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# Normative Explanation: Disorders, Violations and Failures

## 1. The normativity of mind

Some philosophers argue that mind is inherently normative. In one version of normativism, *mental content* is such that certain “oughts” apply (Boghossian 2003). For instance, if you believe that Jill is your mother, then you are committed to believe about Jill, among other things, that she is older than you. Others persuaded by normativism suggest that it is not *content* that is normative, but the reasons relations between propositional attitudes in which contents are had (Zangwill 2005, 2010). For instance, if you believe that Jill is your mother and that, if Jill is your mother then Pete is your brother, then you are committed by norms of *rationality* to believe that Pete is your brother. Likewise, if you believe that the only means to realize some end X is to do Y, and you desire X, then you are committed (pro tanto) by norms of rationality to intend to do Y.

If norms are inherent to thought, if thought is “fraught with ought” (Gibbard 2005), then the question arises how to interpret cases of deviation to the “oughts”. Supposing, for instance, that it’s a *conceptual, normative truth* about belief that one ought to believe that P (if and) only if P is true (Shah and Velleman 2005; Engel 2007, 2013), then believing what is false is a deviation from the truth-norm of belief. Is, then, a person who believes falsehoods *violating* the relevant norm and susceptible to blame or correction, or is he suffering some cognitive *disorder*? Similarly, is a person who does not conform to the essential normative rationalizing relations (Zangwill 1998) between propositional attitudes *violating* norms and susceptible to blame or correction, or is he suffering from some cognitive *disorder*? Or is it rather just the case that we *disvalue* falsity and irrationality (McHugh 2012)?

While some philosophers argue, to my mind congenially, that mind is not normative in any of the proposed senses (Dretske 2001; Glüer and Wikforss 2009, 2013), I will assume that some form of normativism is generally true, and pursue a normativist answer to the question

whether norm-deviating thought should be interpreted as *violations* or *disorders*. To do so I distinguish between two kinds of deviations. On the one hand we can distinguish a subject's *occasional* from *systematic* deviations. Occasional deviation captures cases of being wrong or irrational without any indication that the subject has a tendency to deviate generally within the class of cases under consideration. Systematic deviation, on the other hand, captures cases of being consistently wrong or irrational in some particular domain of inquiry or reasoning. A subject who sometimes misreads the hands of his watch, for instance, is an occasional deviator with respect to correctly telling what time it is, whereas a subject who (almost) always misreads the hands of his watch is a systematic deviator with respect to telling what time it is. We can, on the other hand, distinguish between *local* and *global* deviation. A local deviation is such that the subject is, occasionally or systematically, wrong or irrational with respect only to a certain specifiable task, like telling what time it is from looking at his watch, but where there is no indication that this local, occasional or systematic, deviation affects the subject's overall capacities in other, perhaps very similar, task-specific domains. A global deviation, in contrast, is such that the subject is, occasionally or systematically, wrong or irrational with respect to his overall capacities in a task-specific domain. For instance, the subject, occasionally or systematically, is wrong or irrational with respect to inductive reasoning; the subject's reasoning from "All *F*s observed have been *G*" to answer the question, "Is the next *F* to be observed (likely to be) *G*", occasionally or systematically deviates for all values of *F* and *G*.

## **2. False belief and normativity**

Treating occasional, local deviation from the truth-norm of belief – "you ought to believe only what is true" (e.g. Wedgwood 2002) – as indicative of a *disorder* is highly implausible. Only an infallible cognitive agent will be in systematic conformity with this norm and, so, the result of treating such cases as indicative of disorder implies treating almost all cognitive

agents as subject to cognitive disorders. Furthermore, occasional failures to conform to the truth-norm can result from seemingly non-cognitive causes, like bad lighting conditions or other environmental noise. Thus there is no warrant to explain such deviation in terms of violations of any norm on cognitive states of subjects. Then again, both occasional and systematic failures to conform to the truth-norm can result from malfunctioning psychophysical systems of subjects; e.g. the optic nerve may occasionally or systematically fail to deliver undistorted signals upstream. But such cases of failure cannot be explained in terms of the subject violating a norm on belief, for the failure lies outside of his control and is something he cannot correct on purely epistemic, deliberative grounds. Thus even if malfunctioning of a subject's perceptual systems causes the failure, still, there is no warrant to explain the deviation in terms of a violation of any *norm*. It is generally agreed among philosophers that 'ought implies can' (Glüer and Wikforss 2014); that is, if failure at some task is due to something that is outside the scope of what you can, as a subject, do, then it cannot be an 'ought' impingent on him that he has violated if he did not do it. More simply, nothing that you cannot do can sensibly be said to something that you 'ought' to do. Impaired vision is a case in point. There is nothing essentially *normatively wrong* with myopia. Myopia may cause you to systematically and globally misperceive the world, but the explanation is not that you have violated a norm but rather that your perception is malfunctioning, which is something you cannot, but with spectacles, correct by cognitive effort or deliberation. So it seems that, if there is any norm inherent to belief such that one ought to believe only what is true, the norm explains neither occasional or systematic, nor local or global, failures to believe only what is true. The explanation can likewise be grounded elsewhere, e.g. in the environment or in the subject's psychophysical systems, neither of which fails due to the subject violating any norm. We may here speak of 'disorders' like myopia, but again, that one suffers such 'disorders' is not explained in *normative* terms.

The philosophical import of the evil demon thought-experiment is that people might, unbeknownst to them, have systematically and globally false beliefs. It is a conceptual possibility that the story is true. But, supposing it true, that people would then be systematically and globally wrong could not be explained in terms of their violating an epistemic norm, for their circumstance would *ex hypothesis* be such that they *could not*, but by some peculiar metaphysical transcendence, have true beliefs. Global scepticism, whatever else may be wrong with it, isn't a disorder or a violation of any norm constitutive of belief. The same goes for the (alleged) conceptual possibility of being a brain in a vat stimulated by scientists to have experiences like any ordinary, embodied subject. Whatever other disorder such a brain suffers, its having systematically and globally illusory experiences does not imply that it is violating any *norm*; less still is it implied by the story that the brain being thus deceived is explained in *normative* terms.

So it seems that not even in the strongest cases of deviation from the truth-norm are we justified to explain such deviation in normative terms. Norms don't explain deviations of this kind, and these deviations do not merit treatment as cognitive *disorders* in any other sense than, e.g., myopia or colour-blindness deserves such treatment.

### **3. Norms of rationality**

In contrast to deviations from assumed norms of content, certain cases of deviation from assumed norms of rationality do seem to push the limits of what we are prepared to call a *thinking* subject. Normativism about rationality is unlike content normativism in not postulating any 'ought' on, e.g., beliefs being true, or on desires being satisfied. Instead of such vertical mind-to-world relations being normative, we are now to think only of horizontal relation between mental states being essentially normative. Frank Jackson, for instance, argues that

Someone who believes that P, and that if P then Q, *ought* to believe that Q. It is not simply that, by and large, they do believe that Q. It is that if they don't, there is something *wrong*. More generally, people ought to believe the fairly obvious consequences of what they believe. Likewise, people ought not to have inconsistent sets of beliefs; internal consistency is a normative constraint of belief. (1999: 421)

So no norm here is not violated if one believes P when not-P – at least, that is not *entailed* by endorsing normativism about rationality, such that it is essential to propositional attitudes that they ought form a consistent network (Zangwill 2005: 5).

Consider the following deviation from a simple norm of rationality. Tom believes that snow is white, and that if snow is white then grass is green. However, Tom rejects the belief that grass is green. Thus Tom has, normativists of rationality would insist, deviated from essential 'oughts' of the set of beliefs under consideration. Tom does not believe the fairly obvious consequences of what he believes. Similarly, if Tom desires X and believes that Y = X, then if Tom insists that he does not desire Y he is deviating from 'oughts' essential to the belief-desire pair.

According to Nick Zangwill, the kind of normativism we are considering is “compatible with the actuality of extensive irrationality” (2010: 23). It is not the case that it is constitutive of having thought that one's thoughts *do* stand in normatively appropriate relations. If people, e.g., do not believe the fairly obvious consequences of their other beliefs, then it is not that they actually unknowingly have the required beliefs, but that they ought to have them. So subjects can be irrational in the sense that not all their propositional attitudes are coherent and consistent. *Local* deviation, in other words, is a real possibility, and it is not a *disorder* but a *violation* or *failure* of thought, explained by the fact that the subject has propositional attitudes that logically entail each other although the subject fails to draw the inferences. This seems correct. It is not the case that the beliefs that P and that if P then Q *causes* one to

believe that Q. For in that case having only a very limited set of propositional attitudes would cause one to also have an indefinitely large set that is the consequence of the former. Furthermore, on a causal construal of rationality, *irrationality* would be a case of unusual or non-standard causal chains among thoughts. But it seems rather that there is nothing unusual about making a non-warranted inference; people are disposed to occasionally get things wrong.

However, normativism about rationality yields an interesting picture for understanding which deviating lines of thought are failures and which are disorders. In cases of *systematic* and *global* deviation from the norms of rationality we actually seem to be ‘loosing mind’. If we imagine a mapping of the total set of thoughts of a subject, and find that *no* token thought in the set is consistent with any other token thought, then it seems that we are not mapping a thinking being at all – at least we cannot make sense of it as a thinking being. That it makes no sense is not explained by our *disvaluing* being such a subject or by the our, or the subject, having *misunderstood* what it means to be a thinking thing. Rather, such systematic, global deviation from rationality requires an explanation in terms of something *constitutive* of having thought, something without which we cannot make sense of another as a thinking being.

The normativist about rationality would insist that it is the normative relations between propositional attitudes that explain why a subject’s being systematically and globally irrational does not merit being thought of as a thinking being. Furthermore, in a less extreme case, the explanation of widespread global inconsistency as something meriting classification as a disorder – perhaps multiple personality disorder – is a normative explanation: it being essential to thought that you ‘ought not’ simultaneously have inconsistent thoughts explains why we classify some widespread, systematic deviations from these norms as ‘disorders’ and not just as occasional, compartmentalized failures to conform. This line of explanation also does justice to the reality of borderline cases between disorders and failure of thought. For

there will be many ambiguous cases between occasional and systematic deviations, on the one hand, and between local and global deviations, on the other, for which some arbitrariness in treatment between disorder and failure will be very hard to avoid.

Nevertheless, the question remains: are the explanation of ‘disorders’ of this kind, assuming that that is what they are, *normative* explanations of the form, “That it is an essential ought of rationality to have, at least mostly, consistent thoughts explains why Tom, whose thoughts are almost globally inconsistent, is suffering disorder *D*”? Or should we think of these cases in terms of *reasons* explanations of the form: “That Tom has no reason at all to believe that he is Jesus Christ, in fact he has many reasons to believe that he is not, explains our diagnosing Tom with disorder *D*”?

To Frank Jackson’s question “Are we supposed to say that there is nothing wrong with representing that P and that if P then Q, while refraining from representing that Q?” (1999: 432), Glüer and Wikforss respond: “The answer is, we take it, that in such a case the subject is irrational, but that it is a further question whether holding an irrational belief is *wrong* in the sense of violating a norm” (2014: 136). Similarly, the non-normativist response to the *normative* explanation why systematic, global irrationality deserves being treated as *disorders* would be that there is nothing *wrong*, in the sense of violating a norm, with suffering from, e.g., multiple personality disorder. Instead, multiple personality disorder is better explained *descriptively* as the subject’s thoughts deviating from reasons relations between propositional attitudes, and that no ‘ought’ follows directly from that fact.

#### **4. Conclusion**

A conclusive argument to the effect that it is *because* false and irrational belief, or inconsistent thought in general, deviate from *norms* essential to mind that they are ‘wrong’ or pathological remains to be developed. This is not to deny that there actually *is* something wrong with being irrational or having false belief. But our saying that they are *wrong* or *bad*



expresses only what evaluative attitudes we take towards falsity and irrationality, and should not be confused with the reverse order of explanation: that the evaluative attitudes we take towards falsity and irrationality reveals that there is something essentially normative of mind.

I am in no position to conclude here that normativism about rationality can be waived to the side. It is not entirely untoward that we classify systematic and global inconsistency as disorders of some type *because* we think that there is something *wrong* with systematic and global inconsistency. However, to repeat, it is important to separate such evaluative attitudes' being essential to our *ascribing* thought, on the one hand, from there being norms essential to *having* thought on which those ascriptions are premised.

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