Thick Evaluation, by Simon Kirchin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. xi + 198

Separationism holds that thick concepts, like COURAGE, are composed of thin concepts (e.g. GOOD) along with nonevaluative concepts. Simon Kirchin aims to reject separationism and to support nonseparationism—the view that thick concepts are unitary evaluative concepts not composed of more fundamental elements. Kirchin's version of nonseparationism holds that 'thick concepts are as wholly or purely evaluative as thin concepts are, even if some evaluative concepts are more specific than others' (112). Kirchin does not seek to provide '*any* knockdown arguments against separationism or for nonseparationism.' He instead argues that nonseparationism makes better sense of thick concepts, and that 'neutrals' should accept his form of nonseparationism (7).

Kirchin's book contains valuable discussions of many issues regarding thick concepts, such as whether thick and thin differ in kind, whether thin concepts are conceptually prior to thick ones, and whether separationists can escape the shapelessness argument. Kirchin also explains and critiques two models for how thin and thick relate—the genus/species and determinable/determinate models. But the book contains only one main argument that Kirchin fully endorses and takes as the book's centerpiece. That main argument will be the focus of this review.

In broad outline, Kirchin's main argument is that thick concepts are 'not exhausted by pro and con stances,' and that this conflicts with separationism but is explained by nonseparationism. Kirchin casts this argument in terms of two rival theories of evaluation—the conservative and liberal views.

> The *conservative* view of evaluation restricts evaluation to clear positive and negative judgements alone. In more detail, it is the view that a concept can be counted as an evaluative concept only if in every instance of its use there is a clear and obvious positive or negative stance or view being expressed. The *liberal* view—which is the view I favour—claims that a concept can be evaluative overall and in any particular instance of its use even if in some instances there is no positive or negative stance being expressed when it is employed (4-5).

Kirchin's penultimate goal is to argue for the liberal view and against the conservative view. His ultimate goal, however, is to use the liberal view as a way of supporting nonseparationism over separationism. The argument goes as follows:

(1) The liberal view is highly plausible.
(2) Separationism is at odds with the liberal view.

  Thus, separationism is implausible.

(3) Nonseparationism best explains the evaluations associated with thick concepts.

  Therefore, nonseparationism is more plausible than rival views, other things being equal.

Unfortunately, all three premises have problems that never get addressed. I discuss these problems after explaining Kirchin's support for each premise.

1. Premise (1). To understand Kirchin's support for the liberal view, let's get clear on what the liberal and conservative views state. The above quotation reveals that the conservative view makes two separate claims, and the liberal view rejects them both:

(Binary-Claim) Evaluations must be either positive or negative.

(Concept-Claim) A concept is evaluative only if it expresses a positive or negative view in every instance of use.

The Binary-Claim rules out neutral evaluations. The Concept-Claim states a necessary condition for a concept to be evaluative. Kirchin tends to blur these claims, but they are logically independent. The Concept-Claim doesn't entail the Binary-Claim, because the Concept-Claim doesn't rule out neutral evaluations (e.g. it allows that a nonevaluative concept could be used to express a neutral evaluation on a particular instance). And the Binary-Claim doesn't entail the Concept-Claim, because the Binary-Claim allows for an evaluative concept to have nonevaluative uses. Since these claims are independent, we should consider them separately.

To reject the Concept-Claim, Kirchin supplies various examples of concepts that seem evaluative, indeed thick, but which can be used in ways that are neither positive nor negative. The concept ELEGANT is one example:

Although we can praise the elegant, and often damn because something is elegant, we can apply this concept simply to categorize, to compare, and to give conceptual shape to the thing we are trying to understand (131).

He makes similar points about MACABRE, GOSSIP, and CAJOLE. According to Kirchin, these evaluative concepts 'are sometimes used in overtly pro and con ways and sometimes not' (133).

To reject the Binary-Claim, Kirchin needs to show that there are neutral evaluations. That is, he must establish that concepts like MACABRE and ELEGANT are being used evaluatively even when they express nothing positive or negative. Kirchin supports this by considering a particular use of MACABRE:

When I say of a novel that it was macabre, and do not intend praise or blame or anything else positive or negative, I am still offering evaluation of it (that is, there is still evaluative content), *because my categorization of it in this instance relies on, or is an expression of, an understanding that encompasses times and instances when there are explicit types of praise and blame or other positive and negative reactions* (134, italics mine).

Kirchin says nothing more to support his rejection of the Binary-Claim. And unfortunately, what he says in italics is not enough to show that MACABRE can involve a neutral evaluation. Consider another case, where a real-estate agent categorizes a house as having vaulted ceilings but is indifferent about this feature. She merely lists the feature to provide information for homebuyers, knowing that some will react positively and others negatively. In this case, the agent's categorization 'relies on, or is an expression of, an understanding that encompasses times and instances when there are explicit […] positive and negative reactions.' She wouldn't have mentioned the vaulted ceilings if it wasn't for these reactions. But it appears that she's not offering an evaluation in this particular case—she's merely listing information for homebuyers. For all we know, Kirchin's MACABRE example might not be offering an evaluation either.

Initially, one might object that MACABRE is unlike VAULTED-CEILINGS because MACABRE is an evaluative concept, and evaluative concepts cannot have nonevaluative uses. But this approach would render Kirchin's comments in the above passage superfluous. And as we'll see in a moment, Kirchin provides no principled reason for denying that VAULTED-CEILINGS is an evaluative concept.

Let's return to Kirchin's rejection of the Concept-Claim. Initially, one might respond by claiming that ELEGANT, MACABRE, etc., are nonevaluative concepts. But Kirchin provides two lines of reply. He first points out that even paradigmatic thin concepts such as OUGHT and DUTY exhibit the same behavior as ELEGANT, etc. And it's implausible to think these thin concepts are nonevaluative (131-3). Second, Kirchin admits that he wants to expand the set of evaluative concepts to include many concepts that have not traditionally counted as evaluative (141). To this end, Kirchin supplies examples such as RELEVANT and SUFFICIENT, which exhibit the same behavior as the above concepts, but which are not traditionally seen as evaluative concepts.

Given that Kirchin rejects the Concept-Claim, and wants to extend evaluative concepts beyond traditional bounds, we might wonder whether he allows for any nonevaluative concepts at all. In lieu of the Concept-Claim, is there another necessary condition that would allow Kirchin to exclude some concepts from being evaluative? The liberal view provides no such condition. But Kirchin adds the following to the liberal view: 'there must be some clear instances of pro and/or con use for a concept to count as an evaluative concept' (134). The trouble is that this claim doesn't exclude any concepts from being evaluative, since any nonevaluative concept can be used positively or negatively in some clear instances. Simon Blackburn provides the example of 'south-facing windows'—a nonevaluative expression that can be used to evaluate positively. And Blackburn's point generalizes. Even '5 centimeters' could in principle be

used evaluatively. So, Kirchin's additional claim doesn't help him avoid the view that all concepts are evaluative.

In fact, it's unclear whether Kirchin wants to avoid this view. Although he says there are 'clear examples' of nonevaluative concepts (113-4), he also suggests an affinity for the view that there is '*Evaluation all the way down.*' And he explicitly refuses to provide any necessary conditions that would exclude any concepts from being evaluative (113, 139). This makes it hard for him to claim that VAULTED-CEILINGS, or any other concept, is nonevaluative. To be fair, Kirchin does hint at a method for distinguishing evaluative from nonevaluative concepts:

> [W]e need to look at how people use these concepts, how often and how significant clear pro and con points are conveyed, how often they are used alongside evaluative concepts to help reinforce a judgement overall, and so on. In short, whether something is an evaluative concept is a matter of communal judgment (139).

Unfortunately, we're given no guidance on how this method should play out. In the homebuying world, VAULTED-CEILINGS is used with 'clear pro and con points' and 'alongside evaluative concepts' to reinforce judgments about homebuying. Why should communal judgment classify VAULTED-CEILINGS as nonevaluative and MACABRE as evaluative? Kirchin provides no answer.

Nevertheless, Kirchin might be successful in refuting the Concept-Claim. I will argue that his case against the Concept-Claim extends into unwanted territory—territory that's problematic for Kirchin's defense of Premise (2). First consider a case where GOOD is used in a way that's neither positive nor negative. Imagine we are assembling a police-lineup, and are seeking 'fillers'—innocent people who look similar to the suspect of a crime. So, we divide up potential fillers into two groups, labeled 'good' and 'bad', based on how closely they resemble the suspect. You ask me which group Sal is in, and I reply

   (a) He's one of the good ones.

Sentence (a) would ordinarily express something positive, but in this case it seems neither positive nor negative; it uses 'good' simply to categorize and compare, much like Kirchin's example of ELEGANT. Kirchin could claim that my example involves an evaluation that is 'pro-in-a-way'—a nuanced positive evaluation that Kirchin occasionally references (20). But then we're left to wonder why ELEGANT doesn't also involve a nuanced positive evaluation, thereby satisfying the Concept-Claim. More likely, Kirchin will happily grant that GOOD fails the Concept-Claim, alongside other thin concepts (e.g. OUGHT).

But consider another example, which Kirchin cannot happily accept. This one involves the concept PRO, which Kirchin understands in terms of approval or preference. Kirchin sees PRO as 'the most basic

and minimal positive' stance 'we can take towards things' (20). Despite its name, PRO can be used in ways that are neither positive nor negative. Consider these sentences:

(b) Liz *approves* of Tom.
(c) Humphrey *prefers* walnuts.
(d) Sandra *favors* small government.
(e) David is *pro*-choice.
(f) Millie is *for* raising taxes.
(g) Jane *takes a positive stance* towards Brexit.

At least one of these sentences should express PRO, via the italicized expression. But they need not be used to express anything positive or negative. To see why, notice that each sentence can be followed up with a neutralizing clause—"…but I'm indifferent." So, if any of (b)-(g) express PRO, then PRO fails the Concept-Claim.

For reasons that will emerge, it's problematic for Kirchin if PRO fails the Concept-Claim. He can only reply by denying that (b)-(g) express PRO. But why wouldn't they? He could claim that for a sentence to express PRO it must express a certain attitude, and not merely report that someone has that attitude. However, the treatment of PRO as an attitude prevents Kirchin from using PRO to argue against cognitivist-separationism, which he does all throughout the book. What Kirchin actually says is that PRO is the concept typically expressed by

(h) Sal is good.
(i) Humphrey is fine.
(j) Sandra is cool.
(k) Yeah.

Even if this is so, it doesn't entail that PRO is *not* expressed by any of (b)-(g). And (b)-(g) are the sentences that suggest that PRO fails the Concept-Claim.

Overall, it's doubtful that there is any concept that fits what Kirchin has in mind with PRO. More precisely, it's doubtful that there's a single evaluative concept that's expressed all throughout (h)-(k). To be sure, (h)-(k) have all something in common—they're all positively evaluative. Indeed, we can even classify these sentences under a single concept, which we can call PRO. But these concessions do not entail that PRO is *expressed* by (h)-(k). Nor do they entail that PRO is a positively evaluative concept. Consider an analogy: (h)-(k) can also be classified under the concept EVALUATIVE. But EVALUATIVE is not expressed by (h)-(k). Nor is EVALUATIVE an evaluative concept itself—it's just a theoretical concept used to describe certain expressions, attitudes, concepts, and properties. Most likely, PRO operates in the same way. In the metaethics literature, PRO is used to describe expressions, attitudes, concepts, and

properties—ones that seem positive rather than negative. This classification emerges, for example, when ethicists speak of pro-attitudes. But in this context, PRO is nonevaluative (e.g. ethicists are not expressing an evaluation when they say that desire is a pro-attitude). If this picture is correct, then PRO doesn't actually fail the Concept-Claim. But, as we'll see in §2, it's still a problem for Kirchin's critique of separationism.

2. Premise (2). Let's suppose Kirchin is right that the two claims constituting the conservative view are false, and that the liberal view is true. Is this position at odds with separationism? Kirchin's only support for Premise (2) appears in three sentences:

> Liberal-separationism appears to be a very strange position, verging on the incoherent. A person occupying this position assumes that we should characterize evaluation as being something that is not exhausted by pro and con stances, something that appears to be (as I take it to be) neither descriptive nor pro-or-con-only, yet is also something that can be separated into component parts. Perhaps someone could make this work, but I would want to know what one would be separating this evaluation into: what *are* the component parts? (112).

Kirchin says nothing more about liberal-separationism, and what he says here is plainly dismissive. According to Kirchin, the putative incoherence of liberal-separationism stems from its acceptance of two claims:

(I) Thick concepts are separable into components (i.e. separationism)
(II) Thick concepts are sometimes associated with neutral evaluations (i.e. the liberal view).

Why exactly are (I) and (II) at odds? Kirchin proceeds as if there's an obvious tension, but in fact there is no tension.

We can see that there's no tension by simply combining separationism with one of Kirchin's own claims. Kirchin holds that some thin concepts, like OUGHT, can present neutral evaluations (133-34). And separationists frequently cite these same thin concepts as components of thick concepts. So, we have an easy explanation for how (I) and (II) are consistent—thick concepts are sometimes associated with neutral evaluations because their constituent thin concepts are sometimes associated with neutral evaluations. Call this the Simple Explanation.

Kirchin nowhere acknowledges the Simple Explanation, but he says something in another context that may help him address it. Kirchin claims that OUGHT is 'less than minimally or barely thin,' because it's not as thin as PRO. And he thinks there's a problem for separationists who appeal to a less-than-barely-thin concept, like OUGHT, as we find in the Simple Explanation:

Why would we feel the need to provide an analysis of (so-called) thick concepts and regard them as non-primitive, while also thinking that these thicker-than-bare-thin thin concepts *are* primitive and in no need of analysis? (70)

In other words, the Simple Explanation takes OUGHT to be basic, and thick concepts to be non-basic, while ignoring the fact that PRO is more fundamental than both. If separationists were consistent, they would use PRO to account for both kinds of concepts. And PRO must be associated with a positive evaluation.

But there are at least two replies available to the Simple Explanation. First, these separationists might deny that OUGHT can be accounted for with PRO. Here, again, they can appeal to Kirchin's own claims. If Kirchin is right that OUGHT can be associated with neutral evaluations, and that PRO is always associated with a positive evaluation, then it appears OUGHT cannot be accounted for with PRO. Or second, these separationists can deny that PRO must be associated with a positive evaluation. As indicated in §1, it appears that PRO can be used in ways that are neither positive nor negative. This might be because PRO can express a neutral evaluation (just like OUGHT, DUTY, etc.). Or it might be because PRO is not an evaluative concept at all.

There is also a second explanation for how (I) and (II) are compatible, which Kirchin doesn't acknowledge. Consider a complex evaluative concept like GOOD-LIAR. This concept has a constituent thin concept that is positive, although the complex concept can itself be used negatively. Kirchin grants these claims (154). But if this complex concept can evaluate differently from its constituent thin concept, then what would prevent it from having a neutral evaluation? Now consider the concept GOOD-WAGON-WHEEL. Assuming there's no need for a good wagon-wheel, it appears this concept can in principle carry a neutral evaluation. Of course, Kirchin could claim that GOOD-WAGON-WHEEL has an evaluation that's pro-in-a-way; but then we're led to wonder why Kirchin's preferred examples, like ELEGANT, don't also have this nuanced positive evaluation.

The example of GOOD-WAGON-WHEEL suggests another explanation for how (I) and (II) are compatible. On this explanation, the evaluation of a complex concept can differ from the evaluation of its constituent thin concept, depending on how that thin concept relates to other parts within the complex; the result is that the complex concept might have a neutral evaluation, even if the constituent thin concept is positive or negative. Call this the Complex Explanation. Once we give up on the conservative view, it's unclear why the Complex Explanation should be rejected.

In another context, Kirchin makes a claim that may help him address the Simple and Complex explanations. He questions whether separationists can explain what nonevaluative constituents would make

up the rest of a thick concept, beyond the evaluative constituent. He thinks the liberal view requires that the evaluative domain is so expansive that separationists have few options for citing nonevaluative constituents (141). However, the liberal view does not expand the domain of evaluative concepts beyond ordinary bounds. The liberal view is merely the denial of both the Concept-Claim and the Binary-Claim. And, as already noted, the Concept-Claim can be rejected by citing paradigmatic evaluative concepts (e.g. GOOD, OUGHT, etc.). The Binary-Claim can also be rejected by citing such concepts (e.g. GOOD-WAGON-WHEEL). So, the liberal view does not by itself entail that there are any more evaluative concepts than we ordinarily think. Most likely, Kirchin thinks the evaluative domain is massive, not because of the liberal view per se, but because of the examples he supplies to support the liberal view (e.g. SUFFICIENT, RELEVANT, etc.). But Kirchin's particular examples are no part of the liberal view or of separationism. So, we still have no basis for thinking there's a tension within liberal-separationism. And those examples can themselves be challenged by an earnest attempt at supplying a necessary condition for a concept to be evaluative. Kirchin denounces any such attempt but says nothing that should convince neutrals to do the same (136-37).

It should be noted that the above responses provided on behalf of Kirchin are not ones that he explicitly uses to undermine liberal-separationism. They instead appear in other parts of the book where Kirchin is concerned with conservative-separationism. Kirchin's only comments about liberal-separationism occur in the three-sentences quoted at the beginning of this section.

Why is Kirchin so quick to dismiss liberal-separationism?—possibly because he thinks no one accepts the position. He claims that all separationists discussed in his book 'implicitly assume' the conservative view (112). Even if this is so, it doesn't mean the conservative view is an indispensable part of their separationist theories. For all we know, the assumption is merely for convenience or simplicity.

3. Premise (3). Kirchin provides no reason to reject liberal-separationism, and thus no reason to accept Premise (2) of his main argument. But perhaps he could rely solely on Premise (3). Kirchin thinks nonseparationism best explains the liberal view of evaluation, and also evaluative flexibility—the fact that 'a thick concept can be used to indicate some pro stance in one case, and a con stance in another, and yet we can still be talking of the very same concept' (5). Even if liberal-separationism is coherent, it might be explanatorily inferior to nonseparationism.

However, since Kirchin ignores liberal-separationism, and all the explanations it might offer, it's impossible for him to show that nonseparationism is explanatorily superior. The Simple and Complex

explanations are two possible ways to explain both the liberal view and evaluative flexibility, but Kirchin doesn't acknowledge them. Nevertheless, I will here focus on what he says about conservative-separationism.

Kirchin argues that conservative-separationism cannot explain evaluative flexibility. To explain the flexibility of, say, ELEGANT, conservative-separationists must either deny that ELEGANT is evaluative or posit multiple concepts like ELEGANT-PRO and ELEGANT-CON (49-53). The former approach is rejected in chapter 7, where Kirchin examines Pekka Väyrynen's pragmatic account of thick concepts. The latter approach posits multiple concepts and thereby denies flexibility without explaining it. However, Kirchin fails to consider two ways in which conservative-separationism can avoid these alternatives. First, suppose that OUGHT can produce both positive and negative evaluations without having PRO as a constituent—Kirchin himself accepts this, and there's no reason why separationists cannot also accept it. If so, then separationists can take OUGHT to be a constituent of ELEGANT as well as the source of flexibility in ELEGANT. Or second, recall that GOOD-LIAR is an evaluative concept that appears to exhibit evaluative flexibility—the same concept can be used in both pro and con ways. Separationism is plausibly true of GOOD-LIAR, and separationists could model the flexibility of thick concepts in a similar way. Nothing about these two models would compromise the conservative view, since they don't admit neutral evaluations, or allow an evaluative concept to be used in ways that are neither positive nor negative. So, it's unclear why conservative-separationists must be forced down either path Kirchin sets out.

How does Kirchin explain the liberal view and evaluative flexibility? Kirchin attempts an explanation by appealing to Gilbert Ryle's notion of a thick description—a way of categorizing actions by reference to intentions, desires, and beliefs. Thick descriptions need not be evaluative, but Kirchin uses them as a basis for thinking about evaluative concepts. According to Kirchin, the concepts expressed by thick descriptions are nonseparable but have a 'variety of functions.' Similarly, nonseparable thick concepts might have a variety of functions, which could explain evaluative flexibility and the liberal view (129).

The trouble is that there's no reason to think thick descriptions are nonseparable. Consider one of Kirchin's examples of a complex thick description: The boy winks (i) in order to impress a girl (ii) by imitating his friend. According to Kirchin, the subtraction of (i) would change (ii). And this is supposed to suggest that Ryle's view of thick description is 'nonseparationist in outlook' (126). The trouble is that there's nothing nonseparationist about this view. The fact that (ii) would change when (i) is subtracted only suggests that (ii) somehow depends on (i). But any separationist can allow that one component of a thick concept depends on another. Furthermore, Kirchin's point does not at all indicate that there are no

conceptual components corresponding to a thick description. Indeed, it appears that (i) and (ii) actually express distinct conceptual components. Kirchin has therefore not explained how a unitary concept can have a range of evaluations. The problem he levels against separationism is also a problem for his own view.

Kirchin's main goal is to use the liberal view as a way of supporting nonseparationism over separationism, and to do so in a way that's satisfactory to neutrals. But neutrals should come away with the following thought—even if the liberal view is plausible, it has no bearing on whether separationism or nonseparationism is true.[1]

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[1] The viewpoints expressed in this review do not reflect the official positions of the U.S. Air Force Academy or any other government agency.