

Internal, formal and thin relations

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In one of his most thought-provoking and illuminating contributions to the metaphysical study of relations (« Relations - through thick and thin », *Erkenntnis*, 1998, 325-353), Kevin Mulligan points to the existence of what he initially describes as an « intuitive » difference between such relational predications as « Sam exemplifies happiness », « 3 is greater than 2 », or « Orange is between red and yellow », on the one hand, and « Sam loves Mary », « Paris is to the north of Marseille » or « Mary hits Sam » on the other hand. He then suggests that there might well be an equally intuitive difference – a difference in ontological status – between the corresponding relational universals or tropes on both sides and makes a compelling case for the philosophical importance, at any rate, of this rather broad distinction. Moreover, while he cautiously declines to provide any systematic account of what « thin » and « thick » relations », as he calls them, are « in general », and while he restricts himself, instead, to drawing a list of the main sub-categories of the two kinds of relations involved, he nonetheless endeavours to gloss the thin/thick distinction in terms of several other dichotomies, such as the internal/external, formal/material and topic-neutral/topic-partial distinctions. Clearly enough however, a major difficulty in this respect is that such predicates as « formal » (resp. « material ») or « internal » (resp. « external »), at least as applied to relations, are notoriously ambiguous, so that it remains pretty unclear in the end how the distinctions in question actually stand to each other.

My aim, in this paper, is twofold. First, I attempt to unpack a step further the « thin/thick » metaphor – borrowed, as it stands, from the vocabulary of contemporary meta-ethics - by examining different, alternative ways in which Mulligan's much welcome distinction might be taken as related to other distinctions in the vicinity. Second, I discuss and try to qualify Mulligan's (admittedly « tentative ») claim that, whereas there are irreducible « thick » predicates, concepts and propositions, genuinely thick relations do not feature among the relevant truthmakers.