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A weak defence of normativism

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FROM SEMANTIC NORMATIVISM TO HORIZONTAL ESSENTIALIST NORMATIVISM OF MIND: UNSETTLED SCORES

Proponents of normativity theses about mind and language have come under pressure to abandon most of their pet claims.

With Kripke's (1982) exposition of Wittgenstein's (1953 § 201) 'rule-following paradox,' a *semanticist normativity* thesis became fashionable. According to it, meaning was fraught with ought in the sense that from w referring to all and only F s, S ought to use w to refer to all and only F s. What constituted meaning was couched in terms of norms for language use. Kripke's point was that no purely descriptive account, or *truth-functional* analysis, of meaning would square with the indeterminacy of future correct uses of language from limited past ranges of applications of words. For instance, a dispositional analysis might yield the claim that the meaning of w consists in subjects' dispositions to use w to refer to all and only F s in the future. But Kripke, and philosophers since, argued that people are in fact disposed to make mistakes – for instance, to get 5 from $2+7$. Yet such mistakes surely cannot figure among the meaning constituting facts of '+'. Furthermore, dispositions are hedged-in by subjective finitude such that there will always be a wide range of large numbers, or complicated enough propositions, to which no finite subject's arithmetic or interpretative dispositions can yield an answer as to their product or reference. The trouble, it was argued, is that dispositional analysis gives a *description* of what people likely *will* do, while the relation between past and future use is *prescriptive* in the sense that meaning is determined by what people *ought* to do.

The fall from grace of semantic normativism, or part of the reason for that fall at least, is found in considerations like the following:

semantic categorization is like sorting objects into tables and non-tables [which] should clearly be non-normative. Of course, saying that categorization is non-normative is not the same as saying that it cannot be used to derive normative consequences. Indeed, *any* categorization can be used to derive normative consequences. But not directly. ... Semantic categorization is like sorting objects into tables and non-tables: no immediate normative consequences ensue. (Glüer and Wikforss 2009, 36-37).

That is, while something's being an A may make it true of w that it can be used to refer to the A , it isn't *inherent* to one's use of w that it is *normatively* correct to use it to refer to the A even if, as a matter of social contingencies, people may impose prescriptions to use of w only to refer to A s. Such prescriptions aren't *inherent* to language or language use.

Philosophers who insist that, still, there's something essentially normative about mind (or language) have reverted to a kind of *content normativity* (e.g. Boghossian 2003). The idea here is that belief, desire, intention and other mental states' contents can fail (succeed) in bringing subjects into cognitive contact with their world or fail (succeed) in making subjects bring their world into conformity with their conations. The proposal is that such failure (success) be understood normatively as it being the case that it's *constitutive*, of a belief, for instance, to *truly* represent the world, and that it's *constitutive*, of a desire, for instance, to be *satisfied* if and only if the world is brought to 'match' its contents. In general, it is supposed to be such norms of content that determine what kind of mental state a subject has. For instance, if a state is correct if and only if its contents truly represent, then the state in question is cognitive, and if a state is satisfied if and only if the world is brought into conformity with its contents, then the state is conative (Cf. Jarvis 2012). But, again, the thesis is slipping from the normativist's hands. Fred Dretske, among others, argue that:

Beliefs and judgments must be either true or false, yes, but there is nothing normative about truth or falsity. What makes a judgment true (false) is the fact that it fails (or succeeds) in corresponding to the facts and failing (or succeeding) in corresponding to the facts is ... a straightforward factual matter. Nothing normative about it. (2001, 92).

Surely, one might try saying, we *disvalue* (*value*) false (true) beliefs (McHugh 2012) and frustrated (satisfied) desires. However, as Dretske points out (2001, 92-93), we also disvalue rain when picnicking. But rain, if anything, isn't *constitutively normative* (Cf. Gibbard 2005).

A final kind of normativism, *horizontal essential normativism*, can be found in Nick Zangwill (2005, 2010). According to it, there are no 'oughts' of thought in virtue of *contents* but in virtue of the propositional attitude types in which contents are entertained and the relations in which those attitudes stand to each other. Here it is an *essential normative property* of, e.g., the conjugated beliefs that *P* and that *if P then Q*, to normatively rationalize believing that *Q*. Similarly, it is an essential normative property of the conjugated cognitive-conative pair of belief that *X is the only means to end Y* and desire for *Y* to normatively rationalize an intention to *X*. This normativism escapes the familiar potholes of earlier normativist theses in not requiring norms to obtain *in addition* to truth (falsity) and satisfaction (frustration) of contents. Rather it insists that in order to *have thought* that can be true (false) and satisfied (frustrated) *to begin with* a subject must have a network of propositional attitudes that, if not globally, stand in at least local rationalizing relations. Otherwise the subject cannot even be made sense of as a single thinking thing that can be wrong (right) in its cognitions, satisfied (frustrated) in its conations.

I intend to assess the plausibility of this horizontal normativism about mind. I'll expose it to arguments launched at the cousin theses reviewed to see if it stands where they fall. Since a normativist of Zangwill's stripe resorts to rationalizing relations between propositional attitude types, he appears especially vulnerable to rule-following dilemmas of the sort originally encountered by Wittgenstein and fleshed out by Kripke. This time, though, the problem is not that of how a rule can possibly determine correct future *language use* from a finite range of prior uses, but that of how a rule can possibly guide a subject to *bring her propositional attitudes into rationally licensed relations*. If subjects are required to have beliefs about what propositional attitudes are rationally licensed by, and rationally license, other propositional attitudes, then it follows that subjects must have propositional attitudes about propositional attitudes that are rationally licensed by rules for relations between propositional attitudes – a regress threatens. But if it isn't required that subjects have beliefs of this kind, then it seems that there's no *rule* that subjects fail (succeed) in following that bestow their propositional attitudes the status of being correct in any *normative sense in addition* to being simply rational or irrational (Cf. Glüer and Wikforss 2013, In Press).

The dialectic of the talk is to bring into full circle the dilemmas that have beset normativism since its semantic version until today, and to situate normativism about rational relations between propositional attitudes, like Zangwill's, in that circle. I will propose that Zangwill's horizontal normative essentialism does indeed withstand some of the criticisms that have made other kinds of normativism about the mental slip from philosophical grace. However, it will be found that the litmus test for any normativism to be persuasive *still* remains to be passed: if the 'oughts' of thought are supposed to be caught by *rules* of mind, then no real advance have been made by this normativism. For the original problem already pointed to, though in a slightly different context, by Wittgenstein was precisely how any rule can determine a future 'ought', future correctness, such that subject can follow and be guided by the rule. No argument to the effect that thought *is*, in any preferred sense, "fraught with ought" constitutes an answer to *that* challenge. Normativism, I argue, can have its day only if a plausible argument to the effect that thought *is* normative is coupled with a plausible explication of what the norms or rules of thought *themselves* consist in. That's the holy grail of normativism about mind. Though normativism may have successfully met the first condition, it remains to meet the second.