

The Genealogy of Epistemic Virtue Concepts

Alan Thomas

Department of Philosophy

University of Kent

Canterbury, Kent, CT2 7NF, UK

a.p.thomas@kent.ac.uk

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Abstract

This paper examines the treatment of thick ethical concepts in Williams's work in order to evaluate the consistency of his treatment of ethical and epistemic concepts and to assess whether the idea of a thick concept can be extended from ethics to epistemology. A virtue epistemology is described modeled on a cognitivist virtue ethics. Williams's genealogy of the virtues surrounding propositional knowledge (the virtues of "truthfulness") is described. It is concluded that this genealogy is an important contribution to the project of virtue epistemology and thick concepts must not only feature in the account but will sustain more of the marks of objectivity than their ethical counterparts even on Williams's demanding assumptions.

Keywords

Virtue epistemology, thick concepts, Bernard Williams, genealogy, sincerity and accuracy.

This paper considers the role that thick concepts might play in epistemology by examining their treatment in Bernard Williams's work. In Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy the importance and limitations of thick concepts formed a central strand of the discussion of ethical objectivity. [Williams, 1985, chapter eight] That is because the mere existence of such concepts gives prima facie support to a cognitivist treatment of ethics as grounded in a core of evaluative judgements that sustain all the marks of truth and that seem capable of being known.¹ [McDowell, 1979; Wiggins, 1978; Thomas,

2006] But Williams brought further considerations to bear on the issue in his distinction between an objectivist and a non-objectivist modeling of ethical practice. [Williams, 1985, p. 147] An objectivist model would sustain the claim that on some occasions, when thick concepts are responsibly used, this use would constitute a claim to know. However, the kind of pervasive reflectiveness that is integral to the kind of modern society for which the theory is developed leads inevitably to the destruction of such knowledge claims. Better, then, Williams argued, to adopt his distinctive non-objectivist alternative in which ethics is sustained not by knowledge, but by something else, confidence, that is “basically a social phenomenon”. [Williams, 1985, p. 170; Altham, 1995] This is confidence not so much in concepts as in the form of life that sustains any given repertoire of concepts (thereby, indirectly, making other things knowable). [Williams, 1985, p. 154, pp. 170-171; Moore, 2007]

The term “thick concept” is not used in Williams’s next, explicitly epistemological, phase but it seems that something like this idea is implicit in his account of epistemic concepts (or so I will argue). Williams developed a reflective, synthetic, account of the virtues surrounding the value of truth. (These are, in my view, more aptly characterized as the virtues involved in our use of personal propositional knowledge.²) Following traditional usage Williams called this conceptual synthesis a “genealogy”. Like other such genealogies, this synthetic account proceeds by developing an insightful model of our existing practices on an avowedly naturalistic basis. [Williams, 2002, chapter 2, section 2] This methodology supplies a non-debunking genealogy for a central range of epistemological virtues, practices and their embedded concepts, summarized

under the two generic virtues of Sincerity and Accuracy.³ Williams's account is avowedly an extension of Edward Craig's project of providing a reflective synthesis for the concept of knowledge extended to the virtues of truthfulness. [Craig, 1990]

The central question that this paper will explore is why thick ethical concepts are both prioritized and problematised in Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy while thick epistemological concepts are important to the non-debunking genealogies of Truth and Truthfulness. There is no inconsistency here: it is very important to keep apart the distinctions between thinking reflectively about knowledge and comparable ideas that we need to draw upon in meta-ethics. But any divergence of treatment must be principled. Williams's account of these differences is interesting because of the central role that thick epistemic concepts will have to play in any plausible version of virtue epistemology. If such concepts are not stable under reflection it is not clear what an epistemic virtue takes as the conceptualization of its domain of values (following the Aristotelian example of correlating virtues with such domains). Without this clarification then the objects to which those virtues are directed will remain obscure.

1 Thick Concepts in Ethics and Epistemology

The first question to be addressed is, simply, what is a thick ethical concept? The answer is not free from controversy. Thick concepts were introduced as part of an attack on the metaphysical distinction between fact and value. [Williams, 1985, pp. 217-18 fn. 7] But the attack proceeds via an account of how we conceptualise the world and focuses on the person-level activities of describing and evaluating.⁴ The point of the appeal to thick

concepts is to argue that one cannot find the metaphysical distinction between fact and value on the surface of our language and thought. When we examine our practices of describing and evaluating, we seem to exercise those distinct cognitive powers inextricably in judgements that use certain kinds of concepts. On an occasion of use, then, a thick concept forms part of an overall judgement in which the judger seems both to describe and evaluate, and to determine a defeasible reason for action. Examples of such thick concepts are **cowardly**, **compassionate**, or **generous**.

The dialectical point of the argument was to place an explanatory burden on the prescriptivist or expressivist. He or she must reconstruct the surface appearance of our thought and talk in such a way as to substantiate the underlying metaphysical distinction between fact and value. (The aim is not a knock down argument, but to force recognition of the burden of proof.)

The idea of a thick concept is introduced as one part of a contrast. On an occasion of use, a thin ethical concept gives very little specific information about that to which it applies even if it seems closely tied to the non-cognitivist desideratum that ethical judgments must be “action guiding”. Examples of such thin concepts are **right**, **good** and **obligatory**. Clearly, this distinction is a vague one, with the idea of giving more or less specific information about that which is characterized built into the account from the outset. The basis of the thick/thin distinction is ultimately phenomenological; the ethical cognitivist, expressivist and non-objectivist agree that there are concepts of this kind. The divergence comes in what each party to this dispute says next. I will say a little more

about how the cognitivist sees this case as being made as it is directly relevant to the prospects for developing a parallel account in epistemology.

The interesting case, for present purposes, is the splitting of the difference between the views of the expressivist and the cognitivist by Williams's "non-objectivist" strategy. The expressivist is, Williams claimed, embarrassed by his or her failure to reconstruct the nature of our conceptual practices that use thick concepts as the expressivist overlooks the point that:

Centralism [the view that thin concepts are explanatorily prior to thick concepts] is a doctrine about language and linguistic practice, and there is no reason at all to think that people could substitute for a linguistic practice the term in which that practice was psychologically or sociologically explained. [Williams, 1995, p. 187]

That seems, then, to encourage the cognitivist. But the cognitivist's treatment of these concepts, Williams argued, is too shallow. There are alternative modellings of our conceptual practice only one of which would deliver what the cognitivist would need. He or she has failed to note the necessary distinction between them. Once the non-objectivist alternative is introduced, the case for cognitivism is undercut. The objectivist understanding simply cannot be sustained in the conditions of a pervasively reflective modern society where reflection is corrosively destabilizing of our ethical judgements by making our thick ethical concepts unavailable. Reflection thereby makes the knowledge claims that would have used those concepts equally unavailable. [Williams, 1985; Moore, 1991, 2003, 2007; Thomas, 2006, chapter five; 2007] There is a constitutive pluralism

that drives us out of the cognitivist's paradise. In our fallen condition we know too much for cognitivism to be the last word about ethical knowledge.

Interestingly, in making the case for his alternative non-objectivist understanding of the ethical, Williams seems to appeal to something like a knowing that/known how distinction. Plural sets of ethical concepts are all equally available to us at the reflective level because these highly perspectival repertoires of concepts serve to structure and to allow us to negotiate a social world. There is a plurality of such worlds that we need to "find our way around". There is no one world such that we have, ethically, to live our life within it. So the cognitivist is too quick in taking the mere existence of thick concepts as grounds for the objectivity of a core of ethical judgements. The interesting question is whether this qualification to the objectivity of judgements made using thick ethical concepts has any analogue in the objectivity of judgements made using thick epistemological concepts. A necessary preliminary to that discussion, however, is a better appreciation of what the latter notion is supposed to be.

2 Thick Concepts and Virtue Epistemology

What would be the upshot of transposing these ideas to epistemology? How, in particular, might the idea of a thick evaluative concept be transferred from meta-ethics to epistemology? If one is committed to such concepts as a basis for ethical cognitivism (unlike Williams) then the analogies seem relatively straightforward: a thick epistemic concept would on an occasion of use inextricably combine description and epistemic evaluation and would supply a defeasible reason for belief, not action. It would be a

characterizing of the object of reflection that made it intrinsically worthy of belief. Furthermore, as I have emphasized, the appeal to thick concepts is located in the context of a presupposed cognitivist virtue ethics. The qualifier “cognitivist” implies, in the ethical case, that in an account of this kind an appeal to virtue is not self-sufficient. There is no reductive ambition of explaining all other ethical concepts in terms of virtue concepts. In a cognitivist version of virtue theory, faithful to its origins in Aristotle, an account is developed inter-dependently of the ethically virtuous agent, his or her powers of discrimination and conceptualization, and his or her motivational configuration. In that context only can one explain why a virtuous person is configured both such as to make the correct judgement (where this can involve possessing the right concepts and understanding them in the right way) and to assign that judgement the correct amount of deliberative priority or importance. [McDowell, 1979]

Thick concepts in epistemology would have to be characterized in a parallel way. An epistemically virtuous agent would be characterized as possessing the correct range of thick epistemic concepts, as possessing them in the right way (with an appropriate depth of understanding) and as psychologically configured to react to the formation of judgements using such concepts in an appropriate way. In this last instance, the “appropriate way” would be by acquiring a defeasible reason for belief including the limiting case where a belief is the reason for its own acceptance. What might be examples of such concepts? With no claim to representativeness, perhaps **imaginative**, **bold**, **paradigmatic**, **perfect specimen**, **precise**, **symmetrical**, **insightful** might be examples

of a conceptualization of a presented hypothesis that fit the general profile in a particular context of theoretical deliberation.

An immediate objection is that the analogy simply cannot be sustained as epistemic virtues are directed to the formation of belief and belief is not voluntary (as Williams himself famously argued). [Brady and Pritchard, 2003, p. 3; Williams, 1973; 2002, p. 135] Williams considers the impact of this objection on his two main virtues surrounding telling the truth (exploiting the ambiguity of “telling” with regards to both discerning the truth and communicating it). He considers the question whether Sincerity is a virtue because its exercise is morally appraisable (because, in turn, its exercise is voluntary in an ambitious way) while Accuracy is relegated to the domain of skills because it is not connected to voluntariness and the will. Williams responded as follows:

This is wrong on both counts. Sincerity basically involves a certain kind of spontaneity, a disposition to come out with what one believes, which may be encouraged or discouraged, cultivated or depressed, but is not itself expressed in deliberation or choice. Equally, Accuracy does involve the will, in the uncontentious and metaphysically unambitious sense of intention, choice, attempts and concentration of effort. [Williams, 2002, p. 45]

Williams does not view, then, the fact that one does not choose to believe as a reason to interpret talk of the virtue of Accuracy as misplaced. Indeed, his further reflections on that point are actually helpful to making the case for the constitutive involvement of a range of epistemic virtues in characterizing Accuracy. That is because:

In the territory of Accuracy, there is no such question as “Shall I believe the truth?”. Beliefs necessarily aim at the truth and this is not a merely verbal point. There is

indeed the question “Shall I have an opinion about this?” and this...is an aspect of the epistemic division of labour. It introduces the idea...of what may be called an investigative investment, the idea that information...can have a cost in time, energy, opportunities lost, perhaps dangers run. [Williams, 2002, p. 87]

It is true that the virtue of Accuracy has an individual dimension in encouraging people “not just to accept any belief shaped thing that comes into their head” [ibid, p. 88] but it also, clearly, has a social aspect. It does so because Accuracy introduces the idea of enquiry, its costs and benefits, and the relation between this issue and that of the division of epistemic labour. It matters how accurate one is expected to be and what one owes one’s interlocutor in terms of time, care and effort. That, in turn, depends on the relationship in which one stands to him or her. In order to clarify this social dimension, however, a crucial point about the appeal to thick concepts in a value based virtue ethics ought to be kept in mind.⁵ In order to maintain the strict parallel with ethics, two connected dimensions of a virtue-theoretic account have to be emphasised: the first is the third personal character of virtue ascriptions and the second is the role of thick concepts in deliberation.

In a non-reductionist form of virtue epistemology, an epistemic virtue would be correlated with a domain of values where the relation between the two can only be captured by a non-reductive explanation with neither being explanatorily priority to the other. Within that general explanation, there is an asymmetry between the role that the virtue term plays in the third personal characterization of the epistemic agent and the conceptualization that the agent herself used in first personal deliberation. [Williams, 1985, pp. 10-11; Thomas, 2005] Members of a community of appraisal of, say, a

compassionate person, ascribe to her deliberations and actions the virtue of compassion. First personally she thinks of the situation differently, in terms of another person's distress and the necessity of alleviating it. There are some exceptions, in the ethical case notably the concepts of **justice** and **righteousness**. Furthermore, two reasonable counter-generalizations are the role of virtue terms in learning to be good and in the relevantly similar situation of moral perplexity. The latter deserves some further consideration.

The first person/third person asymmetry has been challenged, in ethics, by those who argue that in ethical deliberation people very often ask themselves what a sincere person, or a person of integrity, would do in this kind of case.⁶ In my view the best response to that objection in the ethical case is to argue that such cases are ones of ethical perplexity that, in the relevant respects, re-capitulate the process of learning to be good. [Thomas, forthcoming] Trying to work out what to do when you are perplexed is like being a learner again. However, perplexity is itself an epistemological category: it is not knowing what to believe. But I see no vicious circularity in appealing to an epistemic idea to explain why, in some case, theoretical deliberators use epistemic virtue terms in the course of their deliberation; the pattern of explanation across the two cases seems to me the same. The central point is that thick concepts figure primarily in first personal deliberation; they are explanatory complements to virtue terms, whether ethical or epistemic. They characterize the domain of values over which a virtue ranges from the perspective of a deliberator.

An epistemological counterpart to this account would have to preserve this feature. Epistemic virtues are ascribed, in a community of appraisal, to an epistemic

agent. The agent, by contrast, does not use the epistemic virtue terms first personally. He or she thinks, rather, in terms of thick epistemic concepts that characterize the objects of theoretical deliberation, namely, what he or she is to believe about a particular question.

This has two further implications for the relevance of thick concepts to virtue epistemology. The first is that, on the most plausible model of responsible belief (one that, regrettably, I cannot defend in any detail here) a great deal of one's epistemic standing consists in a combination of an epistemic status and a range of default entitlements.⁷ [Brandom, 1994, p. 177; M. Williams, 1992; 2008] It is part of this view that most of what I responsibly believe are contents with which I am not actively engaged in a context of theoretical deliberation. I simply believe these things and do so responsibly. While this restricts the scope of application for thick epistemological concepts to the context of reflective theoretical deliberation it does not lessen their importance. This default/challenge model of responsibly held belief is importantly true but it is no part of the view to deny that perfectly well-motivated challenges do arise thereby shifting the agent to a context of reflective justification.

Secondly, this first/third person asymmetry does have consequences for other, admittedly brief, treatments of the role of thick concepts in epistemology. Guy Axtell has recently argued that:

If the DC [default/challenge] Model is to be more widely embraced, epistemologists will need to think carefully about the thin/thick distinction as it relates to the epistemic appraisal of agents. Both thick and thin descriptions of intellectual character find an important role in the explanations needed to discharge our obligations to a sceptical interlocutor. This is not a proposal like those debated recently in ethics, for a move either "from" thin to thick theory, or vice-versa. It is simply the claim that realizing

the resources of the DC Model will require that we find the proper role of both thickly and thinly-described character traits in the logic of explanation. [Axtell, 2008]

Clearly, I agree, but it is important that thick concepts will rarely feature in theoretical deliberation as characterizations of epistemic virtues themselves, but rather as conceptualizations of the object domain of such virtues (except for the “emulation of exemplars” model of perplexity that I have described as a derivative case).

That point of disagreement arises in the context of a great deal of agreement with Axtell’s view that we are primarily concerned, in our account of responsibly held belief, with an account of responsible epistemic agents located in the context of enquiry. [Axtell, 2008, pp. 72-75] That, in turn, directs our attention to the qualities of people as enquirers, a “zetetic” form of virtue epistemology that Axtell shares with the virtue epistemologies of Dewey and Hookway. [Hookway, 2000; 2003; 2005; Axtell, 2008, p. 72] This brings in, immediately, organized social contexts of enquiry of which the distinctive organization of a modern scientific discipline is one highly developed example.

This presupposed social context is a presupposition of the first person/third person asymmetry in the use of the virtue terms themselves. If the description that I have already suggested of the relation between the first personal and third personal uses of the virtue terms is correct, then the characteristic use of the virtue terms is their use by members of a community to appraise the character of another. This brings in the social dimension of knowledge and the idea of membership in an epistemological community. Those communities vary widely: most minimally, there is the idea of a socially co-operating group underpinned by generalized impersonal trust. More ambitious descriptions work

their way up to higher standards of presupposed trust and therefore more explicitly self-conscious groups of qualified appraisers. Epistemology as a whole can hardly ignore the development of a particularly modern and self-conscious group, the scientific community, which carefully polices barriers to entry to the group and sets very high standards for competent “status”. That is recognized by “zetetic” theorists such as Hookway and Axtell; this is important because I will argue that it is within such specialized sub-communities that the use of thick epistemic concepts is to be located. It is time to turn from a necessarily schematic account of where such concepts will be located within a virtue epistemology to an assessment of Williams’s differing treatments of thick concepts in ethics and epistemology. (Although not under that description as the term “thick concept” is nowhere used in Truth and Truthfulness).

3 Williams on Truthfulness

Williams’s primary concern is with “the value of truth”, a phrase that he explicates as “the value of what I shall call ‘the virtues of truth’, qualities of people that are displayed in wanting to know the truth, in finding it out, and in telling it to other people”. [Williams, 2002, p. 7] In developing this account Williams follows a strategy for the virtues and practices surrounding knowledge developed by Craig for the concept of knowledge. [Craig, 1990] Abandoning the analysis of knowledge as justified true belief plus some further factor or relation between these three elements, both Craig and Williams turn from analysis to synthesis. Genealogy synthesizes the concept of knowledge in this way: it poses the question of the conditions under which a group of

people recognizably like us in their needs and interests would construct or introduce such a concept on the presupposition that they lacked it.⁸ Craig's answer, in the case of knowledge, is that the concept originates in the necessity, given certain other interests fundamental to human life, to flag reliable informants. [Craig, 1990, p. 85]

It is important at this point to forestall two possible misunderstandings of that which such an account aims to provide. Timothy Williamson, for example, has objected that any such account fails to respect the basic indefinability of the concept of knowledge. [Williamson, 2000, p. 31, fn. 3] That is his interpretation of the failure of traditional analyses of knowledge: we have to accept that it is a basic and irreducible concept around which we can develop many further illuminating explanations in epistemology, but knowledge itself remains indefinable. That objection seems to presuppose that for any synthetic, genealogical account of a concept one can simply "reverse engineer" such a genealogy to produce a regressive analysis of that same concept in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. But that seems wrong: there is no incompatibility between successful genealogy and the indefinability of the concept for which the account is provided.⁹

A related objection is that if one can supply a genealogical explanation of a concept or value then one has shown that all such concepts or values are only of instrumental value. [McGinn, 2003] To frame a response to this important objection, it is necessary further to exposit some of the features of synthetic genealogies of concepts as Craig and Williams present them. There are two aspects of genealogy that make it a powerful weapon in the hands of the putative "debunker". It reveals there to be function

where none was presupposed and the contingency in the origin of an idea may be at odds with the self-understanding built around that idea itself. But the key word is “may”. Craig’s and Williams’s genealogies are both non-debunking, vindicatory, accounts of knowledge and the virtues surrounding it. That is because while an appeal to function plays an intermediate dialectical role in the genealogy, that role is transcended by a wider explanation that is still functional. Furthermore, unlike the ethical case there is no prior sense that we are dealing in the case of knowledge with a “higher” value that could not possibly be captured by its “low” origins.¹⁰ (That is, by contrast, an important feature of the use of genealogies for ethical and political concepts.) Both Craig’s and Williams’s account pass the test of being vindicatory because, as Williams puts it, there is no gap between the “ordinary interest” in the concept and the concept itself. [Williams, 2002, pp. 36-37] But this simply returns us to McGinn’s concerns:

Showing the function that a virtue serves can only give it instrumental value, not intrinsic value: we might learn what the virtue produces in the way of benefits, but we don't learn why it might be valued in itself. Since Williams insists, rightly, that truthfulness has an intrinsic value, in the sense that we value it for itself and not merely for the good results it might have, his functional story fails, by his own standards, to capture that intrinsic value; so it does nothing, really, to vindicate the intrinsic value of truthfulness. [McGinn, 2003]

How damaging is this objection? It is true that genealogies of both knowledge and the virtues surrounding propositional truth, sincerity and accuracy, have the feature that they identify function in that which was not suspected to be functional. But the categories of genealogically explicable/non-explicable, the intrinsic and the extrinsic and the instrumental and the “for its own sake” do not align in any straightforward way. (As Christine Korsgaard pointed out some time ago, “intrinsic” is not even the contradictory

of “instrumental” even on the simplest dictionary definition of the terms.¹¹ [Korsgaard, 1996]) The “task specification” that a genealogy identifies for knowledge, or for truthfulness, reveals that these concepts can discharge this task only if they are, indeed, treated by their users as intrinsically valued for their own sake and not simply extrinsically or instrumentally valuable. That is a central part of the genealogical account and one that is needed to make it a plausible account of the concept concerned.

Williams is particularly concerned to establish the argument that genealogy can vindicate intrinsic values for the case of truth telling, covering both Sincerity and Accuracy. In the simplest state of nature description from which the genealogy begins, we are to imagine a social group of people relevantly like us who can communicate and wish to co-operate. Introducing the simple idea of a merely positional advantage over other epistemic agents, in a development of Craig’s idea that the concept of knowledge is introduced to flag reliable informants, the members of this group both discern the truth and contribute it to a pool of information that is a collective resource. The two generic dispositions of Accuracy and Sincerity emerge because, using the word “ethical” in as broad and weak a sense as possible, the dispositions of individuals are normatively appraised under these two headings.¹² But this schematic model is defective precisely because it is premised on the fact that the group is social and co-operative but, Williams argues, no such group could exist if the two dimensions of truth-telling involved merely instrumental values. [Williams, 2002, p. 59] Even in this simple version of the model, the problem of instability under reflection arises as soon as one introduces a realistic psychology of motivation. The history of contractarian theories in ethics demonstrates the

instability under reflection of models in which a collective reason for a group fails to become a genuinely distributive reason over each member of the group. So if McGinn's objection is well placed the whole project founders.

That is why a crucial part of Williams's overall argument is the development, in chapters five and six, of an account of truthfulness that could work only if the value constructed is treated as intrinsic. "Construction" here is equivalent to reflective vindication.¹³ The two generic virtues of Sincerity and Accuracy both arise in the context of co-operative social relationships that presuppose trust, where trustworthiness is understood as mutual assurance. [Sen, 1985; Williams, 1995c; Williams, 2002, p. 89] This puts in place a background of ethical relations between an epistemic agent and different groups of appraisers. Williams argues that within that context both Sincerity and Accuracy intelligibly emerge in relation to other values. If you owe people the truth, then you owe them Accuracy (getting it right) and relations that do not involve misleading other people, namely, Sincerity. But the other values in terms of which all of these notions have to be understood have been historically variable, Williams claims, even within the Western tradition.

At an appropriate level of generality, then, all one can say in the case of Sincerity is that different levels of trustworthiness define ethical relations between people that raise and lower the bar in terms of what can be expected in terms of telling the truth and not misleading others. For us moderns, Williams argues, the "archaic" idea of shame, understood in the modern context of a community of equals, is part of what explains the general disposition of Sincerity. That forms an even more important part of what, in his

view, explains Accuracy in the form of the modern scientific enterprise (bearing in mind his approval, in passing, of Alasdair MacIntyre's point that one important context of trust is that of a "shared enterprise to find out the truth", [ibid., p. 120; MacIntyre, 1995])

Accuracy, as I have noted, involves the extent to which your trusting relations to others involve you in taking care to have true beliefs in the first place, and that brings in the idea of enquiry and its costs and benefits. As one moves away from the embedded, fictional, proto-model of enquiry, so this self-consciousness becomes more pronounced. Enquiry has both external obstacles (such as difficulty and the recalcitrance of subject matter) and internal obstacles in the forms of "self-deception and wishful thinking" and methodological care. [Williams, 2002, p. 125, p. 127] Williams is, once again, particularly concerned to emphasise that naturalistic constraints are not reductive. On such a basis one can recognize the intrinsic values of disinterested curiosity and not lying to oneself as the converse of Sincerity directed to others. This is particularly important in the context of:

Refinements in the values of truth themselves, in the form of a dedication to science and to standards of scientific truthfulness, which involve not just Accuracy but Sincerity, both with others and with oneself. [Williams, 2002, p. 141]

Here, too, Williams thinks that the connection with other ethical ideas is important. Lacking Accuracy may, in particular contexts of enquiry shaped by particular expectations (and a high level of mutual trust), may be shaming or dishonourable.

Does this meet McGinn's concern? I believe that it does: Williams's response is at least now clear. Being explicable does not make a value non-intrinsic. Intrinsic and

non-intrinsic values are both explicable, but the point is that you need two different kinds of explanation.¹⁴ Furthermore, the synthetic account of the value of truthfulness sets out a role that this set of values has to discharge that can be completed only by intrinsic values. A narrowly functional explanation of the value of truthfulness can only go so far; it must be supplemented by a wider functional explanation that remains still functional.

There are two ways of dividing Williams's genealogy: there is a division between the fictional component and the real history and between a simpler, schematic, functional account that uncovers function where none was suspected and the completed genealogy. But the latter is not a transcending of function, some kicking away of a functional ladder that has led one to a non-functional vindication of the target idea that can renounce the simpler model. The aim, as always, is reflective insight into existing practice; the account was vindictory, although it did not have to be, and the combination of fictional state of nature "theorizing" and actual history constitutes a functional explanation of why we have the virtues of truthfulness that we do.¹⁵ If the question now is what has been gained by the detour through genealogy, as opposed to McGinn's "straight" response that we have the particular intrinsic value of truthfulness that we have, then the grounding in naturalism offers reason to prefer the genealogical account.¹⁶ [Williams, 2002, p. 90]

If Williams's genealogy succeeds, then the generic virtues of Sincerity and Accuracy will have been reflectively vindicated. What of thick epistemological concepts? They are implicated in Williams's account because to vindicate these virtues is to vindicate the objects to which they have to be understood to be responses. But the detail of that characterization is, in Williams's methodology, located in the actual history of

such practices. Philosophy identifies the need for its own supplementation by history but it cannot supply it. An account of thick epistemological concepts will, then, be located in the actual history of enquiry.

However, I have already argued that it is obvious to us that one particular kind of epistemic community is of special importance to us, and that is the community of scientific enquiry. It represents a paradigm case of MacIntyre's account of "truthfulness as crucial to social and moral enquiry and therefore to any social order whose relationships are systematically open to the results of that enquiry" [MacIntyre, 1995, p. 358] This is the kind of community where inhibiting Sincerity and Accuracy in their specific forms is mutually understood to be beside the point. [Williams, 2002, p. 114] As a stable location for epistemological virtues, understood as inquiry focused theorists such as Hookway and Axtell interpret them, such a community is a stable location for the thick concepts that such enquirers use to conceptualise the objects of enquiry. (Hookway notes, in passing, that the philosophy of science seems to find it easy to bypass the epistemologist's concern with the plausibly thin concepts of **knowledge** or **justified belief**. [Hookway, 2003, p. 194]) The reflective and self-conscious nature of such communities is, as I have already argued, a reason to take up the internal perspective of the epistemic agent and how she conceptualizes the objects of enquiry.

This is a complement, not a departure, from inquiry focused virtue epistemology. Hookway, in particular, emphasizes how epistemic virtues help with the problem of relevance, of knowing which questions are important and which can be ignored, in a way that helps to reconcile epistemic responsibility with reliability.¹⁷ It is important to his

account that epistemological virtues do a great deal of this structuring work without falling within the conscious awareness of the agent. [Hookway, 2003, p. 190-191, 194] That is undoubtedly true, but the proper home of thick epistemological concepts is in characterizing that to which the subject of enquiry (that may be individual subjects, or teams with “distributed” virtues and vices, or a wider community of appraisal) responds. [Hookway, 2003, p. 189, fn. 14] This simply re-iterates the point that the argument for the existence of thick concepts has always been a phenomenological one: in epistemology, an inquiry focused virtue epistemology needs a phenomenology of inquiry (this does not necessarily impose any individualistic bias). That will substantiate the claim that there are thick epistemological concepts: philosophy cannot supply such an account, but a historically informed philosophy (or philosophically sophisticated history of inquiry) will do so.

A speculative suggestion is that a history of thick epistemological concepts will be central to the emergence of scientific disciplines as autonomous forms of objective enquiry. It is noteworthy that in some philosophically sophisticated treatments of the early history of the experimental tradition in “natural philosophy” a great deal of emphasis is placed on testimonial knowledge and the role played by social status in determining the trustworthiness and credibility of interlocutors. [Shapin, 1995] Deeply interesting though this work is, it might be taken to represent a historical illustration of a general truth about trust, namely that inherently risky social interactions where the risk of deception is great need to draw on alternative, supplementary sources of trust. To take an

example of Robert D Putnam's, diamond dealing is embedded within ethnic enclaves that exhibit a high degree of social capital because:

When economic and political dealing is embedded in dense networks of social interaction, incentives for opportunism and malfeasance are reduced. This is why the diamond trade, with its extreme possibilities for fraud, is concentrated within close-knit ethnic enclaves. Dense social ties facilitate gossip and other valuable ways of cultivating reputation - an essential foundation for trust in a complex society. [Putnam, 2001, p. 21]

What these early histories of the experimental tradition seem not to offer is an account of the intrinsic credibility of experimental results themselves to the investigator. Their focus is on the (admittedly neglected) dimension of the constitution of a community of enquiry and the impinging of ethical on epistemic norms. Shapin's account lacks this focus on credibility for the subject precisely because accepting the results of early experimental science is so risky for that nascent community of enquiry that ethical norms grounded in social standing and identity come in to pick up the slack as an alternative source of trust. As the issue of the underdetermination of evidence recedes, so these alternative sources of trust can retreat to what we regard as a location within their proper boundary. As traditions of objective enquiry emerge so they begin to develop their own modes of conceptualizing the objects of enquiry using thick epistemological concepts. No wonder, then, that a catalogue of such concepts is a hazardous project for the epistemologist who does not draw on the resources of actual history: it is nothing less than part of the emergence of the idea of scientific objectivity itself.

This is the area where, it seems to me, a distinction between the ethical and the scientific does begin to emerge, but not grounded on the same basis as Williams's distinction in Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy. I have argued that in a value based virtue epistemology thick concepts have an important role to play as forming a distinct vocabulary for the intrinsically credible. This vocabulary is properly located in reflective contexts, but those contexts have developed as our capacities for acquiring knowledge, individually and socially, have become more and more enmeshed both with theory and with technology (notably instruments). The impact of this on the availability of thick concepts within epistemology is a very large topic beyond the scope of this paper, but clearly it creates some pressure towards the "thinning" of thick concepts towards more abstract characterizations of the intrinsically credible. But, as I have argued, substantiating such a history of thick epistemological concepts lies within the actual history of objective enquiry itself (of the kind represented, for example, by Daston and Galison [2007])

4 Williams's Asymmetry Between the Ethical and the Epistemological

Truth and Truthfulness, develops a vindictory genealogy for a core of virtues and practices that applies to any interpretable group of concept users. But why does an appeal to Davidson's claims about interpretation offer the basis for a vindictory genealogy for the virtues of truthfulness (and by extension, those thick epistemic concepts to which the specification of this virtues are answerable) but not a vindication of ethical virtues, concepts and values concepts too?

Williams's reasons, in the case of the ethical, are not based on an unthinking positivism in which a realm of hard fact is contrasted with a realm of projected or constructed value. His conception of the proper form of the objectivity of that which he called "the scientific" and that which he called "the ethical" comes, as Adrian Moore has pointed out, as a package with a view to developing the correct account of the relations of unity and plurality within both. [Moore, 2007] And knowledge is something else again: there can be highly perspectival knowledge and even knowledge under non-objectified conditions if our practices with thick concepts can be sustained by confidence.

This overall approach is the basis for resistance to those arguments that directly apply Davidson's ideas on interpretation to vindicate a core set of ethical values as conditions on interpretation, such as those of Susan Hurley. [Hurley, 1992] It is an a priori requirement of interpretation that the interpreted groups' beliefs come out largely true, but we cannot infer from that that their evaluative beliefs are located in this transcendental scaffolding. The case made by Truth and Truthfulness however is that epistemic virtues and values are different. They are so closely tied to fundamental conditions on human life that they can reasonably be interpreted as part of a culturally invariant genealogy even if historically elaborated in different ways.

The answer, then, to the basic question addressed by this paper is that while we can reasonably expect thick concepts to be centrally important in any virtue epistemology, in Williams's version the specificity of the particular values to which the epistemically virtuous person responds forms part of the specific working out of the elaboration of the general scheme of the two general virtues in particular circumstances.

Philosophy cannot address that issue, but a philosophically sophisticated history of epistemological practices could. Williams offers an extended working out of his summary claim that “a Nietzschean genealogy can be seen now as beginning from Davidson plus history”. [Williams, 1995a]

The basis of that Gnostic utterance is now clearer: plain truths play a central role in language learning, communication and hence in grounding interpretation. But as interpretation extends to such complex phenomena as the practices surrounding truth telling we need the resources of a synthetic genealogy that is, in important respects, limited in what it can achieve. The abstract representation of our practice gives insight both by directly capturing, in an abstract way, functional aspects of what seemed to be non-functional, and by illustrating its own limitations.

These limitations are three-fold: the “state of nature” narrative requires supplementation by actual history because it is otherwise incomplete. Secondly, it has been actually extended in historically significant ways. Finally, the actual development of the core virtues of Sincerity and Accuracy have developed their own “momentum”. Relating these elaborations back to the original story requires explanation.¹⁸ [Williams, 2002, pp. 92-3, p. 150] The first idea is the most important: the fictional part of Williams’s genealogy left significant gaps in the relation between individual motivation and the collective value of the practice. How that gap is filled in takes different forms in different societies at different times. There is, therefore, no evading the actual history that forms part of the genealogical account.

Whereas Williams's non-objectivism is based on the assumption that there are a variety of social worlds, structured by plural sets of thick ethical concepts, there is a sense in which there is only one epistemic world. Our reflective understanding of truthfulness is that it is based on such a central need of human life that it can be abstractly modeled in a way that, while it is culturally elaborated in particular ways, is shown by the availability of the genealogy itself to be culturally invariant. By contrast, Williams believed that while people certainly have an interest in living an ethical life there is no one specific form of ethical life that they have an interest in living under. The centrality of interpretation, the role of truth in interpretation, and the two general epistemic virtues of Sincerity and Accuracy ensure that there is one epistemic world, but many ethical worlds. But even granting that point there is still much work to be done in the supplementation of the genealogical explanation by actual history. That has a direct bearing on the central question of this paper as it is within that actual history that the account of thick epistemic concepts will be located.

Conclusion

Can Williams's later genealogy of truthfulness offer any encouragement to the extension of the application of the idea of a thick concept from ethics into epistemology? I believe so. Williams's focus, it is true, is on the epistemic virtues of truthfulness and not on how one characterizes the domain of epistemic values to which those virtues correspond. However, the suggestion that virtues and values have to be characterized together was an aspect of ethical cognitivism that Williams accepted. It was part of his agreement with

cognitivism that expressivism could not discharge its explanatory obligations; his objections to cognitivism took a different form. We have to structure our ethical world one way or another, but there is no privileged way in which we must structure it. That grounded his non-objectivism but, as I have noted, Williams makes a powerful case that there is only one epistemic world. The human interests that ground that world are so central and so important to us that this conclusion is inescapable. That is why we can speak of a core set of generic virtues that, in different times and places, receive different forms of cultural elaboration.

For all these reasons, then, it seems to me that Williams's genealogy offers a compelling case for the recognition of the importance of thick concepts in epistemology that play a role parallel to their ethical counterparts.¹⁹ The only caveat is that Williams is quite clear that in discharging the explanatory ambitions of naturalism the fictional part of his genealogy requires supplementation by real history. But it is in the real history of the virtues of truthfulness that the specific elaborations of both those virtues and the values to which they correspond will be found and, hence, that is the place to look for an elaboration of thick epistemological concepts.

In conclusion, then, any defensible virtue epistemology is going to be committed to the existence of thick epistemological concepts. The prospects for such concepts proving stable under reflection are encouraging even under Williams's stringent assumptions. For those who want to relax some of Williams's stringent assumptions (such as in Thomas [2006, 2007a]) the prospects for an objective vindication for a range of thick epistemological concepts is even more encouraging.²⁰

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¹ Ethical cognitivism is the view that a core set of ethical utterances (specific evaluations) are truth-apt, in their primary dimension of assessment express cognitive states, and when successful can be knowledge and frequently are, in fact, known. See Thomas [2006].

² By personal propositional knowledge I intend a contrast with such common impersonal uses as “what is the current state of knowledge in the history of the Roman Empire?” where knowledge is referred to impersonally.

³ Williams capitalizes these words, and I will follow him in this, as a recognition that “These are terms of art”, Williams [2002], p. 44.

⁴ Activities to which there correspond a range of speech acts but not, in my view, any distinctive notion of the content that is embedded in the force of such speech acts.

⁵ “Value based virtue epistemology” is a cumbersome phrase, but simply re-using the term for the ethical view, “cognitivist virtue ethics” looks too question begging in the current context.

⁶ An objection put to me by both Brad Hooker and Michael Slote and one to be taken very seriously.

⁷ For a helpful discussion between these views and the default/challenge model see Fricker [2008].

⁸ It is worth emphasizing that in this characterization of the state of nature and the people within it Craig includes features of people to make them recognizably like us that in one sense of “virtue epistemology” – that of Sosa’s - would make his subsequent genealogy redundant. We need to understand Craig’s subjects as seeking to co-operate on the basis of the pooling of information and that already seems to me to bring in such basic faculties as perception, memory and so on. Craig’s aim is to presuppose these very general faculties and on their basis explain both knowledge and (in Williams’s extension to the genealogy) very general epistemological virtues. But all of this is downstream, as it were, from Sosa’s faculty or function based “virtue epistemology” where the term virtue is understood very broadly in terms of basic human capacities. See, now, Sosa [2007]

⁹ “[A] genealogy gives no way of translating language that mentions the resultant item into terms that mention only the original items, nor does it claim that ‘justice’ or ‘property’ or ‘knowledge’ introduces nothing over and above the original items – on the contrary it shows what new thing is introduced, and why it is new. Genealogical explanation makes such things intelligible without getting involved in reduction.” Williams, [2002] p. 36.

¹⁰ That is a generalization, but some of Zagzebski’s formulations of the “value problem” in epistemology seem more Platonic than Aristotelian and do seem to treat knowledge as

both a higher value and one resistant to explanation. See, for example, Zagzebski [2001, 2003, 2004].

¹¹ As I understand these terms, influenced by Korsgaard (and unconvinced by her critics) in giving a constitutive account of a value one explains its intrinsic nature. [Korsgaard, 1996] Extrinsic values are objects whose value depends on a constitutive relation to another valuable thing, in the way that Rae Langton's wedding ring possesses intrinsic value because of its relation to her marriage. [Langton, 2007] And, following Ross, instrumental value is simply a category mistake: instrumental value is not value at all. The parallel distinction in the theory of valuing (a project undertaken by agents) is to value something for its own sake as a final end or for the sake of something else. In the latter case, one might speak of instrumental reasons but this does not resurrect the category of instrumental values.

¹² This weak and broad sense of the ethical is that of "the capacity shown ... by humans in all cultures to live under rules and values and to shape their behaviour in some degree to social expectations, in ways that are not under surveillance and not directly controlled by threats and rewards", Williams [2002], p. 24.

¹³ "It is a sufficient condition for something... to have an intrinsic value that, first it is necessary (or nearly necessary) for basic human purposes and needs that human beings should treat it as an intrinsic good; and, second, that they can coherently treat it as an intrinsic good... What is essential for this to be so is that the agent has some materials in terms of which he can understand this value in relations to other values that he holds." Williams [2002], p. 92 and, more generally, pp. 88-93.

¹⁴ As I have already explained, instrumental values are not values at all, as Ross argued. See footnote 11 above.

¹⁵ "Theorising" goes in scare quotes as we do not find anything out about the state of nature; it is our stipulation.

¹⁶ If an account along Williams's lines were to succeed, would it have any bearing on what has been called the "value problem" in recent epistemology? While a full consideration of that issue falls outside the scope of this paper, the answer seems to me to be "yes". One version of that problem concerns the failings of an instrumentalist understanding of enquiry as directed to the maximization of the value of truth or a ratio of true to false belief, "as opposed to" a pluralist view of epistemic values. Williams's approach shows that this dualism is a misconception of the problem. There is one clear sense in which truth is not a value at all. [Williams, 2002, pp. 6-7] There is another sense, as I have described, in which he believed that showing that truthfulness can only play the role that it needs to play if it is viewed as an intrinsic value is what it is to vindicate it as such. However, "the value of truthfulness" in this latter sense is just a shorthand for a plurality of virtues, concepts and epistemic values of the kind that value pluralists in epistemology have emphasized. For a very insightful discussion of this issue see Pritchard [2007].

¹⁷ See also the convergent conclusions of the very fine paper by Adam Morton, [2004].

¹⁸ Williams [2002] contains two representative discussions of the extension and the elaboration of the fictional component of the genealogy: the development of the local

conception of temporality into the modern notion of objective historical time in chapter seven and the autonomous cultural elaboration of Sincerity in the more determinate form of authenticity in chapter eight.

¹⁹ As Simon Blackburn noted in his [2001] “on some accounts of ethics, all moral faults are at bottom not only analogous to cognitive faults but are actually identical to them. If to know the good is to love it, then moral defect becomes a species of cognitive defect.”, p. 15.

²⁰ [Acknowledgements]