

Thick Ethical Concepts and the Fact-Value Distinction¹

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Over the last few years, the ‘fact-value distinction’ (FVD) has become increasingly unfashionable, due in part to a number of arguments adduced against it. I myself do not believe the FVD can be maintained, and I think there are good arguments against it. But I have my doubts about the cogency of one of the arguments often invoked against it. This argument turns on ‘thick ethical concepts’ (TECs); I will refer to it as the ‘TEC-argument’. The TEC-argument is attractive because it proceeds from an uncontroversial premise—that we grasp and use TECs—to a substantive and controversial conclusion—that something is wrong with the FVD.² This sounds too good to be true; and it is. I intend to show that although the TEC-argument is frequently invoked, it has never actually been made.

1

Here is the TEC-argument as it appears in Bernard Williams’ influential book *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*:

[S]ubstantive or thick ethical concepts... [e.g.,] *coward, lie, brutality, gratitude* and so forth... are characteristically related to reasons for action. If a concept of this kind applies, this often provides someone with a reason for action... We may say... that such concepts are “action-guiding.”

At the same time, their application is guided by the world. A concept of this sort may be rightly or wrongly applied, and people who have acquired it can agree that it applies or fails to apply to some new situation. ... the application of these concepts is at

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²Just what this conclusion would amount to is a question I wish to leave open for the present; as Hilary Putnam has noted, there are many FVDs, and they tend to be confused with one another. This point will come up again below.

the same time world-guided and action-guiding. How can it be both at once?

The prescriptivist account...gives a very simple answer... Any such concept...can be analyzed into a descriptive and a prescriptive element: it is guided round the world by its descriptive content, but it has a prescriptive flag attached to it. ... All the input into its use is descriptive, just as all the evaluative aspect is output. It follows that, for any concept of this sort, you could produce another that picked out just the same features of the world but worked simply as a descriptive concept lacking any prescriptive or evaluative force.

Against this, critics have made the effective point that there is no reason to believe that a descriptive equivalent will necessarily be available. How we “go on” from one application of a concept to another is a function of the kind of interest that the concept represents, and we should not assume that we could see how people “go on” if we did not share the evaluative perspective in which this kind of concept has its point.³

We need a working definition of ‘thick ethical concept’; let us take a TEC to be a concept that is both world-guided and action-guiding.⁴ Williams takes this argument to “refute the simplest oppositions of fact and value” (150), though not necessarily the more sophisticated ones, such as that between science and ethics, which he endorses. There is a strong way and a weak way to construe this argument. On the weak construal, it could be read as a challenge. The proponent of the FVD claims that fact and value can always be distinguished. Fact and value can be found entangled in TECs that we master and use. The challenge is: distinguish the descriptive and evaluative components of the TEC, or surrender the claim that they *can* be distinguished.

On the strong construal, the argument could be taken as presenting *reasons* to think that the demanded factoring into descriptive and evaluative

³Williams, 1985, 140f; further references by page number in the text.

⁴As we will see, it is not clear that this is a sufficiently robust characterization. For one thing, *all* useful concepts are in *some* way action-guiding. But restricting the application of the notion to (what is often considered to be) the domain of ethics or morals is also unsatisfactory, since the (would-be) TECs that most strongly support the TEC-argument are not drawn from this domain. Finding an adequate characterization of the notion of a TEC is a task we may insist that the proponent of the TEC-argument be able to perform; we shall encounter considerations that suggest that this demand is unlikely to be met.

components cannot be produced. These reasons would have to do with the notion of a shared evaluative perspective.

Now at first blush it should seem that the demands posed by the weak version of the TEC-argument can be met. (If this is correct, the stronger version of the argument is the only viable version; this version would have to show why, despite appearances, the demands cannot have been met after all.) A way to shoulder the burden of proof has been described by R. M. Hare in *Freedom and Reason*. Our language provides resources for muting the evaluative force of TECs. For example, one can say things like, “In describing John’s act as courageous, I don’t mean to be condoning it in any way”, or, “That would be a kind thing to do—though in saying so I don’t mean to recommend it”. What is to prevent the proponent of the FVD from meeting the challenge to factor a given TEC by availing himself of these resources? Hare proposes doing just this:

It is true that there is no single evaluatively neutral word. . . which in the present case [that of the TEC ‘courageous’] can be used to describe such actions without committing the describer to any evaluation; but we *could* have such a word. What I shall actually do, in default of an invented word, is to use the same word ‘courageous’, but to make it clear by my tone of voice or by putting quotation marks round it, that I am using it in a purely descriptive sense, implying thereby no commendation whatever.⁵

For clarity of presentation, I will adopt a slightly different orthographic convention. For any TEC ϕ , a term ϕ^* can be introduced as picking out its descriptive component. (We can call this *starring the concept*.) Then the demand that the descriptive component be picked out can be met by picking it out as ϕ^* . For example, “courageous*” could be introduced as having the force of “courageous”, with the evaluative elements muted or masked. If this technique is acceptable, then the demand for the descriptive equivalent of a TEC is easily met.

Now it may be objected that concept starring produces a concept that is *parasitic* on the TEC used to introduce it, and that therefore it does not sup-

⁵Hare, 1970, secs. 10.1; cf. also 2.8. Hare returns to the point at Hare, 1981, secs. 1.5 and 4.3. Notice that it is the availability of muting techniques that makes this option a live one. Without these, proposing to introduce a term T_d as having the descriptive meaning of some other term T would be on a par with, say, trying to introduce a term T'_c stipulated to have the conventional (or alternatively, the empirical) meaning of a term T' ; and responding to an attack on the FVD by pointing to T_d would be on a par with trying to defend the analytic-synthetic distinction by pointing to T'_c . (I’m grateful to Hilary Putnam for bringing this comparison to my attention.)

port the genuine fact/value discrimination required by the TEC-argument. However, this is not obviously the case. Let's distinguish two senses of parasitism. *Etymological parasitism* involves one concept's having been, as a matter of historical origin, introduced in terms of the 'host concept'. For example, the concept 'debugging' was introduced using the concept 'bug', viz., 'insect'. *Mastery parasitism*, by contrast, involves the inability to master, use or grasp a concept without having mastered or grasped the host concept. Some functional concepts might be like this: it is hard to see how one could master the concept 'hat-rack' without having grasped the concept 'hat'. But it is clear that etymological parasitism does not entail mastery parasitism: it is easy enough for a novice programmer to learn about debugging without bringing to bear the concept 'insect' in any way.

So if the imputation of parasitism amounts to the claim that the descriptive component ϕ^* of ϕ is etymologically parasitic on ϕ , it is uncontroversial but fails to impugn the possibility of an independent grasp of ϕ^* . But if the claim is to mean that mastery of ϕ^* entails mastery of ϕ , then, while its truth might cut against the use of concept starring as an objection to the TEC-argument, the claim is question-begging if produced without supporting argument. (We will see why even mastery parasitism does not necessarily rule out concept starring as a response to the TEC-argument, below.) It is simply not the case that "there is no reason to believe that a descriptive equivalent [of a TEC ϕ] will necessarily be available". We have seen a general technique (concept starring) for producing the requisite descriptive equivalents. Now I am happy to concede that there may well be something wrong with concept starring; it has an awfully fishy look to it. The point is just that if the TEC-argument is to go through, Williams owes us an explanation of just what is wrong with it.

The technique of concept starring which we have adapted from Hare shows there to be a gap between the uncontroversial premise of the TEC-argument, to the effect that we grasp and deploy TECs, and its controversial conclusion, that there is something wrong with the FVD. What the option of concept starring shows is that there is no direct or obvious connection between these; until the gap is filled, we do not actually have a TEC-*argument* at all—merely a suggestion that such an argument might be produced.

Williams does not produce the argument. He does, however, gesture at considerations that might be used to bridge the gap between premise and conclusion. These have to do with the notion of a shared evaluative perspective. He writes:

An insightful observer can indeed come to understand and antic-

ipate the use of the concept without actually sharing the values of the people who use it. . . But in imaginatively anticipating the use of the concept, the observer also has to grasp imaginatively its evaluative output. He cannot stand quite outside the evaluative interests of the community he is observing, and pick up the concept simply as a device for dividing up in a rather strange way certain neutral features of the world (141f).

Just what Williams means by this is not obvious. To be sure, to “understand and anticipate the use of the concept. . . the observer. . . has to grasp imaginatively its evaluative point”: this is trivially true, since part of the use of a TEC (specifically, the evaluative part) is to guide evaluation and action. But this does not yet address the question of whether the descriptive aspect of the concept can be understood without any such imaginative grasp of the evaluative point. Williams’ own examples are unhelpful: he discusses “school slang that uses special names for various objects, places, and institutions in the school” and “languages in which males and females use different names for the same thing”; supposedly, “[d]espite its differences. . . the case of the ethical concept [is] only a deeper example of the same thing. . . there is a condition that has to be satisfied if one is to speak in a certain way. . . [which explains] why the observer is barred from saying just what the locals say, and we can also see that he is not barred from recognizing that what they say can be true” (143f). It is all too easy to master this kind of school slang, and such gender-controlled vocabulary, while remaining imaginatively oblivious to its evaluative component. (Consider the teacher who knows his nickname, but not that—or why—it is derogatory; or many American students of Japanese.) Evidently, the alleged features of a TEC that we are trying to understand are just those in which it is “deeper” than—i.e., differs from—the examples Williams gives us. In short, Williams’ point is insufficiently explained.

Not only do we not yet have a clear idea of why Williams takes shared evaluative perspective to be required for mastery of a TEC’s descriptive force, but it is also not obvious why even necessarily shared evaluative perspective should suffice to “refute. . . oppositions of fact and value”. It would be implausible to suppose that if you share an evaluative perspective (something that Williams is obscurely distinguishing from sharing *values*), then you can no longer distinguish values from facts—that moral perceptiveness ineluctably involves a sudden and peculiar blindness. And even if certain facts can only be discerned by persons occupying a particular evaluative perspective, this is not yet a demonstration that something is amiss with

the FVD. Consider the parallel ‘fact-liver distinction’: the claim that (most) facts are distinct from your liver. Unless you had a liver you would be unable to discern those facts; but does this impugn the fact-liver distinction? Does it ‘refute the simplest oppositions’ of facts and livers? Of course not.

The upshot is that we will have to put a certain amount of work into developing a plausible construal of Williams’ claim. What this construal will turn out to be depends, first, on whether we take a minimal condition on ϕ^* being the descriptive equivalent of ϕ to be identity of extension. If it is, then we may construe the claim that one cannot master the descriptive equivalent of a TEC, or use a TEC without grasping its evaluative point, as follows: mastering certain concepts, i.e., being able to determine to which individuals they apply, cannot be done without sharing the relevant evaluative perspective. There are two possibilities in light of which this claim can be understood: either the shared evaluative perspective plays a part in determining the extension of a TEC, or it does not.

If the shared evaluative perspective does *not* (partly) determine the extension of a TEC, then the role it plays in permitting mastery of the extension of the concept, if it is not entirely occult, must be motivational, in the following way: if I am not an enthusiastic philatelist, I’m not going to be able to bring myself to master the arcane jargon of stamp-collecting. But this possibility does not seem to provide any reason to think that descriptive equivalents of TECs cannot be produced (even if only by appropriately motivated individuals).

If shared evaluative perspective is to pull its own weight in the TEC-argument, it must therefore play a part in determining the extensions of TECs. For example, I might apply the concept ‘courageous’ only to actions which, in addition to exhibiting lack of fear in the face of danger, and so on, are actions of which I approve. (Hare makes this suggestion at Hare, 1970, sec. 2.7.) In this case it is plausible that a descriptive equivalent of a TEC, one that shares its extension with the concept, cannot be produced; but this conclusion no longer seems to impugn the fact-value distinction, for the simple reason that the descriptive component of the TEC does not *have* the same extension as the TEC. That is, if TECs are thought of in this way, it is no longer reasonable to insist that a TEC and its ‘descriptive equivalent’ must apply to the same objects. There is still no reason to think that TECs cannot be understood as involving two distinct sets of criteria (one descriptive, one evaluative), and consequently as factorable into descriptive and evaluative components. For example, ‘delicious’ might be thought of as having a descriptive component (roughly, ‘It’s food of such-and-such a kind’) and an evaluative component (roughly, “I like it”). To be sure, ‘delicious’

is not very world-guided; but it seems that to the extent that evaluative perspective plays a role in determining the extension of a TEC, that TEC will fail to be world-guided.

The other possibility is that Williams does not intend descriptive equivalence to be merely a matter of identity of extension. Now it is not an unusual opinion that concepts have more to them than extensions: the concepts ‘animal with a heart’ and ‘animal with a kidney’ have the same extension, but grasping one concept is not grasping the other, or even grasping the other’s descriptive equivalent. Perhaps even concepts with necessarily identical extensions are distinct in this way. (E.g., ‘has three sides’ and ‘has three angles’.) But this is not enough to undermine the FVD, since insisting that one must grasp descriptive elements of the concept (over and above its extension) in order to have mastered its descriptive equivalent still permits factoring the TEC; whereas requiring a grasp of further *evaluative* elements begs the question against the proponent of the FVD.

Evidently Williams has some stronger notion of there being more to a concept than its extension, and some suitable stronger notion of ‘shared evaluative perspective’ in mind. This is at any rate suggested by his allusion to Wittgenstein (“[h]ow we ‘go on’ from one application of a concept to another”).⁶ Now we cannot take it for granted that we know which exegetical reconstruction of the *Investigations* Williams has in mind. But I am inclined to attribute to him some such view as this. Grasping a concept—and, a fortiori, a TEC—just is being able to ‘go on’ in the right way. It is not as though grasping the concept were an independent factor that *explained* the ability, something distinct from ‘going on’ in the appropriate circumstances. But ‘going on’ in the right way in the case of a TEC means applying it *evaluatively*.

This is not to attribute to Williams’ Wittgenstein a crude behaviorist analysis of grasping a concept—that if you grasp the concept, you do such and such. The force of ‘going on’ here is expressed with such phrases as “the kind of interest the concept represents”; in grasping the TEC, we attend to that interest. It is this that gets called sharing an evaluative perspective. Just as you don’t understand addition unless you know things like, ‘4’ is the *right* answer to ‘What’s 2 + 2?’, so you don’t grasp the concept ‘courageous’ unless you know things like, being courageous is a *good* thing.

⁶Williams further describes “[t]he idea that it might be impossible to pick up an evaluative concept unless one shared its evaluative interest” as “basically a Wittgensteinian idea” (218).

I can't give the Wittgensteinian considerations I'm gesturing at the treatment they deserve right here. What's important for present purposes is that they're not a way to fill in the TEC-argument. It is characteristic of the view I take Williams to have in mind to look at what one *does* (or at what it is appropriate to do) in particular kinds of circumstances. Appropriate response, or at any rate, appreciating what responses are appropriate, is constitutive of being at home in the practice. It follows that such considerations beg the question against the FVD: if appropriate response (construed not merely as linguistic or classificatory behavior) is criterial for mastery of the concept, then it is trivially true that one must share the evaluative perspective to grasp the TEC.⁷ Moreover, the considerations in question have nothing to do with *concepts* at all, much less TECs: the point is either broader (having to do with the practices that, generally, constitute our 'forms of life'), or more narrow (a matter of what responses are constitutive of mastery of a particular concept). The Wittgensteinian point directs our attention *away* from concepts, away from the propositional understanding of language in which concepts are functions mapping objects onto truth-values.

In any case, the need to use the heavy machinery of the *Investigations* deprives the TEC-argument of its most attractive and promising feature, that is, its reliance on an uncontroversial and straightforward premise. Unlike the claim that we use and grasp TECs, the Wittgensteinian considerations in question are controversial and ill-understood—in fact, probably the only point on which Wittgenstein exegetes are likely to agree is that most commentators do not understand Wittgenstein. And finally, note that these considerations are not yet an argument, but only an indication of the kind of place where Williams might be inclined to seek one. We have not actually been given the TEC-argument.

Let me return for a moment to the weaker, burden-of-proof construal of the argument. To address the demand that descriptive equivalents of TECs be produced, we invoked concept starring. But it might be claimed that merely producing a starred concept is not enough. What is needed is

⁷Conversely, if these considerations were effective, the appeal to TECs would be superfluous. As we just saw, these considerations elicit much the same kind of (admittedly indirect) action-guiding force from concepts like 'addition' as they do from concepts like 'courageous'.

One might respond that the points of concepts like 'addition' are not *evaluative*. But what would be the bite of this response? They are certainly action-guiding; and their use can constitute acts of approval, blame, condemnation, and so on. (Think of the arithmetic teacher who says: "*That's* not even addition.") Perhaps the suggestion is that they are action-guiding only when paired with a further, non-descriptive rule; but this would a peculiar objection to be raised by someone attacking the FVD.

a *definition* of the descriptively equivalent concept. This demand is, at any rate, often suggested by remarks made in the course of presenting the TEC-argument. To “produce another [concept] that pick[s] out just the same features of the world but work[s] simply as a descriptive concept lacking any prescriptive or evaluative force” (140) is not simply to introduce a new concept *as* the descriptive equivalent of the TEC in question: it is to *define* the new concept.

It is worth saying a little more at this point about what is required of the demanded definition. First, it must be non-circular; that is, it must not use the TEC being defined in the definiens. Second, because it is defining a purely descriptive concept, all concepts used in the definiens must be themselves non-evaluative. (This condition entails the first.) Third, the definition and the TEC whose descriptive component is being defined must designate the same class of individuals.

These are essentially the conditions for the success of a reduction. This suggests that the demand for such a definition is an expression of the reductionist reflex that has characterized much of analytic philosophy. I suspect that the repeated and consistent failure of reductionist projects to satisfy these demands arises not from some metaphysical or ontological fact (that this or that kind of thing is not reducible) but from unsurprising verities about language. There is little reason for the terms of natural languages to be so definable: they are, by and large, not introduced or learned by reductive definition; and a new word is needed only when old ones will not do. Consequently, reductionist definitions should be the exception rather than the rule, for reasons having to do with the pragmatics of natural languages and their histories rather than with metaphysics and ontology. If TECs prove undefinable—as they almost certainly will—this need not have anything to do with shared evaluative perspectives, or with the supposedly ineluctable entanglement of fact and value. For we can expect such undefinability to characterize most concepts, regardless of their evaluative status. If the claim is to carry any weight at all, it would have to be shown, first, that definitions cannot be produced, and second, that the *reason* they cannot be produced cuts against the fact-value distinction.

As on the other points we have discussed, Williams does not provide the requisite argument. Perhaps this was not his intention; his statement that “critics have made the effective point that there is no reason to believe that a descriptive equivalent [of a TEC] will necessarily be available” (141) comes

with a footnote to two well-known papers by John McDowell.⁸ If there is an argument, perhaps it is to be found there.

2

McDowell's attempts on "the claim that the problematic perceptions [that amount to applying TECs] can be analyzed into cognitive and appetitive components" (346) have more structure than the mere claim that satisfying the requirement of identity of extension requires shared evaluative perspective. So if we are dissatisfied with the considerations Williams presents, examining McDowell's arguments is evidently the next step.

If a TEC ϕ can be factored into its cognitive and orectic components ϕ^* and ϕ^+ , recombining those components in a process of practical reasoning should produce the same behavior as simply acting on the basis of ϕ ; and acting on $\phi^* + \phi^+$ should seem the same internally as acting from ϕ : if recombination is the inverse of factoring, factoring followed by recombination should be the identity operation. But, thinks McDowell, this condition (which I will call the *recombination condition*) cannot be satisfied.

Recombination of ϕ^* with ϕ^+ proceeds (McDowell describes his opponents as claiming) in a pattern that "can take the form of a 'practical syllogism'", in which "[k]nowledge of the major premise... is none other than the disposition of the will which is required... over and above any strictly cognitive state", and in which "what is stated in the minor premise... [is] a straightforward fact about a situation at hand, which... would be incapable of eliciting action on its own" (336). Let S be a situation, $\phi^*(S)$ represent ϕ^* 's applicability in S , and $A(S)$ be an action of type A taken in S . Then the recombination can be schematized as follows:

ϕ^+ : Whenever $\phi^*(S)$, do $A(S)$.

$\phi^*(S)$

∴ Do $A(S)$.⁹

⁸McDowell, 1978; McDowell, 1979; further references to the latter by page number in the text. McDowell endorses the claims that a proponent of the FVD must hold that a TEC is analyzable into descriptive and evaluative components, and indirectly endorses the claim that getting the extension of the concept right requires sharing the concept's evaluative perspective (1978, 18, 20). However, he defers "a proper discussion" to elsewhere; I take it that "Virtue and Reason" is intended to take up the deferred burden.

⁹Whether the conclusion of the syllogism is supposed to be an action, an intention, a decision, or something else can be left open for the moment; all that is required is that

ϕ^+ , the oretic component of ϕ , is accordingly a rule. We can summarize this as the claim that McDowell’s opponents are committed to *deductive recombination*.¹⁰ I take it that the deductive nature of the recombination is supposed to capture the requirement that the force of the TEC be reconstituted without loss. What McDowell calls “the thesis of uncodifiability” (345) is the claim that the rule required for the success of the deductive recombination cannot be formulated:

If one attempted to reduce one’s conception of what virtue requires to a set of rules, then, however subtle and thoughtful one was in drawing up the code, cases would inevitably turn up in which a mechanical application of the rules would strike one as wrong—and not necessarily because one had changed one’s mind; rather, one’s mind on the matter was not susceptible of capture in any universal formula. (336)

That is, rather than simply insisting that ϕ and ϕ^* cannot have the same extension, it is claimed that a ϕ^+ cannot be such that actions triggered by ϕ^* will be the same as those generated by ϕ . The *application* of the TEC—that is, not its mere extension, but its role in practical reasoning—cannot be reproduced by its factors. But this is to argue that it cannot have been adequately factored in the first place.

Now the question here is whether the FVD commits its defender to deductive recombination in a way that lays him open to McDowell’s argument. I will suggest that it does not, and that this can be seen by considering the role a particular kind of TEC has in the argument. I will call TECs which are essentially applicable only by a virtuous individual *virtue-concepts*. McDowell considers no other TECs.¹¹

We, however, shall. Consider a concept that is world-guided and action-guiding, say, ‘winner’ (in a particular kind of game or competition). A judge,

the conclusion be identical with whatever is taken to follow upon an application of the TEC being factored.

¹⁰McDowell repeatedly refers to his opponents’ understanding of such practical syllogisms as the “deductive paradigm” (339, 345); at p. 346 he mentions “our paradigm of reason, deductive argument.”

¹¹It might be suggested that any thick *ethical* concept must be a *virtue*-concept, or at any rate, have a recognizable connection to virtuousness, and that the example I am about to introduce is not an example of a TEC at all. (The examples usually given in the course of presentations of the TEC-argument tend to be of this kind: ‘courageous’, ‘cruel’, ‘pert’, etc.) Recall, however, that the notion of a TEC was introduced in terms of being world-guided and action-guiding; not surprisingly, virtue requires a good deal more than that.

seeing that so-and-so won (application of the concept is world-guided), has reason to award him the prize (application of the concept is action-guiding). To reconstruct the practical syllogism that supported the action, we analyze ‘winner’ into ‘winner*’—the purely cognitive component, picking out such facts as so-and-so’s having come in first—and ‘winner+’—the orectic component that, following McDowell, we can formulate as a rule, say, ‘When x is the winner*, award x the prize.’ The reasoning then goes

1. When x is the winner*, award x the prize.
2. x is the winner*.
3. Award x the prize.

It might be suggested that the major premise is inadequate because such reasoning is defeasible: when informed that the mafia has determined that y is to win instead, a judge might prudently, if not virtuously, refrain from awarding x the prize. And, to anticipate the proposal that the major premise be modified to incorporate this exception, recall that not all such exceptions can be anticipated. But the conclusion, analogous to that developed for virtue-concepts, that the orectic component of ‘winner’ cannot be codified, does not follow. For the proponent of the FVD can deny that the practical syllogism that recombines the components of the TEC in question is to be interpreted deductively.

The deductive recombination requirement can be derived from the requirement that the practical syllogism reconstitute the force of the TEC without loss only given the additional condition, that grasping and applying the TEC suffices fully and univocally to determine one’s response to the situation in which it is applied. But in ordinary cases, grasping and applying a TEC does not involve this complete determination: knowing that so-and-so is the winner need not *of itself* determine the judge’s response. In these ordinary cases, the requirement that the practical syllogism reconstitute the force of the TEC without loss means merely that the indeterminacies in the response that follows upon an application of the TEC must be reproduced in the deployment of the corresponding practical syllogism. Not surprisingly, that is what we find: practical syllogisms are notoriously defeasible.

McDowell’s treatment of virtue-concepts departs from this analysis as a result of his adopting “the attractive idea that a virtue issues in nothing but right conduct” (332). McDowell identifies “sensitivity”—i.e., the ability correctly to deploy virtue-concepts—with the virtue. This has as a consequence that our treatment of the imprudent judge cannot be adapted

to virtue-concepts: we cannot say that the virtue-concept was correctly applied, but that wrong action resulted because some *other* consideration (such as an offer he was unable to refuse) was not brought to bear; for on McDowell's view, wrong action can *never* result from the correct application of a virtue-concept.¹² If the application of a virtue-concept is to guarantee such infallibility all by itself, the syllogism that reconstitutes the force of virtue-concept from its components may not be defeasible.¹³ The orectic component of the virtue-concept that serves as the major premise of a practical syllogism must therefore itself codify *all* the conditions that could conceivably relate the descriptive component of the virtue-concept to action. McDowell is correct to think that we have no reason to believe that this is possible.

Whether the requirement that grasping virtue-concepts guarantee moral infallibility is part of an adequate understanding of virtue is a question I do not wish to address here. The question at hand is, what role can such virtue-concepts play in the TEC-argument? The TEC-argument runs: here are concepts that cannot be factored into fact and value. Virtue-TECs, if they exist, have been argued to be unfactorable. But do we have any reason to believe that anyone has mastered concepts that satisfy McDowell's criterion of infallibility? If the result of having acquired a virtue-concept is that one can do no wrong, then we have no reason to believe that anyone has ever mastered a virtue-concept—or that anyone ever could.¹⁴ Accordingly, while there may be purposes within moral philosophy for which the kind of idealization embodied in this infallibility claim is useful, supporting the TEC-argument is not one of them. For the TEC-argument proceeds from actual concepts; concepts that we grasp (or, at any rate, that human beings like ourselves could plausibly grasp). Not-fully-graspable concepts with

¹²McDowell does allow that someone may “perceive what the virtuous person would...his failure [to act virtuously] occurring only because his appreciation of what he perceives is clouded, or unfocused, by the impact of a desire to do otherwise”—i.e., a further factor, not part of the reasoning proper, preventing correct application of the virtue-concept.

¹³It will follow from this that virtues are unified (McDowell argues this on p. 333) and that the virtuous individual can have only one genuine orectic state, whose object McDowell identifies with Aristotelian *eudaemonia*, glossed as “the virtuous person's conception of the sort of life a human being should lead” (343).

¹⁴McDowell himself acknowledges “the colossal difficulty of attaining the capacity to cope clear-sightedly with the ethical reality which *is* part of our world” (347, his emphasis). Context shows the capacity to be in large part that of applying virtue-concepts. Elsewhere he concedes that “[t]his view of virtue obviously involves a high degree of idealization,” but admonishes us that “in a view of what genuine virtue is, idealization is not something to be avoided or apologized for” (1978, 28).

near-magical properties cannot play this role in the argument, and are not convincing counter-examples to the FVD. Appeal to McDowell's discussion of the uncodifiability of the virtues consequently fails to fill the gap in the TEC-argument; and I am aware of no other arguments on his part that support the TEC-argument.

3

Here is another version of the TEC-argument, presented by Hilary Putnam:

The use of the word 'inconsiderate' seems to me a very fine example of the way in which the fact/value distinction is hopelessly fuzzy in the real world and in real language. . . Even though each of the statements 'John is a very inconsiderate man', 'John thinks about nobody but himself', 'John would do practically anything for money' may be simply a true description in the most positivistic sense. . . , if one has asserted the conjunction of these three statements it is hardly necessary to add 'John is not a very good person'. When we think of facts and values as independent we typically think of 'facts' as stated in some physicalistic or bureaucratic jargon, and the 'values' as being stated in the most abstract value terms, e.g., 'good', 'bad'. The independence of value from fact is harder to maintain when the facts themselves are of the order of 'inconsiderate', 'thinks only about himself', 'would do anything for money'. (1981, 138f)

Now this is not yet the complete argument. For instance, why can't we 'factor' the TEC 'considerate' into a descriptive component *considerate** and an evaluative component whose force is roughly '*Consideration** is morally good'?¹⁵ Like the version of the argument we quoted from Williams, the TEC-argument as here stated is importantly incomplete.

Putnam's way of filling in the gap runs something like this. The facts that make up the world in which we live—our *Lebenswelt*—are value-dependent, not in the sense that we don't know how to tease the facts apart from the values, but in the sense given by the following counterfactual: if the values

¹⁵Putnam himself points out that one can 'mask' the evaluative force of a word like 'considerate', using it "not for the purpose of blaming Jones, but with the intention of predicting and explaining Jones' behavior to someone else" (1981, 138). He entertains the idea that the argument from John's inconsiderateness to his not being a very good person involves a specifically evaluative premise on p. 141.

were different, the facts *themselves* would be different too. Use of TECs is part of having the values that constitute the facts. (I will call this the *Lebenswelt argument*.)

Putnam supports the claim regarding this dependence of fact on value by considering the practice of public discourse.

It is all well and good to describe hypothetical cases in which two people ‘agree on the facts and disagree about values’, but in the world in which I grew up such cases are unreal. When and where did a Nazi and an anti-Nazi, a communist and a social democrat, a fundamentalist and a liberal, or even a Republican and a Democrat, agree on the facts? Even when it comes to one specific policy question, say, what to do about the decline of American education, or about unemployment, or about drugs, every argument I have ever heard has exemplified the entanglement of the ethical and the factual. (1990, 167)

Because such political dispute often involves disagreement over the use of TECs, and because of the proximity of this passage to others in the same text in which Putnam invokes TECs, we may tentatively take this as a filling-out of the TEC-argument. But a bit of caution is indicated. Political opponents frequently disagree in just this way over ‘facts’ that are not appropriately described using TECs. And this raises the possibility that, however cogent Putnam’s point may be, it is not after all a version of the argument we are here examining.

Moreover, although it is true enough that political discourse is like this, this does not suffice to settle the dependence of fact on value. After all, the sloppiness of political discourse is notorious, and an explanation is close at hand: when solid evidence is hard to come by, and when people have a large stake in believing one thing or another, they play fast and loose with the facts. It is hard to imagine a setting more likely to prompt self-deception in human beings, and we should not be surprised when most political argument turns out to look like the expression of such self-deception. The inability of opposing sides to agree on the facts does not show that facts depend on values but only that politics brings out the worst in people.

(After all, if the opposing sides actually thought that the ‘facts’ in such cases really did depend on the values one holds, would they even bother arguing? Such arguments consist largely of appeal to purported ‘facts’. If it was thought that one’s opponent could correctly reject the adduced ‘facts’ simply by saying that because his values differ, they are not ‘facts for him’,

argument would at best be in bad faith. More likely, it would simply be abandoned in favor of other methods of persuasion or coercion.)

Evidently, then, appeal to actual discourse must be supplemented with an explanation of why it works the way it does and with argument that will rule out the null hypothesis of sloppiness and self-deception. The TEC-argument still needs to be filled out. Putnam has two subsidiary arguments, which I will now review. I will not attempt fully to develop these arguments; this would be a task lying beyond the scope of this paper. The brief discussion of each that I will present will suffice, however, to demonstrate that neither is a completion of the TEC-argument.

Putnam's first argument (which I will call the *cookie cutter argument*) is developed using his example of the 'super-Benthamites', whose different value system will lead to their evolving a conceptual apparatus alternative to our own, and involving the use of TECs other than ours. As this happens,

The texture of the human world will begin to change. In the course of time the super-Benthamites and we will end up living in different human worlds. . . it will not be the case that we and the super-Benthamites 'agree on the facts and disagree on the values'. In the case of almost all interpersonal situations, the description we give of the facts will be quite different from the description they give of the facts. (1981, 141)

Now it is true that we and the super-Benthamites will be, to use an old metaphor, equipped with different sets of cookie cutters, and will cut up the world differently. But, it may be responded, both sets of facts are equally sets of facts; they differ only in the purposes and values that make attending to them relevant. We can agree that their facts are facts—albeit facts only ruthless bureaucrats with “a sick system of values” would consider to be the important ones. And they can agree our facts are facts as well, even if facts that would be attended to only by “soft-headed, superstitious, prisoners of irrational tradition” (140). Why is it right to say that the facts depend on the values, rather than—something with which no-one will take issue—that the *selection* of the facts depends on the values?

Putnam replies:

Even if none of the statements they make about the situation are *false*, their description will not be one that we will count as adequate and perspicuous; and the description we give will not be one that they could count as adequate and perspicuous. In short, even if we put aside our 'disagreement about the values',

we could not fully regard their total representation of the human world as rationally acceptable. (141)

Recall that for Putnam, “rationally acceptable” functions as an approximation to “true”; *Reason, Truth and History* argues for a view of truth as *idealized rational acceptability*. The upshot is that the super-Benthamite description of the human world will be, by our lights, not *true*. If we take this global description to answer to a global fact that is the sum of the many individual facts presented by the statements made by the super-Benthamites, then to say that the description is not true is to say that the putative global fact is, after all, not a fact.¹⁶ Evidently, then, we have facts (at any rate, the global facts) depending on values, by way of the TECs it is appropriate to deploy.

There are two problems with this argument. The first is that although the argument, or this particular version of it, mentions TECs, it is not a version of the TEC-argument. TECs are used only inessentially in the argument, which turns on the requirement that the relevant facts be adduced if a description is to be adequate. Sometimes the relevant facts will be described using TECs, and TECs are convenient for illustrating the argument’s point. But the same argument could be made without mentioning TECs, and indeed Putnam produces an example in which failing to use furniture-concepts in the description of a room condemns it as inadequate.¹⁷ (And—although this point is hard to put cleanly—the mere existence of TECs is not sufficient to get the argument going, for if there were, somehow, only one *possible* description of the world, the argument would not go through, regardless of whether that sole description used TECs or not.) In short, the TEC-argument is an argument that proceeds from the existence or grasp or use of TECs to the claim that the fact-value distinction cannot be made; but even if the cookie-cutter argument arrives at the same conclusion, it does not proceed from the same starting point, and so it is not the same

¹⁶It might be objected that this view takes Putnam as being willing to acknowledge that a conjunction of truths need not be true. But notice that Putnam does not characterize the super-Benthamites’ statements as *true*: he says, “[e]ven if none of the statements they make about the situation are *false*, their description will not be one that we will count as adequate and perspicuous” (1981; 141). On the internal realist view, there is a gap between ‘true’ and ‘not false’: it could well be that neither a statement nor its contrary is rationally acceptable. This state of affairs is particularly likely to arise where the statement and its contrary are inadmissible in virtue of deploying an unacceptable bit of conceptual apparatus, such as an inappropriate TEC.

¹⁷Putnam, 1981, 138; he also points out that one of the loaded facts from which the conclusion ‘John is not a very good person’ follows “does not contain any value term” (139).

argument.

What is doing the work in the cookie-cutter argument is the internal realist view that truth is idealized rational acceptability. To pick out something as a fact is just to pick out its description as true; facts have values built right into them, specifically, those values invoked by the notion of rational acceptability. The argument, as just outlined, does not seem to turn on our general ability to grasp and use TECs (although it does deploy a particular TEC, ‘rationally acceptable’), and so is not a version of the TEC-argument. Because this argument is not a version of the TEC-argument, further development of it would lie beyond the scope of this paper. I note only that, even if it works, it does not serve the same dialectical function as the TEC-argument. Unlike the TEC-argument, which proceeds from the uncontroversial and concrete fact that we grasp and use TECs, this argument cannot get off the ground unless one first accepts the doctrines, both more general and more controversial, argued for in *Reason, Truth and History*. The TEC-argument, if valid, can be used to convince just about anybody. The argument from internal realism will convince only those who believe that internal realism is true.

A second argument is the argument from the softness of counterfactuals.¹⁸ Take a counterfactual of the form $p \leftrightarrow q$ to have the interpretation, q holds in the closest possible worlds in which p holds. Then whether the counterfactual is true will in general depend on which possible worlds are closest. But closeness of possible worlds is a matter of relevant similarity, and what counts as relevant similarity will vary depending on what one thinks is important (one’s ‘values’) and on what conceptual apparatus one uses to pick out the features of different possible worlds—*inter alia*, which TECs one deploys. Since many facts are (despite the superficial linguistic opposition) constituted by counterfactuals,¹⁹ it would follow that these facts vary along with one’s values, and, more specifically, along with which TECs one deploys to pick out features of possible worlds that are used to judge their similarity or ‘closeness’.

An illustration may help here. L (an American with leftist political views) and R (an American with rightist political views) disagree about whether the Khmer Rouge would have massacred all those people if the US had not secretly bombed Cambodia. R takes the nearest possible worlds in which the bombing did not take place to be worlds in which the Khmer

¹⁸This move was suggested to me by Putnam (in conversation).

¹⁹The canonical example of this, due, I think, to Amartya Sen, is the distinction between starving and fasting: whether I am starving or fasting depends on whether I could eat if I wanted to.

Rouge are Communist genocidal lunatics (this feature being made salient by his Republican values, which lead him to deploy the relevant TECs). L, on the other hand, takes the nearest possible worlds to be those in which the Khmer Rouge are benevolent social reformers. (He may concede that this description does not hold of the *actual* world, but attribute this to the bombing: the closest worlds in which the bombing did not take place hold Khmer Rouge benevolent social reformers.) With only moderate exaggeration, we may suppose that L regards ‘Communist genocidal lunatics’ as an oxymoron, and that this TEC is unavailable to him; and similarly, that the notion of a ‘benevolent social reformer’ is unavailable to R: this allows the availability and use of TECs to play an explicit role. Picking out the different sets of ‘close’ possible worlds using these TECs allows the two to affirm contrary counterfactuals. L holds that had they not been provoked by the bombing, benevolent social reformers would not have engaged in genocide. R believes that Communist genocidal lunatics are likely to commit atrocities whether provoked or not. The ‘fact’ of who is responsible for the Cambodian genocide turns out to depend on one’s values, and the channel through which value shapes fact is the use of TECs in determining the truth of counterfactuals.

Again, however, the argument does not employ TECs essentially. Individuals with different values could, in light of those values, find different features the appropriate ones with which to pick out similar or close possible worlds, where those features are not picked out by TECs. (And again, the mere existence of TECs does not suffice to make the argument go through: for if concepts (somehow) had ‘objective similarity weights’ that settled what role the concepts had in determining an objective similarity metric over possible worlds, the argument would not go through even if some of those concepts *were* TECs.) Although TECs are useful for illustrating the force of the argument, the argument from the softness of counterfactuals turns out not to be a version of the TEC-argument.

The TEC-argument seems appealing because it moves from an uncontroversial premise (we use TECs) to a controversial conclusion (the FVD is mistaken). If the gap in the TEC-argument could only be filled in by invoking controversial premises that, if accepted, themselves refute the FVD without further appeal to TECs, then the TEC-argument itself would prove superfluous and ineffective. When Putnam’s arguments are disentangled, they turn out to have just this structure—the arguments do not invoke TECs in any essential way (although they are illustrated with examples that involve TECs), and the premises are far more controversial than the one that makes the TEC-argument look so attractive.

4

Iris Murdoch's short but dense book, *The Sovereignty of Good*, is cited by both Putnam and McDowell.²⁰ It is clear that Putnam, at least, regards *The Sovereignty of Good* as the original locus of the TEC-argument:

Murdoch was the first to emphasize that languages have two very different sorts of ethical concepts: abstract ethical concepts (Williams calls them 'thin' ethical concepts), such as 'good', and 'right', and more descriptive, less abstract concepts (Williams calls them 'thick' ethical concepts) such as, for example, *cruel*, *pert*, *inconsiderate*, *chaste*. Murdoch (and later, and in a more spelled-out way, McDowell) argued that there is no way of saying what the 'descriptive component' of the meaning of a word like *cruel* or *inconsiderate* is without using a word of the same kind. . . ." (1990, 166)

Murdoch herself does not refer to any further sources of the TEC-argument; evidently the trail ends here. If we do not find a satisfactory rendering of the TEC-argument here, we may take it that there is none to be found in the literature.

However, it would be surprising to find the TEC-argument in *The Sovereignty of Good*, simply because Murdoch's interests are largely orthogonal to those of advocates of the TEC-argument. TECs are thought of by these advocates as concepts that are essentially world-guided and action-guiding; these are the features that make them interesting and important. But while Murdoch does think TECs can be action-guiding,²¹ this is not her primary concern, and she carefully constructs her central example of a mother and her daughter-in-law (much alluded to by advocates of the TEC-argument)

²⁰Murdoch, 1970; further references by page number in the text. Cf. Putnam, 1981, 139; Putnam, 1990, 166f; McDowell 1979, notes 35–37. Williams mentions a seminar with Murdoch and Foot—but not *The Sovereignty of Good*—as the source of “[t]he idea that it might be impossible to pick up an evaluative concept unless one shared its evaluative interest” (218n7).

²¹Murdoch says that “the agent... will be saying ‘This is A B C D’ (normative-descriptive words), and action will follow naturally” (42). “One is often compelled almost automatically by what one *can* see” (37). She speaks repeatedly of “a world which is *compulsively* present to the will”; “we cannot suddenly alter what we can see and ergo what we desire and are compelled by” (39): “Man... is a unified being who sees, and who desires in accordance with what he sees...” (40, her emphases). While this is not the place to attempt to explicate Murdoch's view of decision and action, the recurring suggestions of automaticity and compulsion point to a dark picture of something other than reasoned action on the basis of reasoned application of TECs.

so that the TECs in question will be action-*neutral*, rather than action-guiding: “whatever is in question as *happening* happens entirely in M’s mind” (17, emphasis hers). Murdoch’s concern is to present a picture of inner moral activity, activity that, unlike action, is not public. It is this inward activity—roughly, the refining of one’s moral vision—that “could be described in...one very natural way...by use of specialized normative words, what one might call the secondary moral words in contrast to the primary and general ones such as ‘good’ ” (22). Her TECs, or TEC-analogs, are picked out not by their being action-guiding, but by the role they play in a certain kind of inner moral development.

Moreover, Murdoch regards applications of TECs as *reality-* rather than world-guided; ‘reality’ is here a proprietary term. “M [the mother-in-law of her example] is not forced to adopt these [here, psychoanalytic] concepts at all, in preference say to any particular set of moral or religious concepts” (27). Rather, “a refined and honest perception of what is really [!] the case...is the result not simply of opening one’s eyes but of a certainly perfectly familiar kind of moral discipline” (38), one that sees not merely “accurately but...justly and lovingly” (23). Murdoch acknowledges that “[p]hilosophical difficulties may arise if we try to give any single organized background sense to the normative word ‘reality’”, as she is using it (40), and I do not propose to enter upon an exploration of those difficulties here. Suffice it for present purposes that the application of TECs, controlled by such a morally-imbued ‘reality’, is not world-guided in a way that is likely to support the TEC-argument. (Murdoch’s example of responsiveness to ‘reality’ involves the substitution of one set of TECs for another, e.g., ‘delightfully youthful’ for ‘tiresomely juvenile’ (17f). But pairs of TECs of *this* kind (others might be ‘frugal’ and ‘cheap’) suggest, if anything, not the inextricable entanglement of fact and value, but an easily made distinction between the factual component shared by two loaded expressions and their evaluative or orectic remainders.)

Finally, the contrasts Murdoch is developing have little to do with the concerns of later advocates of the TEC-argument. ‘Good’ is not, on Murdoch’s view, a *thin* ethical concept (that is a mistake she attributes to the “existentialist-behaviorist view” she is attacking (41)), but rather, *infinitely thick* (cf. 46ff). And what Murdoch takes to be “especially characteristic of normative words” (33) is the importance of their location within an individual’s inner history: “hard” “fact” is being contrasted not with value-infected

and -softened fact, but with *private* fact (24f, 33).²²

Given this divergence of interests, it should not be surprising that when one turns to *The Sovereignty of Good*, the TEC-argument is simply not to be found. Murdoch does attack the fact-value distinction, but she does this by attacking the moral psychology that, she believes, underwrites its adoption. (This is a line of attack that I myself believe should be taken very seriously.) She regards the philosophical tendency to ignore TECs as symptomatic of a pernicious body of doctrine in philosophy of mind and ethics:

It is not *characteristic* of the man [it] describ[es]... to possess an elaborate normative vocabulary. Modern ethics analyses ‘good’, the empty action word which is the correlate of the isolated will, and *tends to ignore* other value terms.²³

On Murdoch’s view, however,

the primary general words *could* be dispensed with entirely and all moral work *could* be done by the secondary specialized words (42, my emphases).

As the phrases I have italicized show, the connection between the doctrine she is attacking and its preference of thin over thick ethical concepts is not direct enough to support anything like the Modus Tollens that would be needed to constitute the backbone of a TEC-argument; and even if it were, the moral psychology in question is not yet the FVD, but only, once again, indirectly (albeit importantly) connected to it. Interestingly, although Murdoch frequently invokes TECs in her attempt to show this body of doctrine false to our moral experience, she insists that her argument could also have been made “in terms of... visual imagery, or in simple or complex metaphors” (18).

Of the claim that TECs *cannot* be factored into descriptive and normative components—much less an argument for that claim—there is no trace. And of an argument that the use of TECs entails the falsity of the FVD (rather than merely that a correct picture of moral development is naturally given using TECs), there is, again, no trace. Its appearance in

²²Murdoch goes on to suggest that her treatment of normative concepts can be extended to such non-ethical concepts as ‘red’ (29). But, as we have already remarked, if the features of TECs that have been taken to show fact and value to be indistinguishable are common to such concepts as ‘red’, then the consequences of such features for the FVD become non-obvious.

²³8, my emphases. The emptiness of ‘good’ is of course being attributed to her opponents’ understanding of it and is not Murdoch’s own view.

citations notwithstanding, *The Sovereignty of Good* is not a locus of the TEC-argument.

5

We have reached the end of the trail, and it turns out that the missing TEC-argument is precisely that.²⁴ To the best of my knowledge, that argument has simply not been made. This fact does not, of course, suffice to rehabilitate the fact-value distinction: there are, I believe, other cogent arguments against it. Some of the arguments that were touched upon in the course of distinguishing them from the TEC-argument may be among these; I am in particular sympathetic to Murdoch's attempt to see the FVD as derived from a mistaken moral psychology. But the TEC-argument should not be accepted as grounds for rejecting the fact-value distinction until it is actually produced.

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²⁴There are other philosophers who invoke the TEC-argument. Phillipa Foot adduces TECs against the fact-value distinction, but fails to defend the claim that they cannot be factored (1958/1978). Susan Hurley (1989) sometimes seems to have this argument in mind when she attacks what she calls 'centralism'.

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