**Eli Friedlander**

Eli Friedlander’s suggestive paper sets forth from a subtle reformulation of the external-internal divide we attempted to draw by distinguishing between thin and thick evaluative concepts. Our thick concepts, we argue, and Friedlander agrees, define the normative commitments particular to our form of life. They are the terms, as he nicely puts it that by “governing the normative dimensions of our lives …[[1]](#footnote-1) lead to a form of framework relativity, or a sense of being inescapably wedded to our form of life without any true possibility of self-criticism”. Thin concepts, by contrast, like “right”, “true” and “good”, we argue, are mere shorthand, empty placeholders whose specific content is supplied without remainder for each community by means of its specific vocabulary of thick terms. To this Friedlander objects. But he does so without contesting our main point in this regard, namely, that despite appearances to the contrary, our thin terms are not shared by others, and can therefore not facilitate agreed comparisons and rankings between significantly different forms of life – the principle we christened: Comparative Irrealism.

Interestingly, Friedlander is unconcerned with what we normatively share or do not share with other cultures. Thin concepts remain for him, as they do for us, inconsequential *between* frameworks. But, unlike us, he insists that despite their thinness, they play an important critical role *within* a framework. This is something we totally failed to see. For us “good”, he argues, not only functions as *shorthand* for the cluster of thick concepts we uphold and aspire to live up to, but is also the *evaluative* label we give them. According to Friedlander, valour and charity, for example, are good for us, not merely because they define or are constitutive of what we take to be good, as we maintain, but because we *deem* them to *be* good. Although the thin acquires its meaning from the thick and can only be realized by means of the thick, it nonetheless imparts upon the thick a stamp of approval. As Friedlander summarizes the point, despite their thinness, thin concepts cannot be dispensed of. “The situation … is not of a choice between the thick and the thin perspectives, but rather one of assuming the tension of holding both together, or of seeking ways of seeing the one being the partial realization of the other.” Friedlander makes a twofold claim. First, and contrary to our argument in *The View from Within*, that in the tense and narrow gap between experiencing something (say, as modest or valiant) and how that experience is *experienced* (as good), a capacity for internal normative criticism presents itself. And second, that in the account of aesthetic judgment in Kant’s third Critique one finds “the purest manifestation of [this] capacity for internal criticism.”

Though “logically singular,” namely, directed always at a particular object, aesthetic judgment is nonetheless universal. It aims, not at winning the assent of others by second-guessing *their* taste, but, as Kant has it, “in allowing myself to speak for others … the aesthetic judgment is pronounced with a universal voice”, by which he means, according to Friedlander, articulating it in words (thick terms) that make it available to others. But, and this is the important point, when the beautiful object is first encountered, when the *need* for such judgment is initially felt, those words are not yet available. To put the point crudely, Friedlander argues following Kant that what is first awakened by the object is a yet inarticulable *sense*, or *feeling* by which it is deemed to be worthy of being judged beautiful by an as-of-yet unsubstantiated, and hence inherently thin notion of beauty, far thinner than the thin concepts of our account. It is then, and only then, that the full judgment is formed, substantiated and articulated by means of a share*able* vocabulary of either existing or specially minted thick evaluative concepts.

And yet, despite being even thinner than ours, the thin sense of beauty and of similar terms is in Friedlander’s account is nonetheless capable of setting in motion an act of determining (by means of already given thick concepts) or reflecting (by means of newly minted ones) judgment wholly independently of the thick terms that will eventually lend it meaning and substance. It is hard to argue with his account, which adds a dimension to the thin-thick distinction which we clearly overlooked.

What is less clear, however, is to what extent can the enriching power of the thin in such acts of reflecting judgment be deemed to be an act of normative *criticism* as Friedlander would like to claim? In reflecting judgment our existing thick vocabulary is enhanced by new thick concepts. To feel the need to form a new concept is to realize the normative *inadequacy* or *incompleteness* of the old. In this sense, the reflective aspect of such judgment is clearly critical. The obvious analogy is to moments of exposure to unanticipated normative possibilities when encountering an alien form of life, and feeling compelled to add them to your own. Time and again we find ourselves inspired by, and endorsing values we encounter in cultures quite foreign, sometimes even antithetical to our own – elements of the chivalric code of medieval Christian knighthood (an example we owe to Lorraine Daston), Muslim hospitality, Christian compassion and forgiveness, equality in same-sex marriages, and so forth. But finding one’s normative framework lacking, and supplementing it while leaving it intact, is different from finding any part of it sufficiently wanting to merit *replacement*. It is to the possibility of the latter form of normative critique to which our book is devoted. The feeling of beauty that drives reflecting aesthetic judgment is, as Friedlander makes clear, always directed at an *object* which it deems to be in need of a more robust evaluative classification than those available. It is not directed critically against any part of the existing set of thick terms presently at the assessor’s disposal. And by the same token, the new thick concept subsequently forged to complete the judgment, augments and extends, rather than modifies it. (An aspect all the more pronounced by its universal presumption)

Schematically, then, Kant’s account of aesthetic judgment as presented by Friedlander, is certainly relevant to our main thesis, but seems to us not to *challenge* it, at least not directly. However, we are more complicated creatures than any neat philosophical picture of human selfhood and agency is capable of painting. Augmenting a normative framework *is* different from replacing parts of it deemed to be normatively flawed. However, what might seem at first as an innocent extension, may well prove in the long-term to have a profoundly transformative effect. From the inception of Christianity, the three monotheistic religions developed in keen and complex interaction with one another. Every aspect of their diverse theological, exegetical, legal, ethical liturgical, social, eschatological, aesthetical and artistic vocabularies took and changed form as religious standards and values of the other two deemed appropriate were endorsed, and those not, negated. Despite the myths of purity and internal unfolding insistently proffered by each of them, all three faith traditions were dramatically transformed and diversified over time as a result of such borrowings and rejections.

However, dramatic as transformations of this kind can be, both in and outside religion, they remain beyond the ken of the more modest and limited aspirations of our book, namely, to explore the possibility of *reasoned* framework transitions; transitions stimulated by reasoned normative critique, and performed by reasoned normative self-purging. We ended up forced to outsource the former to outside critics, in order to enable the latter to be undertaken from within. Reflecting judgment and its possible long-term normative impact, are certainly highly relevant to any understanding of human normativity, reason and agency, and in ways we had not anticipated. However, it remains our contention that they nevertheless ultimately leave our overall argument intact.

1. We skipped the word “can” here because we believe that “the framework relativity”, as he has it, to which our thick evaluative concepts gives rise, is inevitable. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)