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Epistemic norms and rationality

1. Normative Concepts and Rationality

Rationality is often said to be a normative concept: to be rational is not a descriptive feature of an individual or a system, but a normative one, since rationality pertains to what one ought to, or should, do, think or feel. But what is it in turn for an individual or system to ought to do, think, or feel something? I propose to start from this problem and try to see in what sense the notion of normativity can illuminate those of rationality and reason. Here I shall limit myself to the normativity which is attached to the content of thoughts or mental contents, not to actions. But first, I need to say something about normativity in general¹.

Although it is notoriously problematic, the distinction between descriptive expressions/concepts and normative expressions/concepts is familiar. “Cat”, “car”, “tree”, are descriptive, but “nice”, “stupid”, “bad” are normative. Very often sentences or kinds of propositions are said to be descriptive or normative. Declarative sentences, used to make assertions, are descriptive, but imperative sentences and those which contain normative terms are said to be normative. Within the domain of normative concepts it is common to distinguish two classes:

- a) *evaluative* or *axiological* concepts, such as “good”, “bad”, “desirable”, among which philosophers also distinguish “thin” concepts (“good”, “bad”) and thick concepts (“courageous”, “coward”);
- b) *deontic* concepts, such as “right”, “ought”, “permissible”, “forbidden” (deontic concepts are by definition thin).

All these expressions are either used as predicates or as operators on sentences. A further question is: to what do normative concepts apply? Primarily, they apply to actions, to what to do, what to want, what to desire, what to avoid. In which case normativity is mainly a feature of the practical domain. But it seems also to apply to the theoretical domain, to what to think, what to believe, what to know, what to judge. It also applies to feelings: what to feel, what to experience, what not to suffer, what to enjoy. There is a standard of taste as well: what to praise, what to like and dislike, etc.

¹ I am very glad to be able to publish an article on rationality in honor of Jacek J.Jadacki. Jacek introduced me a long time ago, during a visit to Grenoble, to Polish philosophy. We discussed truth and rationality, and I discovered through him the work of Ajdukiewicz and the great tradition of the Lvov–Warsaw School. Since then Jacek has written a lot on these issues, and I have benefited a lot from his work, a model of clarity, of systematicity and of enlightening concision.

More problematic is the ascription of normativity to another range of concepts: to semantic relations, such as meaning and reference; to logical relations, such as implication and consequence, to cognitive acts, such as asserting, supposing, hypothesising, accepting, suspending judgement, etc. Meaning is said to be normative in the sense that if “*N*” means *X*, then one *ought* to mean *X* by “*N*”, or to apply “*N*” only to *X*s. Logical consequence is said to be normative in the sense that if *P* implies *Q*, then one *should* infer *Q* on the basis of *P*. Asserting is normative, it is said, because one *ought* to assert *P* only if *P* is true, or sufficiently justified. Probabilistic concepts have also been said to be normative, in the sense that if *A* has a certain probability *p*, then one *ought* to believe that *A* to degree p^2 . Indeed, epistemic relations are also in this sense supposed to be normative: if one has evidence *e* for *P*, then one *ought* to believe *P*, and if *P* is justified, then one *ought* to believe that *P*.

More recently it has been said that normativity is a feature of intentional content, perhaps of mental content in general. Normativity is said to be attached to propositional contents of psychological attitudes, such as beliefs, desires, and thoughts. It is said in this sense to be a feature of the concepts which constitute the contents of propositional attitudes. Normativity is also said to be a feature of the attitudes themselves. It is said in this sense that it is a fundamental dimension of assessment of an attitude that it is *correct* to entertain it in certain circumstances, or that it is *rational*, or *justified* to have it in such and such conditions. For instance, beliefs are such that they are correct if they are true, and rational if they can be inferred from other beliefs.

All these claims about the normativity of actions, logical and semantic relations, meanings and mental contents raise familiar questions:

(a) *the scope of normativity*: what is the nature of the normativity involved here? Is it uniformly the same for each kind of item to which it is ascribed? If, to use Sellars’s famous phrase, actions, logical relations, meanings, and contents are “frought with ought”, is it the same ought in every case? Probably not: ought to do, ought to be, and ought to think are apparently different kinds of ought. But what is the difference? And is it everywhere a matter of ought, in a deontic sense rather than a matter of *good* or *valuable*, in the evaluative or axiological sense? And what, in general is normativity? Deontic concepts are often compared to modal ones; but is normativity in general a kind of modality³? In other terms, what are the appropriate concepts in terms of which normativity is to be characterised? Is it through modality, deontic concepts, axiological concepts, or, as some philosophers have recently suggested⁴ is normativity to be cashed out in terms of the general notion of *reason*?

(b) *the extent of normativity*: in what sense is normativity a *feature* or a property of actions, logical and semantic relations, meanings and contents? If these items are fraught with oughts, in what sense are they fraught with them? Is normativity an essential feature or simply a dimension, perhaps important, perhaps accidental, of such entities or relations? Does it *exhaust* the nature

² Hallden (1965).

³ Fine (2003).

⁴ For example, Scanlon (1997).

of such entities? For instance, are all actions things that happen because they should? Are logical relations *essentially* normative? Are meanings *constitutively* normative? Is mental content *intrinsically* normative? Is it even, as Brandom suggest⁵, “norms all the way down”? What is, then, the nature of normative involvement or normative ladenness?⁶

(c) *the consequences of normativity*. Answering questions (a) and (b) is indeed crucial for the *implications* that these normativity claims are supposed to have. In particular, the claims that meanings and mental contents are constitutively normative are usually supposed to entail the falsity of the view that meanings and mental contents can be accounted for integrally in naturalistic terms — because naturalistic explanations are supposed to be purely descriptive, hence free of any normative commitments, and in other terms — because nature does not contain norms. But at this point question (a) backfires: for the claims that nature does not contain norms, or that causal explanation is purely descriptive depend upon the kind of account one gives of causation and explanation. For instance, if causation contains a probabilistic element, and if probability is essentially a normative concept (Hallden), then normativity in some way comes into causal explanation. Another case of such dependencies is mental content.

Another implication of the thesis that a kind of item *X* is normative is often thought to be this: normativity is an evaluative feature, but evaluation is relative to evaluators, hence to an observer’s and interpreter’s point of view. Hence the normativity of *X* is said to entail that *X* is in some sense in the eye of the beholder. Thus a normativity claim about *X* seems to entail a form of anti-realism or non-factualism about *X*. Notoriously this is why Fodor, a realist about mental content and meaning, does not like the claim that mental contents and meanings have a normative dimension⁷.

(d) *the ontology of norms and values*. Actually it needn’t be so, and this raises the further question of the ontology of norms. One can be an anti-realist or a non-factualist about normativity and normative statements, and claim that there are no norms out there, because it is we who create the norms. More specifically, one can be an expressivist about normative discourse and normative properties, and claim that these are mere expressions of our attitudes⁸. Alternatively, one can be a cognitivist and a realist about norms and take normative statements to be true or false and to describe a certain kind of facts. Given that many norms are moral norms, it should not be surprising that there are parallels between the respective metaphysical positions in the field of meta-ethics and in the field of norms about meanings and contents. In passing let us note, with Dretske⁹, that the anti-realist’s claim that norms come from our attitudes, intentions and stances would be circular if one claimed that mental content is essentially normative, and false if the norms

⁵ In: Brandom (1994).

⁶ Dretske (2000), p. 242. Dretske compares the issue of normative involvement with the issue of theory ladenness in the philosophy of science. The one is not clearer than the other.

⁷ Fodor and Lepore (1990).

⁸ Gibbard (1991), Blackburn (1998).

⁹ Dretske (2000), p. 245.

involved in mental contents were themselves real and factual; this suggests that an anti-realist about mental content *has* to say that mental contents *are not* essentially normative.

These are some (but not all, no doubt) of the questions raised by the contemporary extension of the category of normativity to so many fields in philosophy. As in any case when a notion is claimed to be applicable to various domains and thus runs the risk of becoming too broad and confused, the question arises whether we should not simply drop it, or whether we should try to clarify its range of application. Some philosophers would certainly be tempted to take the first line, because they suspect that too many things have been said to be “normative” or to have a normative dimension. I share some of their misgivings. In particular, in many cases I find the claim that discourse, concept or entity *X* is *essentially* or *exhaustively* normative baffling. Following Mulligan¹⁰, let us call “rampant normativism” the view that for an item *X* to have a certain kind of property (being an action, a meaning, an entailment, a mental content) *is just* to instantiate a certain normative property. Typically rampant normativism issues in claims of the form:

- (i) for “*X*” to mean *Y* is just for *X* to be *correctly* applicable to *Y*s;
- (ii) for a proposition *P* to entail a proposition *Q* is just to be *entitled* to infer *P* from *Q*;
- (iii) for a predicate *F* to be applicable to a thing *a* is just for it to be permissible to apply the predicate in a judgement;
- (iv) to possess a given concept *C* is just to be able to apply it *correctly*;
- (v) to have a certain attitude *A* is just to incur *the commitment* to ϕ in given circumstances.

Something seems to be amiss with such claims. Compare with the case of actions:

- (vi) For *a* to be a particular action is just to be *allowed (obliged)* to perform it.

But we want to say that even though a number of actions are such that they are permissible, obligatory, forbidden, etc., it does not follow that their permissibility, forbiddenness, etc. *exhaust* their nature or essence as actions¹¹. Actions are events (or processes, or properties, or whatever), and they can in some circumstances have normative properties, but it is not evident that their normative properties exhaust their nature. There certainly are actions which happen because they should, but in our post-Galilean age at least, we are wary of saying that all actions happen because they should. Similarly, in the case of mental contents, we want to say that although certain kinds of contents are such that it is correct, or perhaps that one ought to have them in certain circumstances, it does not follow that what it is to be a certain kind of mental content is just a matter of its being correct, permissible, valuable or obligatory to have them. In other terms, one must distinguish between two kinds of normativity claims:

¹⁰ Mulligan (2000).

¹¹ Boghossian (2003), p. 32–33.

- (a) constitutive normativity claims: actions, meanings, logical relations, mental contents are essentially and exhaustively normative;
- (b) general claims about norms and values:
 - actions with feature X are valuable, permissible, obligatory, etc.;
 - knowledge and truth are valuable;
 - correct inferences are better than incorrect ones;
 - one ought to believe on the basis of appropriate evidence;
 - one ought not to be impolite.

Apart from the question whether constitutivity claims can be true at all, there is all the difference in the world between constitutivity claims of the form (a), which lead to rampant normativism on the one hand, and general claims about norms and values of the form (b). It is one thing to say that knowledge is valuable or desirable, and another to say that knowledge is essentially something valuable. It is one thing to say that it is better to draw valid inferences rather than invalid ones, and another thing to say that constitutively something is an inference only if it is correct. After all, there are bad inferences, and some pieces of knowledge are not valuable.

Still, one feels nevertheless that there is a connection, at least in some cases, between constitutivity claims (a) and general claims about norms of value (b). For isn't it part of my meaning that "cat" means CAT that I am able to appreciate that I ought to apply it to cats and to cats only? Isn't it part of the concept of inference that one is able to appreciate the difference between good and bad inferences, valid and invalid ones, and the fact that it is better to infer validly than not? Wouldn't someone who had the concept of inference but not the concept of validity be someone who does not really understand what inference means? And, to come to the case which I intend to examine here, isn't it at least part of the concept of belief that one ought to believe only what is true, and that one ought to believe only what one has evidence for?

Here I am going to limit myself to only one kind of normativity claim: those about mental contents. So I shall leave aside the general question (a) of the scope of normativity. I shall also leave aside both the question (c) of the consequences of normativity claims (in particular with respect to the naturalism issue) and the question (d) of the ontology of normative discourse. Dealing with these issues would be not only much too broad for my purposes here, but also I believe that one cannot correctly deal with such questions in advance of settling the issue (b) of the extent of normativity. Following my previous attempts¹², I intend to evaluate the extent of the normativity claims with respect to mental contents, hence I shall deal only with question (b). The issue I want to raise, along the line just suggested, is that of the relationship between a constitutive normativity thesis about mental contents and a general normativity thesis about epistemic norms. I want to claim that the link between the two is only indirect, hence that rampant or exhaustive normativism is wrong about mental contents, although there is indeed a connection between the nature of mental attitudes and claims about the nature of epistemic norms. In my view, normativity is not primarily a feature of contents as such,

¹² Cf. Engel (2000), (2001), (2002), (2004).

but a feature of attitudes. Since this claim is much too general, I shall limit myself to belief, and shall claim that the *evidentialist* norm for belief is what carries the weight of normativity. This will lead me to the question whether this norm can be flouted, as any norm can be, and to the issue of epistemic akrasia.

2. Normativity of Content: Thick and Thin

There has been much talk about the normativity of content in recent years¹³. Now, as I said in the first section, the normativity feature of mental content can be attached to two different things:

(1) to the *propositional* intentional contents of propositional attitudes, such as beliefs, desires, hopes, etc., and to the components of these contents (concepts and conceptual contents for the propositional attitudes, or non conceptual contents of perceptions and other similar mental states, if one subscribes to the view according to which there are such non conceptual contents);

(2) to the *attitudes* (beliefs, desires, hopes, etc.) themselves.

It is of course perfectly possible to defend the combined view that normativity applies to both the contents and the attitudes, but these views are distinct. (1) is the thesis that content and its component parts (mostly: concepts) are normative as such, because content is a matter of there being rules associated with concepts. This claim is typically that of philosophers who defend the idea that attached to any particular concept there are certain kinds of rules, some attached to each particular concept, some attached to the inferential links which are said to be constitutive of concepts. A view of the first kind would be the counterpart, for concepts, of the claim that meanings are normative, because each kind of expression has its own correctness conditions. Perhaps Wittgenstein, as read by Kripke, held such a view. Burge¹⁴ holds such a view: there are specific norms for words and concepts such as “cat”, “sofa”, “arthritis”, etc. These norms are social and non individualistic. A view of the second kind is the form of “inferentialism” or conceptual role semantics defended, in particular, by Brandom¹⁵. Conceptual content is a matter of grasping rules of permission or obligation, various commitments and entitlement (“deontic statuses”), which belong to families of normative statuses, which are structured in a certain way, by the inferential relationships which hold between them. Inferential role semantics, however, can be understood either in descriptive terms (mostly: descriptive of the psychology of individual agents or of sets of agents), or in normative terms, about what an ideal agent ought to infer.

The version in question would indeed be normative. Most versions of inferential or conceptual role semantics are of the “rampant” or “exhaustive” normativist kind, since they hold, in the style of ascriptions of the form (i)–(v) of § 1 above, that for certain objects to fall under a certain concept *just is* to be able to apply them correctly, or according to certain specific rules or

¹³ For reference see: Engel (2000), (2001), (2002).

¹⁴ Burge (1987).

¹⁵ Brandom (1994).

norms. And indeed it is Brandom's view that mental contents, and thought in general in so far as it is conceptual, and inferential contents is normative "all the way down".

It is one thing to say that there are specific norms attached to particular concepts, hence (if different kinds of concepts determine different kinds of contents) to particular contents, and it is another thing to say that normativity is a feature of kinds of propositional attitudes in virtue of general requirements of rationality on these attitudes. Not only normativity in this sense is not a feature of particular contents, but of attitudes to these contents, such as, e.g. beliefs, desires, wishes, hopes and intentions, but also it is a feature of these attitudes in so far as they are *rational*. A person as a whole is rational if she or he instantiates a certain rational pattern of attitudes. Normativity, in this sense, is a "high profile" characteristic of attitudes to contents, and not a "low profile" characteristic of contents themselves, as in the particular-concept or in the inferential role conception¹⁶. The idea is the familiar one that the interpretation of an agent or a thinker is necessarily made against the background of certain very general, high profile, normative standards of rationality. This view is commonly associated with Dennett or Davidson. Now one problem with this view is that it often involves a form of interpretationism or anti-realism: the norms of rationality are not, under this view, "in" the contents, nor even "in" the attitudes to these contents, but they are features of the *interpreter's* assumptions about the contents and attitudes that he or she ascribes to an interpretee. For instance, Davidson says¹⁷:

"If we are intelligibly to attribute attitudes and beliefs, or usefully to describe motions as behaviour, then we are committed to finding, in the pattern of behaviour, belief, and desire, a large degree or rationality and consistency".

This certainly purports to be a constitutive account of the normativity of mental content. Elsewhere Davidson says about his methodology of interpretation, "what is not arrived at by these methods is not thought, meaning or action"¹⁸. It is a matter of dispute whether such an interpretationist conception of content implies a form of anti-realism or verificationism about mental contents, and hence about the norms of rationality which are supposed to be involved in interpretation¹⁹. But let us leave this problem aside here. The main objection to such high profile norms for attitudes is that they are not norms at all.

The objection is that we should not conflate high level profile standards of rationality as idealisations on the one hand and as genuine norms on the other. The distinction is between a mere "categorisation scheme", or an idealised description of what a rational agent would do or think in ideal circumstances, and a genuine norm as a "force maker"²⁰. For a norm to be a norm it is not enough that it fits an idealised description or standard of rationality. It also

¹⁶ Bilgrami (1992).

¹⁷ Davidson (1980), pp. 236–7.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ Bilgrami (1992), Engel (2000).

²⁰ Schroeder (2003).

has to have what Schroeder calls²¹ a “normative oomph”, some feature which *requires* us to act or think in a certain way. When Davidson says that we must interpret others as being by and large “correct” in their beliefs, the claim can be decomposed into two distinct components: the truth of the beliefs and the beliefs being in some way good or appropriate. But the very fact that a belief is true does not make any normative contribution. That “*grass is green*” is true is a mere fact. What is normative is only that I accept, value, or in any sense judge that the corresponding proposition is true. Similarly for the property of correspondence. In this sense Davidson’s theory of mind is, according to Schroeder, non normative. The point can be put in another way²²:

“It may be that, for at least some of these normative concepts, there is also a wholly non-normative concept such that it is obvious to everyone who uses the normative concept in question that the normative and the non-normative concepts are necessarily coextensive. For example, some philosophers may use the term ‘rational’ in such a way that the term expresses a normative concept, but it is not really an open question that all that it takes to be “rational” in this sense is for one’s beliefs and preferences to meet certain standards of consistency and probabilistic coherence, which can be defined in purely logical and mathematical terms”.

Such an account of normative concepts can be called a “shallow” one²³. The point is that a *description* of a certain individual as meeting certain “normative” standards of rationality does not imply that the individual is in any way herself *committed* or bound by the standards. I am not sure myself²⁴ that Davidson’s conception of the norms of rationality is non normative or shallow in this sense (it seems to me to fit better Dennett’s intentional systems theory), but the distinction is certainly an important one.

We thus have two distinct versions of the thesis of the normativity of content: the low profile one, whereby normativity is attached directly to various concepts (for instance, negation), and a high profile one, whereby normativity is attached to general standards of rationality. Both views purport to be constitutive normativity claims in the sense given above: for a certain concept featuring in a content, *what it is* to be this concept, its nature or essence, is to be liable to an assessment of correctness in its application.

The problems for such a view, which falls under the category of what I have called above essential normativity or “rampant” normativism, are the following. As we have just seen, if on the one hand, normativity attaches not to particular concepts but to general patterns of rationality, normativity threatens to be just a mere categorisation scheme, hence something shallow. If, on the other hand, normativity is understood as attached to particular concepts, such as that of negation, it would issue such ought statements of the form:

One ought not to accept (say, believe) that p and that not p.

A first problem with such a view is that it is not obvious that inferential role has to be understood thus in normative terms: the conceptual roles might just

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² Wedgwood (2003), p. 7.

²³ Wedgwood (2003).

²⁴ Engel (1999).

be descriptive features of an individual's psychology²⁵. Another difficulty, and a notorious one, is that it is not clear that this can work as a general theory for all sorts of concepts²⁶.

But the main difficulty, it seems to me, is that it is not clear at all that there are normative oughts which attach to contents and to their components concepts.

Suppose that we accept certain standards of rationality in the following (more or less familiar) form:

(1) Rationality requires of you that you do not believe both p and not- p .

(2) Rationality requires of you that you believe q if you believe p and you believe if p then q .

(3) Rationality requires of you that you do not believe p and not- p .²⁷

Take, for instance (2). As Harman often remarks²⁸, in a particular circumstance (2) may be true without its being the case that if you believe that P , and you believe that if P then Q , then you *ought to*, or are required to, believe that Q . You might just as well not accept Q , for other reasons (for instance you dislike it strongly). The fact that rationality requires of me something, objectively, does not mean that subjectively, I am required to have a certain belief. In other words, knowing what it is rational to do or think (here to think) is not the same as knowing what to do or think in a particular circumstance. What rationality tells me that I ought to do or think is not the same as what I ought to do in a given case.

3. The Normativity of the Attitudes

We could put this point thus. Suppose we claimed, in the manner of Kripke's Wittgenstein: "If I mean addition by "+", then it does not follow that I *will* say that "68+57 = 125", but only that I *ought to* say that it does". But nothing of the sort follows. I may deliberately refuse to say what I believe to be correct. This is the same with claims like (2) above as they are supposed to be attached to a particular concept such as the conditional *if*. In other terms, normativity of linguistic meaning (which is Kripke's concern) or normativity of particular concepts (which is the concern of inferential role theorists of mental content) cannot be a *categorical* normativity of unconditional ought, but is it is mere *hypothetical* normativity.

In contrast, if we formulated similar requirements to (1)–(3) above as general normative requirements for the *attitude* of belief, we would come up with a categorical form of normativity.

It is often said that the fundamental norm governing belief is the norm of truth²⁹. But if we formulate the norm in the following way:

²⁵ Harman (1986).

²⁶ Peacocke (1992).

²⁷ (1) and (3) are not the same requirement: (1) says that you should not have contradictory beliefs, whereas (3) says that you should not believe an overt contradiction.

²⁸ Harman (1986).

²⁹ Wedgwood (2002), Engel (2004).

(NT*) For all P , if P is true, then you ought to believe that P ;

it will not do. For there are plenty of propositions which are true, and which are not worth believing, because we cannot clutter our minds with trivialities. For instance, most of the pieces of information that I can get from a phone book are true, but no one should bother to believe all these things. Similarly, that there are 235451 blades of grass in my garden may be true, but why should I believe it? Likewise, it would be absurd to read the symmetric of NT* as forbidding us to believe any falsehood. For it is common experience that we do. *Ought* implies *can*, and it would be crazy to oblige someone to believe all truths and to disbelieve any falsehood. A more perspicuous formulation of the norm of truth should not say that we ought to believe any truth whatsoever, but that a belief is correct only if the believed proposition is true. Hence the proper formulation of the norm of truth should not be (NT*), but:

(NT) For all P , one ought to believe that P only if P ;

which does not have the consequence that any true proposition must be believed or is worth believing.

Now if NT is, as I have argued elsewhere³⁰, the proper formulation of the norm of truth, the normativity claim here attaches not to the concepts which figure in the propositional content of the attitude of believing, but to the attitude itself.

Now the view which I want to propose is that it is not *content* as such which is normative, or which has normative features, but *the attitudes* towards this content. In the same manner, although the norms can be different this would apply to other cognitive attitudes related to belief but distinct from it: knowledge, thought, judgement, or even hope or fear in its propositional sense (*fearing that*)³¹. Let us, however, concentrate on the epistemic attitude of belief here. To say that normativity attaches not to content but to the attitude of belief is to locate the normativity feature in the epistemic norms governing believing in general, and not to the particular contents which are the objects or the attitudes. As I have remarked above in the introduction, we should distinguish between constitutive normativity claims and general normativity claims about epistemic norms and values, such as: in general it is better to have rational beliefs rather than irrational ones, true rather than false beliefs, justified rather than unjustified, etc. Now if normativity attaches to belief and not to content, this seems to imply locating it not in the constitutive nature of belief, but in the external aim or end of believing.

This is not completely right, however. What I want to claim, with the “constitutive” (but not rampant) normativist — the theorist who believes that normativity is an essential and categorical feature of the mental — is that there are indeed norms of thought as such. But against the rampant normativist I want to claim that this essential normativity is a feature of the attitude itself. Now someone³² might want to subscribe to the idea that there are general epistemic norms and values, *without* granting that mental content is norma-

³⁰ Engel (2004).

³¹ For a related view see: Boghossian (2003).

³² For instance, Mulligan (1999), (2000).

tive in any constitutive sense. I agree. But it does not follow that normativity is not a constitutive property of attitudes like belief. So what is the connection between this constitutive feature and the general norms of rationality?

4. The Norms of Reason

Let us try to formulate better the general claims about epistemic norms related to belief. We first have to formulate the norms in question. There are many such formulations in the literature³³. Let us concentrate upon what we may call the evidentialist norm for justified belief as it is formulated by Feldman and Conee³⁴:

(NE) For any P , believe that P only if you have enough evidence for P .

This is indeed closely related to the norm of truth (NT) above. To believe that P is true is to believe that P is true for good reasons, or because one has enough evidence for P .

But here we encounter the same problem as above. If it can be correct *in general* to embrace (NT) or (NE), as a rational thinker, how can it be *normatively correct* for me in particular circumstances to subscribe to (NE)? In other words: how can (NT) be normative at all? If we cannot answer this question, we would face the same objection as that which “high profile” conceptions of the normativity of mind face: they have no normative “oomph”. In order to understand this, we need to understand how a general norm of evidentialism such as (NE) can be regulative of a given attitude or belief. For that, we need to understand how such a norm can be flouted or broken. There are such cases. These are the cases when a thinker accepts (NE), but still does not believe according to it. These are cases of what is often called “epistemic akrasia”³⁵.

5. How Is Epistemic Akrasia Possible?

(NT) and (NE) are often said to be norms for belief in the sense that it is a conceptual, or in some sense necessary, feature of our concept of belief that someone ought to believe that P only if P is true, or ought to believe that P only if he or she has sufficient evidence that P . In other words, someone could not be said to understand the concept of belief if he were not able to appreciate this norm. It is in this sense, in my view, that one should interpret the familiar idea that “belief aims at truth”. In my view³⁶ it does not imply that truth is, in a teleological sense, the goal or value that a believer must aim at in a conscious or intentional sense, in order to be a believer. In this sense, I disagree with Velleman³⁷ on the nature of the aim of belief. But this conceptual or constitutive interpretation of the aim of belief does not explain *how* the norm of truth for belief functions. It tells us that (NT) is a conceptually necessary characteristic of belief, but it does not tell us how the norm can be applied,

³³ Nozick (1993), Miller (1995), Pollock and Cruz (2000), Broome (2003).

³⁴ Feldman and Conee (1985).

³⁵ Heil (1983), A. Rorty (1983), Hurley (1993), Scanlon (1997).

³⁶ Engel (2004).

³⁷ Velleman (2000).

or can fail to be applied. In particular, it does not tell us how the norm can be flouted or violated. Norms are not logical necessities nor laws of nature. They rest upon logical necessities (e.g. in logic) or upon conceptual necessities (in our present case, necessities about the concept of belief), but they are not *simply* necessities. They can fail to be applied in certain cases, or even apply in some case *ceteris paribus*. In particular, we want to explain how it is possible, in certain cases, for someone to believe that he has enough evidence to believe a certain proposition, but nevertheless fail to believe it, or vice versa.

It is quite important, for our problem, to determine whether such a phenomenon as epistemic akrasia is possible. For, on the one hand, its possibility, if real, would seem to undermine the claim that (NE), and possibly (NT), is a genuine constitutive norm or belief: if there are believers who can fail to believe, and actually do fail in a number of circumstances, when they have excellent evidence for believing, and realise this fact, how could one say that (NE) is a norm for belief at all? There would be all sorts of beliefs, some based on sufficient evidence, other not, and even others which the subjects who recognise as insufficiently based on evidence by their own light, but which would lead them to hold the corresponding beliefs nevertheless. In other words, there would be no intrinsic rational norm for belief. On the other hand, if epistemic akrasia is impossible, this would reinforce the claim that it is a conceptual impossibility that one could believe a proposition that one consciously thinks that one ought not to believe, and hence the constitutive account of normativity. But then, as I have just suggested, we would fail to understand how (NT) and (NE) can be epistemic norms of belief at all. Fortunately, as I shall try to show, we do not need to embrace either of these courses.

What conditions must exist for epistemic akrasia to be possible? For the concept of akrasia to make sense in the epistemic domain, it must, at least in some crucial respects, be parallel to the concept of akrasia in the practical domain. Ordinarily an action is said to be akratic if (a) it is such that the agent performs it against his own best judgement — hence, in some sense of this term, while having control over his performance of the action, and (b) is such that the agent is conscious of what he or she does. Both conditions are in general said to be required in order to avoid the assimilation of practical akrasia into mere wishful thinking.

Let us accept this general characterisation of practical akrasia. The parallel notion of the epistemic akrasia in the cognitive case of belief would then be this. A belief is formed (and maintained) akratically only if³⁸:

- (i) a person's first-order beliefs can diverge from his higher-order judgments about what she ought (epistemically) to believe or about what it is reasonable (sufficiently justified, etc.) to believe;
- (ii) the person in some sense controls the formation of beliefs of kind (i).

There are thus two ways in which one can deny that epistemic akrasia is possible: first by denying that (i) is possible, i.e. by denying that one could possibly fail to believe what one considers that one ought to believe; second, by

³⁸ Owens (2002).

denying (ii), i.e. that one can control such beliefs. Given that (ii) depends upon the possibility of (i), we have to examine it first.

A number of writers have claimed that epistemic akrasia is impossible just because (i) is impossible. Thus Susan Hurley writes³⁹:

"In the case of what should be done there may be conflict within an agent, there may be conflicting reasons competing for authority. But in the case of what should be believed, truth alone governs and it can't be divided against itself or harbour conflicts. It makes sense to suppose that something is, ultimately, good in some respects but not in others [...] in a way it does not even make sense to suppose that something is, ultimately, true in some respects but not in others".

In other words, although there can be many kinds of reasons for acting, there can be only one kind of reason for believing, either truth (NT) or evidence (NE). The norm of truth cannot be divided.

In the same vein, Philip Pettit and Michael Smith write⁴⁰:

"Imagine that your beliefs run counter to what evidence and fact require. In such a case, your beliefs will not allow those requirements to remain visible because the offending beliefs themselves give you your sense of what is and your sense of what appears to be. You are therefore denied an experience whose content is that you are believing such and such in defiance of the requirements of facts and evidence."

As they indeed note, the point can more simply be put by noting that a subject with such beliefs would instantiate Moore's paradox.

Jonathan Adler has recently argued⁴¹ that one can actually move from the "subjective principle of sufficient reasons" that:

A. When one attends to any of one's beliefs, one must regard it as believed for sufficient reasons;

to the objective norm of evidentialism (NE):

B. One ought to believe that *P* only if one has adequate reasons (evidence) that *P*;

through the fact that one cannot recognise oneself as fully believing that *P* and that one's reasons are inadequate.

There is the move here from an *is* (in A) to an *ought* (in B), he tells us, because (A) is already normative, and expresses the recognition of a norm.

Now there is in these arguments an implicit assimilation of (NT) and (NE), and of statements of the form:

(1) I believe that *P* but this belief is based upon insufficient evidence (reasons);

and statement of the form:

(2) I believe that *P* but not *P*;

as equivalent forms of Moore's paradox. But they are not equivalent:

I might, for instance, very well believe that:

(1') Moriarty did it but that this belief is based on insufficient evidence.

³⁹ Hurley (1993), p. 133.

⁴⁰ Pettit and Smith (1996), p. 448.

⁴¹ Adler (2002).

If I say, in contrast that:

(2') I believe that Moriarty did it, but he didn't do it;

this second belief is not equivalent to the first. I may have some information which undermines, even very strongly, my belief that Moriarty did it, and still believe that he did it. In other words, contrary to what Pettit and Smith, and Adler claim, although there is a tension in (1'), it is not incoherent in the sense in which (2') is. It seems perfectly possible in this sense to believe contrary to evidence, and in the sense of condition (i) above, to be epistemically akratic. Indeed, it happens quite often and not simply in religious cases or in various cases of pathological beliefs⁴². In this sense, the norm NE is often flouted.

Should we therefore conclude that NE is not a norm at all, because epistemic akrasia is possible? No, because condition (i) is only necessary, but not sufficient, for epistemic akrasia. For epistemic akrasia to occur, condition (ii), the condition that we should in some sense have control over our first order deficient belief and over our belief that this first order belief is deficient, must be met. Otherwise there would be no difference between epistemic akrasia and wishful thinking or wishful believing: only the former is voluntary.

There is a well known classical argument of Bernard Williams to the effect that we cannot have such control, just because there is an intimate connection between the impossibility of our believing at will and our being conscious that we are so believing⁴³. I am not going to restate or discuss here Williams's argument. There are different notions of "control" and of the "will"⁴⁴. But most writers on the topic of believing at will agree on this point: fully believing at will can neither be believing "just like that" — as a matter of direct voluntary control of what one believes — nor believing as an indirect and more or less distant effect of one's having taken the decision to believe through some sort of causal process that one controls, such as drug, hypnosis, or simply habituation. Such beliefs may be held for various reasons, including practical, but they are not the case of believing *for a reason*, in the sense in which the reason is judged by the agent to be such that it is a reason for the very belief that he or she has. One can certainly believe something for a reason which is distinct from the reason which justifies a certain belief (in particular a practical reason), but one cannot deliberately and voluntarily believe that *P* when one judges that the reason or evidence which supports *P* is insufficient. In this sense, Adler is right. It is because his principle of sufficient reasons for beliefs (A) prevents a belief formation in the supposedly akratic manner, described as being voluntary, that epistemic akrasia in the end turns out to be impossible in the sense of condition (ii)⁴⁵.

If this is correct, then the norm of evidence actually governs the attitude of belief constitutively and conceptually. In this sense I have to agree with the constitutive normativist. But it does not follow that the first condition of epistemic akrasia (i), our own conscious believing that we do not believe what we

⁴² See, e.g., Colthreart and Davies, eds. (2000).

⁴³ Williams (1973).

⁴⁴ See in particular: Owens (2000).

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

ought epistemically to believe, cannot be met. This fact is, in my view, enough to ensure that an agent can experience his or her *partial* divergence from the norm, and hence gives us cases where the norm is not respected. But this is the case with all norms, including those epistemic.⁴⁶

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⁴⁶ Distant versions of the article were read in Padova in Mach 2003, and in 2004 while I was a fellow of the Center of Advanced Studies of the Norwegian Academy of Science. I thank the CAS, Pier Daniele Giaretta, Massimiliano Carrara, Isaac Levi, Jose Bermudez, Olav Gjelsvik, Bjorn Ramberg, and Tim Williamson.

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