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Meaning Normativism: Against the Simple Argument

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ABSTRACT: The paper examines a central argument in support of the thesis that meaning is essentially normative. The argument tries to derive meaning normativism from the fact that meaningful expressions necessarily have conditions of correct application: Since correctness is a normative notion, it is argued, statements of correctness conditions for an expression have direct normative consequences for the use of that expression. We have labeled this the 'simple argument', and have argued that it fails. In this paper we elaborate on our objections to the argument in response to Daniel Whiting's recent attempt to rescue it. We argue, first, that statements of correctness conditions simply allow us to categorize the applications of an expression into two basic kinds (for instance, the true and the false) without this having any normative implications; and, second, that the normativist has not provided any reasons to think that some further, normative notion of semantic correctness is essential to meaning.

KEYWORDS: Anti-normativism – correctness – meaning.

Since Kripke (1982) first suggested that meaning is essentially normative, the thesis has been subject to much scrutiny and criticism. It has been argued that the thesis fails, and that whatever norms are associated with language are extrinsic to meaning. Nevertheless, meaning normativism is still with us, and several authors have recently attempted to revive some

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version of it. Among the arguments employed by normativists one stands at the center. This argument tries to derive meaning normativism from the claim that meaningful linguistic expressions necessarily, or essentially, have conditions of *correct application*. Since correctness is a normative notion, the argument goes, statements of correctness conditions for an expression have *direct* normative consequences for the use of that expression. In a nutshell: no meaning without correctness conditions and no correctness conditions without normative consequences.[1]

We have labeled this 'the simple argument' (Glüer and Wikforss 2009). It is simple in the sense that it does not require any substantive semantic commitments beyond the idea that correctness conditions are required for an expression to have meaning. Naturally, the notion of 'conditions of correct application' is a place holder, and one can debate what to fill it with, but all parties agree that some such notion is needed to account for the basic semantic relation between meaningful expressions and the world. If, therefore, meaning normativism just rests on the assumption that meaningful expressions necessarily have correctness conditions, the thesis would seem to be beyond reproach. Moreover, it would mean that the thesis could have the function Kripke (and many following him) assigned to it: It can serve as a constraint on any acceptable of meaning, to be used as a weapon against every attempt to naturalize meaning.

It is therefore easy to see the attraction of the simple argument. However, we have argued that it fails (Glüer 1999a; 1999b; 2000; Glüer and Wikforss 2009; Wikforss 2001). In this paper we would like to defend and elaborate on our objections to the simple argument in response to some recent attempts to rescue it. In particular, we would like to consider Daniel Whiting's efforts, in a string of recent papers, to save the argument (2007; 2009 and 2013). We shall argue that Whiting fails to defend the simple argument against the objections he considers. There are other arguments in support of meaning normativism (for an overview and discussion see Glüer and Wikforss 2009), but the prospects of finding a quick, theory neutral argument, look increasingly bleak.

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[1] See, for instance, Boghossian (1989, 513), and Blackburn (1984, 281f), for versions of this argument. The argument is clearly present in Kripke (1982, 37), although he also provides other considerations in support of meaning normativism. Whiting (2013) characterizes normativism based on this argument as the 'orthodox interpretation' of the slogan that meaning is normative.

1. The simple argument: round one[2]

To say that meaning is essentially normative is to make a claim about the *nature* of meaning: No meaning without norms. The norms in question are supposed to follow from nothing but the nature of meaning—they are genuinely *semantic*, and distinct from other types of norms (moral, prudential, epistemic, etc.). According to the strongest interpretation, it is both metaphysically and conceptually necessary that meaning is normative: Meaning normativism is a conceptual truth.[3] Those who rely on the simple argument tend to adopt this stronger claim. Moreover, they share the standard assumption that the relevant notion of normativity is that of *prescriptivity*, involving genuine, action-guiding 'oughts'. Whiting formulates the position along these lines: "Facts about meaning, according to it, are inherently action-guiding or prescriptive; they have implications for what a subject *may* or *should* (not) do" (2009, 536).

We have suggested that there are two distinct interpretations of meaning normativism, what we have labeled (ME)-normativism and (MD)-normativism (Glüer and Wikforss 2009). According to the first interpretation, statements of what an expression means have immediate *normative consequences*: The normativity is 'engendered by', or consequent upon, meaning. According to the second interpretation, it is the norms that 'engender' meaning, and normativism is a metasemantic thesis—meaning is *determined* by the speakers' following certain norms, or by their being in force for them. The simple argument is used in support of (ME)-normativism, since the idea is precisely that meaning statements have immediate consequences for how the speaker ought (or may) use an expression.[4]

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[2] Parts of this section are taken straight from our earlier paper "Against Normativity Again: Reply to Whiting" (unpublished MS). Whiting (2009), responds to this text (it was available on the web), and in section 2 we respond to this response.

[3] Normally, the conceptual claim is taken to imply the metaphysical claim. Not everyone agrees however. For example, Gibbard (2012) argues that while the *concept* of meaning is normative, *meaning* is not. His view, therefore, does not actually qualify as meaning normativism in the sense characterized here.

[4] Defending the simple argument, Whiting makes clear that his concern is with (ME)-normativism: "to say that meaning is a normative notion is to say that a statement of what an expression means is, or immediately implies, a statement about what

Those who have objected to this argument have not denied the truism that meaningful expressions have correctness conditions. We shall go along with Whiting here and take this to amount to a commitment to the following principle:

(C) w means $F \rightarrow \forall x$(w applies correctly to $x \leftrightarrow x$ is f),

"where 'w' is a word, 'F' gives its meaning, and 'f' is that feature in virtue of which w applies" (2007, 134). What the anti-normativist denies is that (C) has any direct normative consequences. She denies that we can move from a statement such as (C_1) to (N_1):

(C_1) For any speaker S, and any time t: if 'green' means *green* for S at t, then it is correct for S to apply 'green' to an object x iff x is green at t.

(N_1) For any speaker S, and any time t: if 'green' means *green* for S at t, then S ought to apply 'green' to an object x iff x is green at t.[5]

In support of their claim, anti-normativists have pointed out that a) 'correct' can be used in normative and in non-normative ways, and b) the relevant notion of correctness in (C) is the notion of *semantic correctness*. What that precisely amounts to depends on the choice of basic semantic concept; the main contenders are *truth* and *warranted assertibility*. Either way, the anti-normativist submits, the notion of semantic correctness is non-normative in precisely the sense that no statements about what we ought (not) to or may (not) do with w directly follow from (C).

Putting this point more positively, we have argued that what statements of correctness conditions, such as (C), give us is nothing more than the conditions for the application of the basic semantic concept to applications of the word w.[6] Nothing in (C) shows that this has to amount to anything

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we ought (not) to or may (not) do with that expression" (2007, 134). See also Whiting (2013, 4).

[5] It has been much debated how the relevant norm is to be formulated. The 'iff' formulation seems too strong since we clearly do not have an obligation to apply 'green' to all green things. At the same time, simply replacing it with an 'if then' is too weak to support standard normativism (Bykvist and Hattiangadi 2007). Whiting's proposal is that the 'iff' can be retained if the 'ought' is replaced with a 'may' (2009, 544-545). Since we deny that (C) implies norms of any form, we shall not engage with this debate.

[6] See especially Glüer (2001, 60f); Wikforss (2001, 205ff).

over and above the possibility of *categorizing*, or *sorting*, applications of *w* into two basic semantic kinds; for instance, the true and the false. Nothing in (C) shows that correct applications of *w* are those that ought to, or may, be made of *w*.

Let's call a categorization that has no direct normative consequences a "non-normative categorization". Sorting things into tables and non-tables should clearly be non-normative in this sense. Now, saying that a 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. Any categorization of things into *A*s and *non-A*s, be they actions or not, can be used to derive normative consequences *if a suitable norm is in force*. Take tables. If a suitable norm is in force, for instance the norm that tables under all circumstances ought to be kicked, normative consequences can be derived from something's being a table. But not directly. Things can be categorized into tables and non-tables without any such norm being in force.

The normativity thesis must therefore not be mixed up with the claim that normative consequences can be derived from semantic categorization. That would utterly trivialize the thesis. Normative consequences can be derived from any categorization. But not every categorization is such that they can be derived directly. The anti-normativist claims that semantic categorization is like sorting objects into tables and non-tables: No immediate normative consequences ensue.[7]

In his 2007 paper, Whiting defends the simple argument against similar objections put forth by, among others, Hattiangadi (2006). In support of his argument, Whiting tries to hijack an analogy provided by Hattiangadi. The example is that of a minimum height requirement for going on a certain ride in a theme park. Hattiangadi observes that whether a child meets this "standard" is a "straightforwardly non-normative, natural fact" (2006, 224). Whiting agrees that in order for the child to meet the standard certain descriptions concerning her height must be true of her. However, he argues, given that the "standard is in force" (136), the fact that the child

[7] There might, of course, be *other* reasons for why meaning statements has to be loaded with normative consequences. For instance, Kot'átko (1998) argues that the very concept of utterance meaning is to be analyzed in terms of the utterance's normative consequences. What is relevant here is simply that this does not *immediately* follow from an expression's having conditions of semantic correctness but requires further, substantive semantic commitments.

meets this standard has immediate implications for whether she *may* (or *should not*) go on the ride: "If she were to do so incorrectly, *with the norm in place*, sanctions or criticism ... would be appropriate" (136, emphasis ours). A similar conclusion, he contends, holds in the case of meaning. If '*w* means *F*' does indeed imply that there are conditions for the correct application of the term, then this equally has implications "for whether it may or should be used in certain ways" (ibid.).

As far as we can see, this simply illustrates the point that a given non-normative categorization (here, of children as having or not having a certain height) can be used to derive normative consequences—*if* a norm to that effect is in force. Here, this is the norm that children under a certain height may not go on the ride in question. That does nothing to show that we would not be able to sort children by height if no such norm were in force. Rather, it seems perfectly obvious that we can do that. Our point is precisely that (C), by itself, gives us no reason to think that the same does not hold for semantic categorization: Sorting applications of *w* by, for instance, truth and falsity is possible without any norms being in force.

Notice that the notion of a standard, just like the notion of correctness, has non-normative and normative uses. Whiting seems to have the latter use in mind when he speaks of a standard's *being in force*.[8] It is of course trivial that meeting the standard in this latter, normative sense has normative consequences for whether the child may (or should not) go on the ride. Similarly, if 'semantic standard' is construed normatively, the fact that a given use "meets the standard" is, as Whiting puts it, "clearly a normative or evaluative matter" (2007, 135). But what we wanted to know was why the notion of a semantic standard (or, as we have put it, the notion of a semantic category) should be construed normatively in the first place; not what follows if it *is* construed that way.

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[8] The talk of "being in force", notice, applies to *norms*: It is the idea that the norm is valid for a subject. Hattiangadi suggests that standards can be "in force" in the purely descriptive sense "that they are accepted within some relevant community and are enforced by sanctions" (2009, 57). But it is very difficult to see how standards, in a non-normative sense, can be accepted and enforced by sanctions. Whether the standard "ought to be in force", as Hattiangadi puts it, is a further matter—even norms that ought not to be in force are norms (in the sense relevant to this discussion).

2. The simple argument: round two

Whiting (2009) sets out to defend normativism against recent criticisms. In particular, he aims to show that the objections to the simple argument fail. He has two lines of defense: First, he suggests that it is problematic to hold that 'correct', in (C), expresses a non-normative notion, when it normally does express a normative notion. The normativist, according to Whiting, postulates an ambiguity that is not independently motivated. Second, returning to Hattiangadi's fairground example, he argues that it does not provide an example of a standard by which one can judge that a certain act is correct and which has no normative implications.

Let us discuss the second point first. In her response to Whiting (2007), Hattiangadi suggests that we consider what kind of standard is operative in the fairground case. She invites us to compare (2009, 56):

(S_1) *S* is permitted to ride if and only if *S* is over one meter tall.
(S_2) Ride X is safe for *S* if and only if *S* is more than one meter tall.

The mere fact that a child meets a certain standard, Hattiangadi argues, does not in itself have any normative consequences, as illustrated by (S_2): That Vikram is over one meter implies that it is safe to ride, but does not in itself imply anything about whether he ought (not) or may (not) go on the ride (cf. 2009, 57).

Whiting responds by suggesting that Hattiangadi's argument can be used to turn the tables on the anti-normativist. If indeed the fairground standard is along the lines of (S_2), Whiting argues, then it is no longer possible to derive from it, and from the fact that Vikram is over one meter, that his going on the ride would be correct. Indeed, Whiting suggests, this supports the view that correctness is a normative affair, and that we can infer from (C_1) that *S* should not apply 'green' to *x* if *x* is not green. After all, that such an application would be incorrect is accepted by normativists and anti-normativists alike (2009, 542).

However, this misses the crucial claim the anti-normativist starts out from: that the notion of semantic correctness used in (C) is a *placeholder*, to be replaced by your favorite basic semantic concept. If your favorite basic semantic concept is that of truth, and if 'green' means *green*, you'll agree that applying 'green' to an object *o* that's not green is incorrect—where that means that *o* does not satisfy the predicate 'is green'. The fairground analogy assumes that the relevant placeholder notion of correctness, *fair-*

ground correctness, has already been replaced—in the example by the notion of a ride's safety. If you take both these things together, it does indeed follow that going on the ride *is* correct—*fairground correct*—if you are one meter tall. But that by itself has no normative consequences because it only means that going on the ride is safe. Whether you ought (not) or may (not) go is a different matter entirely.

This of course is precisely the move that Whiting's first line of defense is supposed to undermine. According to Whiting, the claim that the notion of semantic correctness used in (C) is merely a placeholder for your favorite basic semantic concept is implausible; 'correct' in (C) *must* be interpreted normatively. Since the shared starting point here is (C), *this* dispute does *not* concern the *extension* of the notion of semantic correctness—the normativist and the anti-normativist count precisely the same applications as correct (and as incorrect). The dispute thus concerns the very *concept* of semantic correctness, not its extension.

Take an anti-normativist who is a fan of truth-conditional semantics. She thinks that the basic semantic concept is that of truth. Against her suggestion that 'semantically correct' just provides a theory-neutral way of talking about the basic semantic features of sentences (or predicates), Whiting in effect argues that even though 'truly' and 'correctly' can, in a context like (C), be substituted *salva veritate*, they cannot be substituted *salva intensione*.

To make this plausible, he appeals to a distinction stressed by Gideon Rosen, between correctness (a normative notion) and the correctness-making feature, the non-normative property something must have in order to count as correct. To say that someone is playing the Moonlight Sonata correctly is not just to make a claim about the notes played, but to make a higher order claim that the performance possesses the feature that "makes for correctness in acts of that kind" (Rosen 2001, 620). Similarly, Whiting argues, we should not identify correctly applying an expression with truly applying it. Therefore, "even if one agrees with the anti-Normativist that the pertinent 'word-world relation' is not normative, this does not undermine the view that the property of correctness—possessed in this instance in virtue of the 'word-world relation'—*is* normative" (2009, 539). What the anti-Normativist must show, Whiting continues, is not just that from (C) one can derive a non-normative statement about when an expression truly applies "but that one cannot *also* derive normative statements about what a subject may, should or has reason (not) to do" (2009, 540).

Of course, if you think that the notion of correctness used in (C) is a normative notion, you will think that you can derive normative consequences directly from (C). The considerations just rehearsed show that employing a Rosen-style "higher order" notion of correctness makes it possible for the normativist to hold on to that claim *even if he concedes that the basic semantic notion itself is not normative*. This is a very important concession for the normativist to make, and we shall come back to that.

But first, we would like to ask how showing that a Rosen-style construal of the notion of correctness *can* be used to hold on to the claim that (C) has direct normative consequences, is supposed to demonstrate that 'correct' in (C) *must* be interpreted normatively (Rosen-style)? As far as we can tell, it simply does not do that. Rather, we are at a conceptual impasse again: The normativist uses the Rosen-style construal of 'correct' to absorb the insight that the basic semantic notion itself is not normative and shows that 'correct' *can* nevertheless be interpreted normatively in (C). But this does nothing to prevent the anti-normativist from countering that 'correct' *does not have to* be interpreted that way in (C)—she is perfectly free to interpret it in terms of the non-normative concept she takes semantic correctness to be.

Faced with such a dispute, it can be concluded either that the disputants operate with different concepts, or that one of the parties is conceptually confused. We do not think it is our business to accuse people of conceptual confusion and will therefore simply grant the normativist that he can absorb the insight that the basic semantic concept is not normative if he interprets 'correct' in (C) Rosen-style. To get beyond this impasse, however, substantive *further* argument would be needed.

Whiting seems to rest his case simply on the idea that interpreting 'correct' in (C) non-normatively does not cohere with ordinary usage. He appeals to Ralph Wedgwood's complaint that it is "surely implausible" to suggest that the word 'correct' is ambiguous, and suggests that this places the burden on the anti-normativist to "provide reason to think that 'correct' behaves in the way he suggests, when appearances suggest otherwise" (2009, 538).

We have two things to say in reply. First, it is important to remember that the notion of semantic correctness *as used in (C)* is *not* an everyday notion, but has its place in semantic theory. The question of whether 'correct' is ambiguous in natural language is therefore of only limited relevance when it comes to the plausibility of the claim that *as used in (C)*, 'correct' is

just a placeholder for the basic semantic concept. But secondly, it seems rather clear to us that 'correct' is indeed used in different ways in natural language, some of them normative, others not.[9] In fact, a look in the dictionary confirms this. Here are the three main entries Merriam-Webster lists for the adjective 'correct': 1) true or accurate, agreeing with facts, 2) having no errors or mistakes, 3) proper or appropriate in a particular situation. We thus remain unconvinced that 'correct' in (C) has to be interpreted normatively.

Is the upshot then that both the normativist and the anti-normativist can simply stick to their guns? Not quite. Remember that Whiting's normativist has conceded that the basic semantic concept is *not normative*. This concession saddles him with a considerable task if he still aims to provide further argument to the effect that 'correct' in (C) not only can, but must be interpreted normatively. He would have to argue that the anti-normativist fan of truth-conditional semantics, for instance, is missing something essential to meaning by interpreting 'correct' in (C) as a placeholder for 'true'—even though the anti-normativist construal of (C) *captures the basic semantic relation perfectly well* (the "word-world relation" Whiting talks about). But given this concession, what element essential to meaning could possibly be missing from an anti-normativist account of semantic correctness? Doesn't the very need to construe normative correctness as a "higher order" feature, a feature merely "surfing on" the basic semantic relation, testify to its inessentiality? If truth indeed is the basic semantic concept, is there any reason to think that having truth conditions would not amount to being meaningful unless these truth conditions are also correctness-making conditions in a normative sense? Given the concession that the basic semantic concept itself is not normative, the need for construing the notion of semantic correctness as normative has become ever so much harder to motivate. Pending further argument, we cannot help but conclude once more that the normativist notion of semantic correctness is nothing but an idle wheel in the theory of meaning.

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[9] Whether these amount to ambiguity is a difficult question that we do not want to pronounce upon here.

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