibilities and concerns. Take our abilities of aesthetic evaluation. Why would people rather listen to a Bach Trio Sonata or a Lied from Schubert than to some bunch of uncoordinated sounds produced by randomly hitting the manual of a piano that is out if tune? Why do we think that a piano is out of tune in the first place? Well, it seems that our love for tonal and rhythmic (instead of atonal and arrhythmic) music has something to do with the structure of the specific auditive sensibilities that we have as humans. Whether noise is counted as music, or even beautiful music, seems to depend on the occurrence of a particular ‘match’ between our auditive sensibilities and certain physical facts about the frequencies and amplitude of sound waves. Some constellations of noises, forms, colours or movements will have aesthetic meaning to us because of the way we are disposed to relate to them. Similarly, we could say that we are disposed to react to acts, states of affairs and persons in a moral way, because of the particular ‘match’ between features of these acts, states of affairs or people and concerns springing from our physical and psychological ‘make up’ as humans. In general, it seems that that there is a relation between the instantiation of normative concepts and what can be known about human nature. ‘Secondary quality’ properties, like colour-properties are paradigmatic for the kind of relationalism I am thinking of here.

However, this idea of relationalism need not necessarily enter into the semantics of concepts that refer to secondary quality properties. Redness for instance is semantically spoken an *ostensive* property: a property that is available to be picked out in perception. Redness is visually present in such a way that the only way to learn the use of the words ‘red’ and ‘redness’ is by being presented with red objects and having the visual redness-experience. A relationalist account of the essence of colour properties is not part of the semantics of the concepts that we use to refer to those properties. Similarly, relationalism reflects our grasp of what is essential for being a normative or evaluative property like being admirable, beautiful or good, without having such a relationalism being part of our intuitions about the semantics of the concepts referring to those properties.

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4 Therefore, the main difference between ostensive and most evaluative concepts is that while knowledge of the instantiation of properties to which ostensive properties refer requires causal contact with what is perceived, tasted or smelled, knowledge of the wrongness of acts or the badness of persons does not require any actual acquaintance with that act or person. Mere reflection upon the general nature of, say, the cruelty of an act or the cowardliness of a person will be sufficient for attaining knowledge about the instantiation of the rightness- or goodness-property.
It may, however be, that our understanding of what is essential of a property is also included in the semantics of the concept that refers to that property. In case of certain ‘thick’ evaluative concepts like ‘dangerous’, ‘courageous’, ‘generous’, ‘cowardly’ or ‘elegant’, for instance, we see our understanding of the character of the properties referred to reflected in the semantics of the concepts. These ‘thick’ evaluative concepts have some similarity to dispositional concepts like ‘fragile’, because they describe the disposition of an event or act to be harmful, or the disposition of a person to take a certain attitude or to do something courageous, generous, elegant or cowardly. ‘Being generous’ is a dispositional property, just like ‘fragility’. It says something about what a person is disposed to do, just like fragility says something about how certain molecule structures are disposed to behave, which means that it describes what would happen to those structures under certain circumstances (similarly: ‘being generous’ describes what a person under certain circumstances would do). This dispositionalism which is essential for the properties in question is directly heard in the semantics of the concepts used to refer to those properties.

Also in case of the ‘thin’ deontic and evaluative concepts like ‘right’ and ‘good’ there appears to be a direct connection between our intuitions about the semantics of such concepts and our grasp of what is essential for being the property the concept refers to. Semantically ‘right’ and ‘good’ are like abstract concepts such as flatness or ‘being parallel of’. If we think about the nature of the properties the concepts refer to we find the same abstractness. The ‘rightness’ of an act is a second-order abstract property of having properties that provide for conclusive reasons to regard the act as the right one to do. The ‘rightness’ of an act is not a property additional to these reason-giving properties. It is a formal property that tells us to what conclusion those reasons should bring us (and in case of ‘rightness’ this conclusion is an all-or-nothing judgment: there is conclusive reason to say that the act is right or not). Similarly, the ‘goodness’ of a person or a state-of-affairs is a property of a purely formal kind: it is the property of having natural properties that provide reasons to take a certain favourable attitude or stance. Something is ‘good’ because its natural properties constitute reasons to respond to it in a certain way.

In the case of evaluative concepts like ‘admirable’, ‘despicable’, or ‘preferable’ (which are neither clearly ‘thick’ nor ‘thin’) things are more complicated. These evaluative concepts have something in common with evocative concepts like ‘disgusting’ and ‘boring’ or, more generally, ‘appealing’ and ‘repellent’. The evocative character of the evaluative property of being admirable or despicable is directly heard in the semantics of the concepts used to refer to them. Something is admirable if it evokes admiration. Still, there is an important difference. We say that something is nauseating or disgusting if it evokes actual nausea or disgust in responders in normal circumstances. However the instantiation of the property ‘admirable’ is not actually dependent on our reaction of admiration, because the dependency is a normative dependency: someone is admirable if she deserves to be admired, that is, if it is appropriate to admire her. We can make a distinction between false admiration and appropriate admiration, but it is difficult to make such a distinction
in cases of nausea or disgust. Evaluative properties like ‘admirable’, ‘laudable’ or ‘preferable’ are not simply evocative. They are evocative in a normative way of reading it: they instantiate in case the response of admiration, praise or preference is merited.

This reveals a general lesson about evaluative properties. On the one hand there is a relation between the instantiation of such properties and human ways of reacting, given specific human sensibilities and concerns. There is a relation between attributions of value and the kind of creature that attributes. In the words of Frank Jackson:

> The relativity to kinds of creatures arises from the fact that which properties of the world around us stand in the right relation to certain experiences for those experiences to count as presentations of the properties is, in part, a matter of how the creatures having the experiences are, just as which kinds of intruders a burglar alarm latches onto is in part a matter of how the alarm is made, and which weather conditions a barometer records is in part a matter of how the barometer is calibrated.

On the other hand, however, this relationalism is not straightforward, because it is always also a normative question whether an evaluative property instantiates, which means that the answer to the question whether something is good, beautiful, admirable or preferable is not simply given with the occurrence of a match between facts of the world and specific human sensibilities and concerns. Something is good, beautiful, admirable or preferable if it merits or makes appropriate such a way of regarding it. Whether a response is appropriate is not just an empirical (e.g. a statistical) question, it is always also a normative question. Relationalism in the case of evaluative properties has an essential normative dimension.

**Comparing colour and value: the issue of rigidification**

We can come to a better understanding of this normative dimension by asking in what sense value attributions would change if our specific human sensibilities and concerns were to change. There seems to be a difference on this count between evaluative judgments and colour attributions. If our sensitivity for colours were to change radically, so that everything that appeared as yellow came to appear as blue to us (and the other way around), would we say that yellow things have become blue (and blue things yellow) or would we say that what looks blue actually is yellow (and the other way around)? My intuition is that the world of colours would have changed relative to a change in human perception. Perhaps in the first year ‘after the change’ people would still say: “this blue-

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5 Still, even in the case of ‘disgusting’ and ‘boring’ we tend to invoke normativity, for instance when we say “This food is not disgusting, it is delicious!”, or “You are wrong, this book is not at all boring, actually it is very exciting!” This invocation of normativity is also to be found in other, what Johnston (2001, 182) calls “inherently sensuous values”, like ‘charming’, ‘horrific’ and ‘banal’, in spite of the close connection between the instantiation of those value-properties and our actually having the concordant reactions.


7 Jackson 1998, 95.
It is not altogether simple to characterize the ‘mind-dependence’ of secondary qualities. But it is plausible to say that these are relative to our perceptions of them in this way: if we were to change so that everything in the world which had appeared blue came to appear red to us, this is what it is for the world to cease to contain blue things, and come to contain only red things.8

But, says Blackburn, moral categorizations are not in this way relative to our sensitivities:

The analogue with moral qualities fails dramatically: if everyone comes to think of it as permissible to maltreat animals, this does nothing at all to make it permissible: it just means that everybody had deteriorated.9

According to this view deontic and evaluative concepts are ‘objective’ (or non-relative) in the sense of being independent of changes in our sensibilities and attitudes. What does that mean?

Take the following intriguing example discussed by Peter Railton. Railton presents a science fiction case in which human reproduction through cloning has become a wide spread practice. Many choose to have full-scale adult replications of themselves, instead of having to care for a naturally born child. However, the cloning process does not produce exact replicas. Railton tells us that replica-individuals…

…lack a special, intrinsic interest in those from whom they are replicated or who are otherwise genetically close to them. Biological relatedness does not seem to matter in its own right to them, even after they have fully “matured” and are successfully integrated into the community, and even when they are well informed and reflective. In virtually all other respects, they are emotionally and affectively our replicas.10

Because of a change in sensibilities these human clones have lost any sense of the value of having and caring for kin relationships. For us kinship matters in its own right, but for them such agent-relative reasons have no appeal. They only have ‘impartial’ concerns. Now, should we say that although humans have become insensitive to it, this change in sensibilities would not alter the intrinsic value of relations effected among biological kin? Or should we say that there is nothing desirable or valuable anymore about having kin relationships, as the agent-relative reasons involved in valuing such relationships have definitely lost any appeal? Railton thinks that what is intrinsically good for humans is not rigidly fixed by actual human responses, but reflects instead potentially evolving or changing human responses. Still, this must be different in case of

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8 Blackburn 1985, 14.
9 Idem.
moral evaluation. For, if we all turned into sadists, this would certainly not mean that torturing animals or maltreating children would no longer be wrong.

Railton counters this kind of objection by pointing out that a change in human sensibilities would not change the intrinsic badness of wanton cruelty toward animals or children or any victim of that conduct, simply because such conduct will remain intrinsically unlike. Because moral evaluation is non-partial, we have to take into account the basic interest of others and this implies avoiding cruel behaviour. Fortunately, the newly cloned humans in Railton’s example are fully sensitive to such impartial reasons, and as impartiality is constitutive of morality we can say that their change in response to the meaning of kinship relations does not affect their moral outlook. So, Railton believes that we should not save morality by rigidifying on actual human responses as we now have them (before turning into sadists), but by rigidifying on what is constitutive of morality, viz. impartiality, on a higher level of evaluative conceptualization.

The problem with such an approach is that it presupposes that it is possible to conceptualize moral value so as to distinguish it radically from prudential value. If we can make such a radical distinction, then there seems to be no problem in contending—as Railton does—that what makes the life of a human being good and worthwhile (prudential value) is closely related to the fluctuating sensibilities and concerns of humans. Kinship relations have no meaning whatsoever for the newly cloned humans, so it seems that we cannot hold that having these relationships and caring for them would contribute to the flourishing of their lives. A change of sensibility must result in a change of prudential value.

But can we make such a clear separation between what is prudentially valuable and what is morally valuable, given the fact that also what counts as moral values is in some way dependent on typically human sensibilities and concerns, just as with prudential values? Railton believes that morality is limited to the requirement of impartial consideration of the basic interests of others. But does that mean that there is nothing morally wrong with a mother who abandons her children in order to work 24 hours a day for Oxfam? And does that mean that from a moral point of view the man on the Titanic who leaves his own little son behind in order to save the two daughters of the steersman must be praised? Able users of the concept ‘moral’ will not think that agent-relative concerns have no moral import and that the only thing that counts in moral judgment is the impartial consideration of the basic interests of all.

Our folk intuition about what morality is all about does not limit moral concerns to the important concern for impartiality. And there is no good reason for a reversionary attempt to replace our ‘folk’ use of the concept ‘moral’ with a more philosophical one. For if we think about it why impartiality plays such an important role in our idea of morality, it seems that we are led to consider what makes human being into the kind of creatures that deserve equal consideration of their basic interests. Why do humans deserve equal worth and respect? I am inclined to think that human beings have equal worth because their reflective capacities turn them all equally into sources of normativity. Humans are, given their reflective capacities, capable of asking normative questions
about the good and the beautiful, and they are capable of answering those questions. As such they come to value things, or to disvalue them. The human capacity for critical reflection is the source of what is taken as normative. Humans spread value around the world and are as such equally to be valued.

But not only this capacity of critical reflection is essential to being human, equally essential is the fact that we may be captivated by love and partial consideration. Harry Frankfurt speaks about the ‘necessities of love’: we have concerns that we cannot help having. The love of parents for their children is the paradigm of such inescapable concerns. These concerns are not irrational. They provide for focus and structure to our practical life. They give us the identities or self-conceptions under which we value ourselves. I am not just a human being, I am also a father to my foster-son, a scholar, a amateur musician and lover of the French kitchen. There is a dynamics between these self-conceptions and the things in the world that I take to be normative and valuable. Our life of rational reflection derives is impetus and structure from what we love and are concerned about.

If moral evaluation has to do with what we owe to each other given what is essential to us as human beings, then we cannot say that love for one’s kin is completely void of moral value. Love for kinship is of moral value, because it says something about who we are. It says something about what is essential to ‘us’ humans. The new (cloned) ‘humans’ in Railton’s example have lost something that seems to be definitive of being a human being. This is why love for kinship cannot just be considered to be a fluctuating non-moral (‘just’ prudential) concern. Caring for one’s family seems to carry with it moral value. Partial concern is to be included in what we owe to each other.

Saving moral value by rigidifying on what is constitutive of morality in terms of impartiality therefore cannot do the whole job. What is essential of being morally valuable and right is also related to what we now understand to be constitutive of being a human creature. We need to rigidify the reference of moral concepts in order to avoid a devastating relativity. We need rigidification in order to fix what is essential for the properties to which moral concepts refer.

Compare this to the rigidification involved in fixing the essence of the properties to which natural concepts refer. H₂O is the essence of water, a fact that has been established a posteriori (via empirical research). That H₂O is what makes water into water means that, if on another planet we were to find that the watery stuff that on our planet has the chemical structure of H₂O there has a different chemical identity, than we would not call the watery stuff on that other planet “water” but “something that looks like water”. So the essence of water is rigidly determined by the physical nature of our world.

Similarly, what is essential of being valuable and right is rigidly determined by human nature: that what turns human beings into human beings. And we have at least partial empirical access to factors that make a being into a human being. We can to a large extend account for this in psychological and sociological terms. Of course, humans may change. But this change will be within a range of what can genuinely be called ‘human’.

11 Frankfurt 1999.
Such changes will result in changes of value. But if changes result in humans loosing what makes them human, such changes will not result in a change of value.

References


