

**DINA MENDOÇA (Lisbon)**  
**SUSANA CADILHA (Lisbon)**

**Bernard Williams and the concept of shame:  
What makes an emotion moral?**

---

**Abstract**

*The paper proposes a way to understand moral emotions in ethics building upon Bernard Williams' claim that feelings, emotions and sentiments are an integral part of rationality. Based upon Bernard Williams' analysis of shame we argue that the richness and thickness that it is attached to some emotions is the key to understand why some emotions have a distinct ethical resonance. The first part takes up Bernard Williams' philosophical assessment of the concept of shame (Williams 1993) establishing a general framework to show how recent developments in philosophy of emotions are in line with the far-reaching consequences of Bernard Williams' insights. Then we highlight the way in which there is both an historical relativity to emotions and an intemporal understanding of their ethical role, and use the concept of meta-emotion to reinforce the idea that what makes some emotions moral requires employing Williams' distinction between thick and thin concepts.*

**Keywords:** Bernard Williams, shame, moral emotions, thick concepts, meta-emotions

---

**1. What makes an emotion moral?**

The same emotion word can be ethically rich or not depending on its complexity and context. One can describe someone stating they feel guilty for not having kept a promise while it is also possible to describe someone saying they feel guilty for enjoying all the chocolates in the box. The first use is clearly within the ethical realm, and yet the second does not necessarily hold an ethical tone. Our general claim is that this happens because though it is

possible to point out that an emotion has a moral value, it is not possible to delineate a strict line between moral and nonmoral emotion, and consequently not possible to indicate which emotions are specifically moral. De Sousa states the problem clearly when in "Moral Emotions" (2001) he describes how the notion of moral emotions can be interpreted in two different ways. Namely one can use the notion of moral emotions aiming to morally assess some emotions and distinctively coin their moral value, and also one can use the notion to focus on how moral judgments are made on the basis of emotions.

We argue that it is not possible to clearly define which emotions are moral emotions because of some specific quality intrinsic to emotions themselves, and that privileging some emotions instead of others can lead to serious theoretical errors and can establish pathological ongoing misunderstandings of the self and of others. Specific emotions do not have a fixed and overarching value for morality which privileges them to understand ourselves and others ethically. This means that identifying the strong impact of some emotions as moral emotions, the way Williams' work illustrates about shame, does not mean that these specific emotions have something morally special about them, and our focus should be to highlight that what makes some emotions moral lies at the heart of how they have acquired a moral relevance, and that when people morally assess some emotions as moral they are translating the thick evaluations of emotions into a thin interpretation of their overall positive or negative value for Morality and Ethics. That is, instead of considering that guilt can be a moral emotion because it implies a negative evaluation of a specific behavior which asks for reparative actions such as apologies, dialogue and prosocial actions (Sheikh & Janoff-Bulman 2010, 213-214), the focus is often on guilt's negative valence as indicating transgression of behavior giving the misguided impression that the valence of guilt is somehow specifically moral.

The way philosophy has taken up the role of emotions in moral judgment can be summarized under three positions (De Sousa 2001, 109). First one can completely deny that emotions can have any worth in moral judgments and, by underlying the importance of impartiality in ethics, advocate that the moral judgment is to be made in the absent, or at least indifference to emotional import (De Sousa 2001, 109). The daily life comment advising people not to be too emotional reflects this type of posture. The second view can be stated as one that privileges certain emotions for the excellence of moral action and consciousness and separates them as having a special moral role to be played within the human psyche (De Sousa 2001, 110). This can also be found in daily life when people advise others to forgive and forget the misdemeanors of people they care about, because what is important is to love each other, to offer generous interpretation of those close to us and keep an open dialogue to share misun-

derstandings given that "love is the most important thing." Finally, the third view, is to argue in an Aristotelian tone that moral judgements imply an emotional landscape and that somehow "all emotions are intrinsically relevant for ethics" (De Sousa 2001, 110). This is also embodied in daily life comments when people advice others to not follow just their heads and to have what their heart feels also in consideration. All three postures are superficially present in daily life common sense understanding of the role of emotions in moral judgements.

We think that Bernard Williams' work enables introducing another possible position: namely that because emotions make somehow part of thinking rationally, ethical and moral judgments are also carried out with feelings, emotions and sentiments. This fourth position argues that the entire emotional landscape is relevant in considering ethics and morality, because feelings, emotions and sentiments are part of the process of rationality, and given that it is too big of a task to analyse and examine each specific role of every emotion in the various ethical situations, there are some emotions that take up a guiding role to show how emotional insight is part of moral judgements. The proposal lies somewhere between the second and third positions identified by De Sousa.

That is, all emotions somehow take part and are relevant for ethics and the way we can best acknowledge that is by seeing the thick descriptions of some emotions that more frequently appear in the ethical realm. Now this may historically change and consequently an emotion may more frequently be the focus in ethics in a specific historical period than in another, and even though this means that moral emotions are historically relative, it also proves that they have a decisive place of relevance that confirms their essential role to ethics and morality across time. This means that although this or that specific emotion can be highlighted morally in a specific historical period, it will also be visible how it holds moral impact in other historical periods. The reason why certain emotions are moral is given by their historical location but there are general traits that make emotions part of judgments and ethical evaluations which can be recognized regardless of the historical time one is placed. The proposed fourth position can only be acknowledged if the complexities of Bernard Williams' suggestions are fully integrated with new insights from the theory of emotions.

## **2. Williams and the role of emotions in moral judgements – the example of shame**

Williams helps us to see the importance of emotions in ethics – acts of kindness or generosity need not to be the result of the application of a principle; the reasons for our behaviour are often the product of the contingencies of our personal history, delineated by a person-

specific emotional structure. Given that our conception of rationality would be an insane concept if it did not include feelings, emotions and sentiments, identifying the importance of emotions for ethics and moral judgments brings forth the complex set of interconnections among emotions, as well as the "wide range of other experience, memories, social expectations, and so on" (Williams 1995, 83) that takes part of acting rationally. According to Williams, it is clear that our identity and character as moral agents is indissociable from those contingent and emotional aspects: a completely detached conception of rationality would be an absurd: "it would be a kind of insanity never to experience sentiments of this kind towards anyone, and it would be an insane concept of rationality which insisted that a rational person never would. (...) One's history as an agent is a web in which anything that is the product of the will is surrounded and held up and partly formed by things that are not." (Williams 1981, 29).

It is not disputable that Bernard Williams' understanding of what to include under the ethical realm is much broader than what is commonly accepted in contemporary moral philosophy given his attention to the detail of ethical questions, and his claim that ethical thought does not have to take the form of a moral theory in order to be taken seriously (Williams 1985). Our aim is to argue that this general claim is strongly connected with the idea that ethical concepts often involve an entanglement of fact and value. Williams famously distinguished between thick and thin concepts (Williams 1985), clearly showing that the former (concepts like *coward*, *rude*, etc.) are as much important to ethical evaluation as the latter (concepts like *good/bad*, *wrong/right*). Thick concepts involve an entanglement of fact and value because they have the particularity of conveying some kind of ethical knowledge – establishing the circumstances under which the concept of *coward*, or the concept of *gratitude*, for instance, are applicable – and also of succeeding in being action-guiding.

Thick concepts are fundamental to ethical judgments, and their value is due precisely by their ethical richness, because they give us the moral overtones that make the difference in moral judgments. Following Goldie (Goldie 2008), we will argue that what conveys these moral overtones of thick concepts is precisely their emotional content. We think the best way to accomplish showing that is to take up Bernard Williams' philosophical assessment of the concept of shame (Williams 1993).

In *Shame and Necessity*, Williams proposes that Greek ethics has a lot of important points and it is very much possible, and desirable, to learn from them, even if Greek thought is "neither fully recoverable nor fully admirable" (Williams 1993, xvii). He considers that "the most basic materials of our ethical outlook are present in Homer" (Williams 1993, 21). Wil-

Williams' goal is to make clear that it is possible to have a better sense of some ethical ideas if we get a closer look at some ideas conveyed by the Ancient Greeks. One of these ideas concerns the ethical resonance of emotions, particularly the emotion of shame. Bernard Williams' analysis of shame shows that the ethical richness of emotions is best seen through the lenses of thick concepts because they are mutually insightful for morality. We will argue that the ethical richness of shame given by Bernard Williams' analysis is transferable to other emotions, ultimately explaining that an analysis of both the richness and thickness that it is attached to some emotions is the key to understand why some emotions have a distinct ethical place. We expect that this also makes clear how the ethical richness of shame for Ancient Greeks is still presently meaningful in all its complexity according to Williams.

One of the ways to better grasp Williams' proposal is to contrast it with a modern perspective on the concept of shame, inspired by a Kantian outlook. For a Kantian, shame is an emotion that does not involve true ethical value, since the values at stake in a social structure dominated by shame are merely heteronomous. Accordingly, there is an association between the concept of shame and the notion of 'losing or saving face', where face "stands for appearance against reality and the outer versus the inner" (Williams 1993, 77). Williams will argue that this is an incomplete and highly superficial view on the ethical relevance of the notion of shame.

Tracing a picture of how ethical relations governed by shame work, Williams puts forward that the basic experiences associated with shame have to do with what one would feel if someone were seen by others in some embarrassing situation, or with a prospective feeling, as a form of fear of what the others will think or say about one's action. According to Williams, it is a huge mistake to think that this is all about the 'fear of being seen' or of being found out, as is the effect of 'losing face' towards the other. On the contrary, if motivations of shame are internalized, the gaze can be "the imagined gaze of an imagined other" (Williams 1993, 82), which ultimately means that this imagined other is just the inner self. In sum, the suggestion is not that people simply adjust to what others will think, but that they are also genuinely thinking in that way because there is some evaluative content that humans share – there are some kinds of behavior that people admire or despise, and this is the reason why they pursue or avoid them, instead of a mere fear of hostile reactions or search for judgments of approval.

Overall, there is a truly ethical sense governing the structure of the relations of shame, and the values at stake are not merely heteronomous connections which depend upon the opinion of others. Williams uses the example of the tragic hero Ajax, who kills himself out of

shame. This happened due to some kind of profound dissociation between what Ajax thinks of himself and what he has done, because "being what he is, he could not live as the man who had done these things" (Williams 1993, 73). This has profound ethical resonance, even if there is no reference whatsoever to what people should do and to what are their moral obligations. In fact, in Williams' words,

People do not *have to* think that they could not live in that situation (...). But they may sensibly think it if their understanding of their lives and the significance their lives possessed for other people is such that what they did destroyed the only reason they had for going on. (Williams 1993, 74)

Williams clearly acknowledges and explains how the mechanism of shame can display a conception of one's ethical identity. If Ajax sees it as absolutely necessary to end his life, that necessity is grounded in his ethical identity, a sense of who he fundamentally is. It is not a necessity grounded in a concept of a categorical imperative or in the concept of moral duty because it stands as an *ethical* necessity. A necessity to act in a certain way that emerges out of a profound and internalized conviction – an ethical conviction. Thus, contrary to what is commonly understood, the ethical sense of necessity, at least for some tragic heroes, has an internal source, not external nor divine, funded in the mechanisms of shame.

In a nutshell, what the Greeks help us to understand is that an ethical point of view does not simply coincide with the rationalist and detached point of view that simply evaluates something as good or bad. To evaluate something as good or bad, right or wrong, is necessarily intertwined with a thick connection to values and with a narrative which, in Williams' terms, means that the moral self is not completely "characterless", disentangled from every contingent aspect that makes someone what that person is. A moral outlook is composed of contingent, psychological, social and emotional features and thus it is reasonable that an emotion like shame can have such moral importance, and that truly ethical decisions can be explained by the mechanisms of shame. The ancient Greek conception of an ethical outlook is broader and less committed to a distinctive unique path to morality. In fact, perhaps one of the fundamental advantages of the Greek ethical thought is that it lacks the concept of morality, in the sense of a set of motivations or demands that are in some way essentially different from other types of motivations and demands. This means that there is no clear cut distinction between moral and nonmoral motivations, or between moral and nonmoral emotions, moral and nonmoral qualities, which means that every action is somehow potentially of moral importance.

The emotion of shame for the Greeks is neutral on that distinction and has a multiplicity of applications such that people can be ashamed for having run away in battle (for lack of bravery), and they can also feel ashamed for a failed gesture of generosity. Not distinguishing between what would be pure moral motivations or qualities and nonmoral motivations or qualities is one of the advantages that the Greek understanding of ethical emotions has to offer. It is closer to daily life experience, and consequently offers a more realistic way to see the role of emotions in ethics. The modern moral thought, on the contrary, because it emphasizes the distinction between moral and nonmoral, implies a compartmentalized way of looking at our daily lives and that enforces given primacy to certain emotions in an isolated way, like it gives primacy to the emotion of guilt in the moral domain. Whereas the modern moral thought focuses on guilt (in the sense that here is clear the connection with the notion of someone being harmed, the notion of victim), the Greeks did not see the primacy of guilt, and did not make guilt the most important moral emotion precisely because they were able to understand that there is so much more to our ethical lives than individualized judgment of action and behaviour. Consequently, the Greeks were able to understand, for instance, that it is possible to feel guilt and shame towards the same action, and that having an ethical outlook is not simply a matter of distinguishing between what is good and bad. This is something that Williams' assessment of the emotion of shame helps us to understand, and the importance of it can be recognized by how we still link shame to a negative evaluation of the self as opposed to how the negative evaluation of behavior is found in guilt (Sheikh & Janoff-Bulman 2010, 213).

### **3. The ethical richness of emotions – the case of Phrike**

Having a realistic notion of what our moral lives are thus requires acknowledging the significance of the so called thick concepts to ethical evaluation, combining both a descriptive and normative/evaluative dimension to the ethical realm. Consequently, this means that though there is a crucial link between the emotional landscape and morality, there is also no clear cut distinction between moral and nonmoral emotions, similar to the Ancient Greek posture. Therefore, what can be seen about shame in Williams' analysis can also be seen in other emotions of the Ancient Greek times. Take as an illustration how *Phrike* (Cairns 2017) can be taken as a moral emotion, though its use and classification as a moral emotion has been lost in time. *Phrike* is the physical experience response of the body that shivers and shudders in face of certain events (Cairns 2017, 54). Though we can describe it as being an involuntary

bodily movement which normally responds to changes in the temperature of the organism, it is associated with unexpected and unsettling disturbing visual stimuli making it a "feature also of language and of thought" (Cairns 2017, 57). Similarly, to the way William shows with shame, we can still recognize its role and relevance and see that we could refer to its moral importance nowadays, perhaps still visible in the way we still refer to how something gave a shiver, and recover its thick conceptual network once we overcome the historical transformation that implied its loss of use.

If we closely analyse the use of this emotion, *Phrike*, it is possible to see how the context-specific and living examples reinforce the crucial link between the emotional landscape and morality. In "Horror, pity, and the visual in ancient Greek aesthetics" (2017), Cairns explains how an audience can feel *phrike* when in Sophocles' *Aedipus Tyrannus* the play offers the sight of Aedipus reaction to blind himself when confronted with his tragic story. According to Cairns, what the experience of *phrike* denotes is a shared conception and awareness of the vulnerability of all human beings (Cairns 2017, 70) such that "*phrike* responds to the misfortunes of others, uniting both the fearful sense that we ourselves are as vulnerable as they are and a sympathy that is born of that very recognition" (Cairns 2017, 71). What happens in the experience of watching the tragedy is that both the Chorous – internal audience – and the public watching the play – the external audience – will similarly experience *phrike* providing a live example of the internalized other we have identified earlier in the description of shame by Williams. And similarly it would be simplistic to think that the external audience feels *phrike* because the Chorous does (Cairns 2017, 71). As Cairns explains,

In so far as the emotions of internal and external audiences are the same, this is a matter of their converging on the same object, though it is entirely possible that the emotion of the internal audience may serve to prime, focus or reinforce the response of the external audience. (Cairns 2017, 71)

What has been said about *phrike* is transferable to our current times, despite the absence of current use of a similar term, because the embodied experience linked to the physical and social environment is similar and the "ancient Greek emotional concepts are, to large extent, built up out of the same materials as our own" (Cairns 2017, 57).

Though some emotions have some ethical richness, the same emotion word can be ethically rich or not depending on the complexity of its context. Nevertheless, this ethical richness can only be understood if we take up the challenge of showing how the normative and descriptive levels of discourse should be understood as an interconnected activity, through the notion of thick concepts.

#### 4. Thick concepts and the ethical richness of emotions

To better understand how the description of Williams about shame can be transferable to other emotions requires translating the description of thick and thin concepts in order to reveal the ethical richness of an emotion. Thick concepts, as we said, have the particularity of conveying some kind of ethical knowledge (establishing the circumstances under which the concept of *coward*, or the concept of *gratitude*, for instance, are applicable), but also of succeeding in being action-guiding. This means that thick concepts have both a normative/evaluative as well as a descriptive dimension. Moreover, thick concepts give us the moral overtones that make the difference in moral judgments, and what conveys the moral overtone of thick concepts is precisely their emotional content (Goldie 2008). Accordingly, the use of thick concepts involves an entanglement of fact and value and also of judgment and emotion.

Williams introduced the notion of thick ethical concepts in his *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985):

If a concept of this kind applies, this often provides someone with a reason for action (...) We may say, summarily, 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 (...) We can say, then, that the application of these concepts is at the same time world-guided and action-guiding. (Williams 1985, 140–1)

His most common examples are: treachery, promise, brutality, courage, or gratitude. With his extreme attention to the detailed and the particular, he clearly shows that these are the specific notions in terms of which people think and speak about their own and others' conduct. And this is a denser description which can more often be found in our ethical discourse than simply stating that some action is simply good or right.

Contrary to thin concepts, thick concepts have a descriptive content which, in Williams' words, "seem to express a union of fact and value" (Williams 1985, 129). This means that there are some descriptive/factual circumstances under which the concept of *coward* or the concept of *gratitude*, for instance, are applicable because they call for a certain evaluative posture, and thus thick concepts may be rightly or wrongly applied. Thus while there is appropriateness or not of application, there is, at the same time, inbuilt in these concepts, a sense of condemnation or praise, which means that they also succeed in being action-guiding, and function as normative concepts. In other words, if someone observes that an action is *cruel*, this will in principle give her some reason for action either by doing something or refraining

from it. As Williams points out, evaluating some action as cruel or coward conveys a particular way to say that an action is bad, and stating that some action is cruel or coward simultaneously means much more than simply stating that some action is bad. To identify some action as bad asks only to condemn it, to say something is cruel or coward asks for a more complete description of the persons' character, the situation they experienced and the details that shape the event and make us wonder what could have changed the occurrence. Thick concepts are important because they make clear that moral evaluations are not tinted in only two colours – they present us the colourful moral overtones that make the difference in moral judgments and allow us to understand the ethical richness of our common moral evaluations. As Williams puts it:

in being interested in a person's moral judgement, so called, we are in fact not merely interested in whether he is pro this and con that, whether he grades these men in one order or another. We are interested in what moral view he takes of the situation, how those situations look to him in the light of his moral outlook" (Williams 1973, 213).

Goldie (2008) wishes to clearly display the connection between thick concepts and emotions, and to give a philosophical account of that connection that is not simplistic. Meta-theories as emotivism or sentimentalism would be examples of how this connection between emotions and thick concepts could be oversimplified. Goldie asserts that if we properly understand what role emotional dispositions play in ethical evaluation, we are also able to understand the entanglement between description and evaluation that thick concepts involve. He suggests that it is possible to convey a certain moral outlook through the employment of these kinds of concepts, thick concepts, precisely because they express not only the entanglement of fact and value, but also the entanglement of emotion and judgement – when employing thick concepts, it is impossible to isolate the "moral content" from the emotion that is being expressed. Moreover, Goldie is suggesting that it is emotions that bind together the beliefs, concerns and values that thick concepts involve. As Williams has proposed, it is emotions that give us the moral overtone attached to thick concepts.

This does not mean that expression of ocurent feelings is necessary or sufficient for sincere expression of moral belief (as emotivists would claim), but it certainly implies that sharing the beliefs, concerns and values that permit someone to apply a certain thick concept involves sharing some emotional asset, that there is certainly a connection between some emotions and those beliefs, concerns and values. According to Williams, this connection "between strength of feeling displayed on moral issues and the strength of the moral view taken" is clear (Williams 1973, 220), but it is important to stress that having 'strong feelings'

does not necessarily require that those feelings occurs or be expressed at a particular moment. What is closely linked with the beliefs, concerns and values involved in thick concepts is not necessarily the expression of specific feelings, but the expression of a certain emotional structure that goes, and grows, along with those beliefs, concerns and values that convey a certain moral outlook. Williams goes even further: he is not suggesting that there is a mere empirical correlation between the strength of feeling and criteria for taking a moral view – for if that was the case "we could imagine a world in which people had strong moral views, and strong emotions, and their emotions were not the least engaged in their morality" (Williams 1973, 220) – but rather he wants to reinforce how we should think of them intertwined such that feelings are part of the moral views. He writes, further clarifying his position,

My suggestion is that, in some cases, the relevant unity in a man's behaviour, the pattern into which his judgements and actions together fit, must be understood in terms of an emotional structure underlying them, and that understanding of this kind may be essential. Thus we may understand a man's particular moral remark as being, if sincere, an expression of compassion. (...) and it may be that it is only in the light of seeing him as a compassionate man that those actions, judgements, even gestures, will be naturally taken together at all. (Williams 1973, 220-222)

### **5. Thick concepts and meta-emotions – developing Williams' insights**

Recent developments in philosophy of emotion, namely the concept of meta-emotion (Mendonça 2013) and the link to embodied experience of cultural and social interpretation of emotions, enable us to see other far-reaching consequences of Bernard Williams' insights, because the way people conceptualize their emotions changes their emotional experience since "what people's ethical emotions are depends significantly on what they take them to be" (Williams 1993, 91).

Without realizing Williams was already pointing out the importance of layers of emotions for the dynamics of the emotional landscape. When emotions are about emotions, they are layered instead of sequential (Pugmire 2005, 174). For example, when someone is sad about their shame, their sadness is a meta-emotion. The meta-emotional layer can be equal to the first order emotion or different such that one can be sad about their sadness while one can also on another occasion be sad about their jealousy. It is possible that the layered nature of our emotional landscape is an outcome of the social character of mind and that it springs out of the fact that caregivers have emotions about others they care for which are possibly incor-

porated in development within the individual emotional scenario. This is perhaps why the concept of meta-emotion first appears in parenting literature referring to parent's emotions and beliefs regarding their own and their children's emotions (Gottman, Katz, and Hoven, 1996, 1998). The outcome of such pedagogical devise is a type of internalized emotional experience where emotions are internal reasons for acting, as pointed out by Williams in his treatment of Self.

However, since then researchers have defined meta-emotions in a variety of ways (Haradhvala 2016, 1). For the purposes of our argument it suffices to acknowledge them as "evaluative reactions to the sum total, the sequence or accumulation to date of one's admirations, amusements, envies, indignations, loves, griefs" (Baier 1990, 24), without which any theory of emotion stands as incomplete if it does not somehow work out and incorporate the meta-emotional layer (Mendonça 2013, Howard 2015, Belli & Broncano 2017).

If we introduce the reflexivity of emotions within Williams' proposal and recognize that meta-emotions can change the meaning and value of the first order emotions because being angry about being sad and being proud of being sad is a completely different emotional experience of sadness, then we have added an important dimension to be described in the thickness of the concepts attached to an emotion and to an ethical judgment. Thus, the importance of meta-emotions lies partly on the way in which they influence and mold the impact of the first order emotional experience (Mendonça 2013, 390), and on the way in which they take part of the suggestion of thick description proposed by Williams and undertaken by Goldie (2008). Since meta-emotions have an impact on the value of the first-order emotion which modifies them and promotes a change in the whole emotional experience (Mendonça 2013, 394), there is an added significance brought by meta-emotion, namely that it is not a mere sum of its meaning to the meaning of the first order emotion. The layered description can thus provide a transformative interpretation, and as a result the "information obtained with the description of meta-emotions is not simply a matter of having more information about the experience; the extra knowledge we get from meta-emotions may change the meaning of the experience altogether" (Mendonça 2013, 394). That is, people can be angry about their fear and only acknowledge their separatedness, and once they are able to identify the anger and the fear and how their anger is about their fear they have a different description which may allow them to see anger as, for example, a protection against fear, and ultimately the connection and interpretation of experience changes it and enables other actions and reactions than were previously available when the first order experience was taken independently of the second order one.

Meta-emotions are often identified as strategies for healthy emotional regulation even though the relationship between emotions and meta-emotions can be far more complex and negative than the usual positive regulative connections (Howard 2015, 11-15) making it crucial to identify the ways in which regulation can be maladaptive. That is, recognizing that reflexivity of emotion does not necessarily award a positive self-corrective direction, just like thinking about thinking does not, yet we can easily recognize that it provides a privilege ground for instances of regulatory mechanisms because just as thinking about thinking can guide and correct thinking, emotions about emotions can refine and guide feelings.

The usefulness of combining the thick and thin concepts distinction with the concept of meta-emotion is that it enables developing Williams' insights providing a more precise understanding of the role of emotional structure in morality, and suggests a possibility for overcoming the difficulties in properly answer the Blackburn challenge (Heuer 2012). Blackburn argues that there is something wrong with seeing thick concepts as action-guiding, because there are, for sure, pejorative thick concepts (sexist or racist ones, for instance), and in these particular cases, we clearly do not want to claim that the facts asserted in propositions which involve thick concepts are action-guiding, in the sense of providing reasons for action.

Some of us can, for instance, understand the conditions of application of a thick concept like obscene, but that does not mean we are prepared to admit that there is something I should be doing or not, simply by recognizing that something is obscene. Thus, argues Blackburn, the correct application of thick terms is not necessarily connected with an evaluative stance, which means that the evaluative and descriptive aspect are not intertwined as Williams, or Putnam (2002), suppose. Instead, Blackburn (1998) thinks thick concepts are constituted by two distinct and separable elements: a descriptive element on one side, and the expression of an attitude on the other.

Williams can answer Blackburn's challenge by claiming that the kind of knowledge that thick concepts convey, closely linked with a specific evaluative stance, is not universal but shared by a community (Williams 1985, 1993). As Williams puts it:

An insightful observer can indeed come to understand and anticipate the use of the concept without actually sharing the values of the people who use it. (...) The sympathetic observer can follow the practice of the people he is observing; he can report, anticipate, and even take part in discussions of the use they make of their concept. But, as with some other concepts of theirs, relating to religion, for instance, or to witchcraft, he may not be ultimately identified with the use of the concept: it may not really be his. (Williams 1985, 141-142)

The members of that community can see the specific connection between the descriptive element and the evaluative stance, the reasons there are for doing or for refraining from doing something. Sharing this kind of ethical knowledge is already sharing a worldview, and an emotional landscape, which means that thick concepts are parochial and, as Heuer (2012) acknowledges, being specific of one community is "consistent with the possibility that the community consists, contingently, of everyone" (Heuer 2012, 7). Someone from outside of the community can understand how the concept is applied, can be perfectly able to apply the concept accurately, and able to grasp the evaluative point (since these are not separable), without its application being action-guiding, without seeing reasons for acting accordingly, since he does not participate in that way of life and does not share their emotional resonance. Adrian Moore defends the exact same point, by introducing the notion of *fully embracing* a thick concept stating that there are two ways in which they can be understood. When the thick ethical concept is grasped in an engaged way it is possible to act and simultaneously feel at home in applying the concept to oneself and "being prepared to apply it oneself means being prepared to apply it not only just in overt acts of communication but also in how one thinks about the world and in how one conducts one's affairs" (Moore 2006, 137). On the other hand, when the thick concept is taken in an disengaged way there is simply the recognition on how the concept would be applied and what are the conditions of correctness, acknowledging and understanding how others apply it. The engaged manner of grasping a thick concept then requires "sharing whatever beliefs, concerns, and values give application of the concept its point" (Moore 2006, 137). In addition, since thick concepts are action-guiding concepts they are also up for debate and can be revised provided proper and rigorous evaluation. Similarly to how an emotion can turn into a different emotional experience by the presence of a meta-emotion, so thick concepts can be modified by ethical evaluation of their use. Meta-emotions are part of the emotional structure that offers the moral resonance and this may also account for the way in which temporal modification occurs regarding the value of moral emotions throughout history.

## 6. Concluding remarks

We wish to conclude by showing some future possible research directions based on the practical implications for education and for a better understanding concerning the value of character.

Education stands as an important place to identify the future possible research directions because it can be interpreted as a laboratory of philosophical ideas for, as John Dewey writes, "The educational point of view enables one to envisage the philosophical problems where they arise and thrive, where they are at home, and where acceptance or rejection makes a difference in practice" (Dewey 1916, 338). At the same time it provides further clues on how to continue research in experimental psychology concerning the value of the education of character. In the field of moral education, the recent focus on character education and on emotional learning show how the philosophical work on emotions can have important practical applications. One important idea is that "virtue is about emotion as well as action: that in order to be fully virtuous, a person must not only *act*, but also *react*, in the right way, toward the right people, at the right time" (Kristjánsson 2006, 40). The issue at stake is less about the possible Aristotelic connection between the emotions and the 'good life', and more about stressing the educational salience of emotions for morality and ethics, and consequently to better understand how the management and experience of emotions can be cultivated and fostered at schools and families. Importantly, we have shown that this demands the notion of meta-emotions as to provide a deeper and more complete description of the connection of emotions and morality.

*Dr. Dina Mendonça, Universidade Nova de Lisboa,  
Portugal, md@fcsh.unl.pt*

*Dr. Susana Cadilha, Universidade Nova de Lisboa,  
Portugal, susanacadilha@gmail.com>*

## **References**

- Baier, Ann. "What Emotions Are About," *Philosophical Perspectives* 4, (1990):1-29.
- Bartsch Anne, Markus Appel, and Dennis Storch. "Predicting emotions and metaemotions at the movies: The role of the need for affect in audiences' experience of horror and drama," *Communication Research*, vol. 37, no. 2 (2010): 167–190.
- Bartsch, Anne et al. "Appraisal of emotions in media use: Toward a process model of metaemotion and emotion regulation." *Media Psychology*, vol. 11, no. 1 (2008): 7–27.

Belli, Simone and Broncano, Fernando. "Trust as a Meta-Emotion," *Metaphilosophy*, vol. 48, no. 4, July (2017): 430-448.

Beer, Niels and Giovanni Moneta, "Construct and concurrent validity of the Positive Metacognitions and Positive Meta-Emotions Questionnaire" *Personality and Individual Differences*, vol. 49 (2010): 977-982.

Ben-ze'ev, Aaron . "Emotions and morality". *The Journal of Value Inquiry* vol. 31 (1997): 195–212.

Blackburn, Simon. "Through Thick and Thin", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 66 (1992): 285–99.

Blackburn, Simon. *Ruling Passion*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1998.

Cairns, Douglas. "Horror, pity and the visual in ancient Greek aesthetics," in Douglas Cairns and Damien Nelis (eds.). *Emotions in the Classical World. Methods, Approaches and Directions* Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2017, 53-78.

De Sousa, Ronald. "Moral Emotions". *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* vol. 4, no. 2 (2001): 109-126.

Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education, 1916*, in Jo Ann Boydston (ed.). *The Middle Works of John Dewey, Volume 9, 1899-1924*, Vol. 9. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980.

Ferrari, Michel, and Emiko Koyama. "Meta-emotions about anger and amae: A cross-cultural Comparison." *Consciousness & emotion*, vol. 3, no. 2 (2002): 197-211.

Goldie, Peter. "Thick concepts and emotion," in Daniel Callcut (ed.). *Reading Bernard Williams*. London and New York: Routledge, 2008, 94-109.

Gottman, John Mordechai, Katz, Lynn F., and Carole Hooven. "Parental meta-emotion philosophy and the emotional life of families: theoretical models and preliminary data." *Journal of Family Psychology*, (1996) 10 (3): 243-268.

Gottman, John Mordechai, Lynn Fainsilber Katz, and Carole Hooven. *Meta-emotion: How families communicate emotionally*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997.

Gross, James J. "The emerging field of emotion regulation: An integrative review," *Review of General Psychology*, vol. 2, no. 3 (1998): 271-299.

Haradhvala, Natasha. "Meta-Emotions in Daily Life: Associations with Emotional Awareness and Depression". Thesis. St. Louis, Missouri: Washington University in St. Louis, 2016, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7936/K7H130F6>

Howard, Scott Alexander. "Metaemotional Intentionality," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 98 (2017): 406-428. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/papq.12093>

Jäger Christoph, and Anne Bartsch. "Meta-emotions," *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 73, (2006):179-204.

Heuer, Ulrike. "Thick Concepts and Internal Reasons". In Ulrike Heuer and Gerald Lang (eds.) *Luck, Value, and Commitment. Themes from the Ethics of Bernard Williams*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Kristjánsson, Kristján. "Emotional intelligence in the classroom? An Aristotelian Critique". *Educational Theory*, vol. 56, no. 1 (2006): 39-56.

Koven, Nancy S. "Specificity of metaemotion effects on moral decision making" *Emotion*, vol. 11, no. 5, (2011): 1255–1261. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0025616>

Mendonça, Dina. "Emotions about Emotions," *Emotion Review* vol. 5, no. 4 (2013): 390-396.

Moore, Adrian. "Maxims and thick ethical concepts," *Ratio* (new series), vol. 19 (2006): 129–47.

Pugmire, David. *Sound Sentiments. Integrity in the emotions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Putnam, Hilary. *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays*. Harvard University Press, 2002.

Sheikh, Sana and Ronnie Janoff-Bulman. "The 'Shoulds' and 'Should Nots' of Moral Emotions: A Self-regulatory Perspective on Shame and Guilt," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol. 36, no. 2 (2010): 213-224.

Williams, Bernard. *Making Sense of Humanity and other philosophical papers 1982-1993*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Williams Bernard. *Shame and Necessity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

Williams, Bernard. *Ethics and the limits of philosophy*. London: Fontana, 1985.

Williams, Bernard. "Moral Luck". In Bernard Williams. *Moral Luck*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 20-40.

Williams, Bernard. "Morality and the Emotions". In Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Paper 1956-1972*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973, 207-229.