

MIND AND NORMATIVITY

Prepared for a Dictionary in 2000, never published

A statement is said to be “normative” if it bears about what an individual *ought to*, about what it is *right* or *wrong*, *correct* or *incorrect* to do or to feel. Normative statements often express prescriptions, directions, permissions or interdictions. They can also express evaluations, to the effect that some actions or feelings are *good* or *bad*, *valuable* or not. Such a normative vocabulary is obviously most appropriate to actions, to emotions, feelings, and to various psychological attitudes, such as desires and wants. There are practical as well as aesthetic norms. But can this normative vocabulary also be applied to thoughts, beliefs and to mental states in general? A first sight it seems that it can, since we talk of what we ought to think, of beliefs which are valuable or appropriate, rational or not, of the good or bad evidence that we have for them, and so forth. There are epistemic norms, principles, rules or maxims, such as the maxim that we should believe on the basis of appropriate evidence. A general criterion for the existence of a norm in the practical realm is not only that it licenses some actions, but also that it forbids or rules out some. The parallel seems to hold in the epistemic realm: if a person does not believe on the basis of sufficient evidence, and if she knows that she does, then, other things being equal, she is self-deceived or irrational in some sense, and she can be blamed or corrected for that. But is the *very having* of a belief, of a desire or a feeling, *in itself* “normative”? For instance does my belief that it rains today commits me to any obligation to think or to do anything? It seems odd to say this, for beliefs, desires, and feelings are, unlike actions, involuntary and hence not amenable to normative appraisal. That I believe so or so seems to be just a psychological fact about me, and there does not seem to be any room for any normative appraisal here.

A number of philosophers, however, maintain that there is a normative dimension in thought in general, and that this normative dimension is not contingent, but intrinsic. In Sellars' phrase, thought belongs to the "space of reasons", and this is why it cannot be reduced to, or cannot be placed within, the space of natural properties or of causal or physical laws. The essence of thought is normative, and in this sense, mental contents cannot be "naturalized". What does this mean? And is it true?

One strand in the argument that mental content is intrinsically normative comes from Wittgenstein's considerations on "following a rule" (Wittgenstein 1953, Kripke 1981). According to this line of thought, when one ascribes a thought to someone, or a meaning to an utterance or to a word, the very content of the thought, of the utterance, or of the concept expressed by the word, cannot be completely determined by either the natural dispositions of the thinker or by his individual mental states, since these dispositions or states are finite, whereas the number of possible applications of the rule are infinite, and so a number of different "rules" could be compatible with these dispositions or states. What fixes the nature of the rules followed, or the beliefs or meanings expressed cannot be purely *internal* to the individual or determined by his brain or physical states, but must be determined by what is *external* to the thinker, by the nature of his practices within the community to which the thinker belongs. Hence what a speaker means by a word, such as "cat", or the concept expressed by this word, can only be settled within the context of social rules that the speaker follows. Meaning and thought contents are normative because they are essentially social. (This is why, for Wittgenstein, there is no such thing as a private language.) The social rules governing meanings and concepts are not reducible to facts about individual or communities because statements about rules are not statements about facts: they express norms, and norms are not facts.

A related, but different, strand in the argument for the normativity of thought and meaning comes from Davidson's (1984) interpretative approach to

thought and communication. According to Davidson, a thought is a thought, and a meaning a meaning, if it can be interpreted within a situation which necessarily involves the beliefs of an interpreter, his beliefs about an other individual, and their common reactions to an environment which causally impinges, at least in the basic perceptual cases, upon them. Thoughts can be ascribed by the interpreter only if he is able not only to compare his own distal stimuli to the other's, but also to communicate linguistically with him. This basic "triangle" between two speakers and an external object is the basis both for communication and thought. Now in order to ascribe beliefs and actions the interpreter is bound to be able to discern in them some rational pattern of coherence between beliefs, and between other mental states, such as desires, and actions. Hence no ascription of mental content, of intentions and actions, is feasible without the presumption that belief contents and action are, by and large, governed by rational norms, for instance to the effect that the agents do not have contradictory beliefs, that most of their beliefs are true, or that they perform the actions that they consider, other things being equal, as best for them. This is the gist of Davidson's "principle of charity". Logic and decision theory codify the norms of rationality, and hence must belong to the equipment of interpretation, even if they have to be applied to particular circumstances. An individual can fail to be logical or rational, but she must at least instantiate an interlocking pattern of attitudes and contents discernible from the point of view of an interpreter equipped with a set of rational norms. Even the ascription of a single belief presupposes the possibility of ascribing *other* beliefs, roughly related to the first through some inferential pattern (this is called the "holism" of the mental). An agent who does not fit such an overall rational pattern, is not interpretable, and hence cannot be said to have thoughts at all. This is why it is difficult to ascribe full-blown thoughts to infants, animals, or to creatures within which a minimal amount of rationality cannot be discerned. Irrationality, in such forms as those currently studied by cognitive psychologists, psychoanalysts, or economists, such as cases of *akrasia* or weakness of the will, self-deception, delusional beliefs or other

abnormal clinical phenomena belonging to the realm of psychopathology, can only be studied within a framework where rationality can make sense. Not all causes of behavior are *rational* causes, but even irrational behavior makes sense under a background of reasons. Psychoanalytic interpretation is no exception. (Cavell 1993).

According to Davidson's interpretative stance, the normativity of the mental comes from three sources: the "constitutive ideal of rationality" which governs the attribution of propositional attitudes such as beliefs and desires, the interlocking or "holistic" character of these attitudes and their contents, and the essentially social character of communication within which these thoughts can be ascribed. Because these normative features cannot be encapsulated within mental *laws* to the effect that when mental events of a given kind occur (e.g. beliefs and desires) other events of the same or another kind (in particular actions) occur, these features have no "echo" in the physical domain, and thus cannot be reduced to features of this domain(Davidson 1980). Any attempt to derive a mental or a semantic "ought" from a natural "is" will fail, just as an attempt to derive a moral "ought" from a natural "is" fails, according to G.E. Moore's famous "naturalistic fallacy". Various philosophers, such as Putnam (1981), Burge (1986), McDowell (1994) or Brandom (1994) have held similar views.

The thesis of the normativity of mental content (for short "the normativity thesis") is not unproblematic, for several reasons. First, since it ties the nature of thought to its expression in linguistic meanings, it seems to be applicable mostly to the mental contents which are expressible in words. It is not obvious that such mental episodes as sensations, perceptions, feelings or emotions obey the same normative constraints as beliefs and other propositional attitudes. Furthermore, a number of psychologists and cognitive scientists claim that there can be thought without language, or at least prior to its expression in language (think for instance of the kind of thoughts that we entertain while driving a car). If linguistic meaning is admittedly rule-governed and public, it is not clear that all intentional contents

are such. So perhaps the thesis should be restricted to those thoughts which imply the exercise of concepts and judgments, which can manifest the holistic inferential relations characteristic of these: for a thinker to be able to entertain the thought that *a* is *F*, she must be able to entertain the thought that *b* is *F*, that *a* is *G*, that *there are things which are F*, etc. It would thus be open to the proponents of the normativity thesis to extend it to perceptual contents, by arguing that the latter are essentially conceptual, or that they presuppose the kind of rational relations in which concepts enter (McDowell 1994). Second, even if it arguable that the meaning of a word (say “dog”), is governed by rules of use within a community (to the effect that “dog” applies to dogs and that it would be incorrect to apply this word to cats), and similarly for concepts, it is not clear *what* specific normative commitments individual incur when they hold particular beliefs. If you believe, for instance that *if there is beer, it is in the fridge*, and that *there is beer*, logic tells you that you *should* believe that *it is in the fridge*, and a charitable interpreter who would ascribe to you the first two beliefs should ascribe to you the third. But suppose you go to the fridge, and discover no beer in it. Should you still believe that *there is beer in the fridge*? Or should you revise your initial beliefs? Deductive logic by itself does not tell you. In this sense, it hard to say that the normative implications which go with particular belief contents are *intrinsic* to them, or that they are *categorical* features of these contents. On the contrary, they are only *hypothetical*, and subject to provisos, such as: *other things being equal, if an individual is rational and believes that P, and that if P then Q, then he should believe that Q*. A partisan of the Davidsonian view need not deny this, but he has to say that the normative features of mental contents have only a very high and general profile and cannot be intrinsic to particular contents. Rationality is not necessarily codifiable into specific norms. Third, the normativity thesis, in so far as it is associated to Wittgenstein’s private language argument, is not immune to the difficulties of this argument: in particular it is not clear that a solitary individual cannot follow rules. Fourth, even if norms of thought are not reducible to natural facts (and in particular to psychological facts of individuals), it

is arguable that they are at least dependent, or “supervenient”, upon such facts (Davidson 1980). My having a particular belief is presumably a state, or an event in my brain, associated to particular representations which a natural scientist could study, and this is just a causal fact about me, connected to regularities in my brain or my behavior. In this sense, there is nothing “normative” in it.

A number of critics of the normativity thesis (e.g. Fodor and Le Pore 1990) claim that it implies a form of anti-realism about mental and intentional content: if beliefs, desires, and other mental states are only what they *ought* to be for an interpreter, it seems that they have no reality of their own, or only an *as if* kind of reality. Similarly if their normative features are essential to them, it seems that they owe their existence to certain kinds of appraisal or evaluation of what they *should* be, and not to any fact about what they *are*. But this is wrong. It does not follow, from the fact that mental contents are essentially apprehended through descriptions which involve rational norms, that there is nothing to describe. What it does follow, however, is that a full blown realism about intentional contents, whereby these contents could be individuated only by causal and natural facts, and reduced to such facts, is bound to fail.

The normativity thesis, then, is not true without qualifications. It is wrong to formulate it as the thesis that norms of thought and meaning enter *directly* into mental contents, as categorical features of them. At best, they enter only indirectly, and perhaps it would be better to say that mental contents have normative *implications*. These implications may be specific to different kinds of mental states. Beliefs, for instance (to take the case of an attitude which is central among other propositional attitudes) may be dispositions to act in certain ways, and are identical to certain physical events in individuals. But in so far as an individual *reflects* upon her beliefs, and accepts them, she is bound to recognize certain commitments: that believing that P is believing that P *is true*, that she has certain *reasons* to believe that P, which are in general constituted by the *good evidence* that she has for them, that this *excludes* certain other beliefs and so forth. These are clearly normative

implications. Of course it may happen that one insists upon holding a belief for which one has no good evidence, if the belief is considered in other ways useful (considerations such as these led Pascal to propose his famous “wager” argument, and William James to defend a relaxation of a narrow “ethics of belief”). Within certain limits, people can consider the possibility of changing or criticizing some norms. The question whether it is always irrational to do so is open, since rationality is, in many ways, an open ended notion. But revisions of some basic norms, such as the epistemic norm that one should always believe what one takes to be true and well confirmed, will always indicate some tensions within the individual. This is what it takes to be a subject, or a person, and in so far as to have a mind is a property which is fully realized in persons, capable of valuing certain things and not others, it will be difficult to get rid of the normativity of the space of reasons.

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