

**Direction [SNF-Project](#) “Thick Concepts and Reasons for Action” (August 2010 – Juli 2013)**

**Abstract**

In the past decades, the aspiration for an external grounding of morality that has shaped modern moral philosophy from Kant to Habermas has increasingly lost its credentials. In response, most authors working in that field have retreated to the project of reconstructing the specific internal logic of moral discourse. However, in the context of the current state of moral discourse—the hallmark of which is an increasing pluralization, hybridization and fragmentation of ethical cultures and subcultures—the appeal to our basic moral intuitions that is congenial to the internalist turn in moral philosophy seems to be highly parochial and arbitrary. As a result, the lack of a shared understanding of what counts as a good argument or a *prima facie* acceptable position which is characteristic of current moral discourse is reproduced in the moral-philosophical literature as well as in that on applied ethics.

It is the fundamental metaethical goal of the research project to contribute to overcoming this shortcoming of current moral-philosophical discourse by developing a theory of ethical judgment that simultaneously avoids the discredited project of an external grounding of morality, and the now fashionable internalism or traditionalism. We avoid the first of these pitfalls by adopting a picture of ethical discourse that has been developed by the proponents of the Neoaristotelian tendency in analytic moral philosophy over the past four decades, according to which at the core of that discourse are not abstract value predicates like “is morally right” or “is morally obliged” on which modern moral philosophy traditionally focused, but specific evaluative terms like “is friendly”, “is cruel” or “is brave” – so called *thick terms* – the constitutive function of which is to articulate a sensitivity for what matters in a specific situation that can only be acquired by being socialized into a particular ethical tradition. The second one, e.i. the conclusion that a rational agreement on ethical issues is only possible within a framework of a particular tradition suggested by that picture, is evaded by developing a criterion for the adequacy of thick terms on the base of which the users of incompatible ethical vocabularies can conduct a rational discourse. The need for such a criterion is particularly urgent in the current cultural context within which the appropriateness as well as the content of various thick terms as for instance “masculine”, “feminine”, “self-reliance” and “deviant” are the topics of intense and important public debates.

The central function of thick terms is to make explicit certain forms of practical inferences and hence of reasons for action. Accordingly, the envisaged account of ethical judgments is routed in a theory of reasons for action and practical rationality. This theory essentially contributes to the controversy between preferentialist and cognitivist accounts of reasons for action – which constitutes one of the most important controversies in modern theory of action – by taking up the criticism that has been leveled against the preferentialist account by adherents of the Neoaristotelian tendency, like Dancy and McDowell, while it constitutes a crucial advance over the criticism in several respects. Thus, it removes fundamental obstacle to developing a cogent cognitivist account that derives from the difficulty, in particular in the context of modern culture, of construing debates on basic ethical issues as a rational discourse. For, this difficulty suggests that such debates amount to practical conflicts between countervailing intentions or preferences, rather than to disagreements about matters of fact, that is, that difficulty *prima facie* confirms the preferentialist account. Conversely, the theory of ethical discourse to be developed in the research project lends credibility to the cognitivist account of reasons for action by showing how a rational agreement on basic ethical issues is nevertheless possible.