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Against Content Normativity

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As meaning's claim to normativity has grown increasingly suspect the normativity thesis has shifted to mental content. In this paper, we distinguish two versions of content normativism: 'CE normativism', according to which it is essential to content that certain 'oughts' can be derived from it, and 'CD normativism', according to which content is determined by norms in the first place. We argue that neither type of normativism withstands scrutiny. CE normativism appeals to the fact that there is an essential connection between content and correctness conditions. But, we argue, this fact is by itself normatively innocent, and attempts to add a normative dimension via the normativity of belief ultimately fail. CD normativism, in turn, falls prey to the *'dilemma of regress and idleness'*: the appeal to rules either leads to some form of regress of rules, or the notion of rule following is reduced to an idle label. We conclude by suggesting that our arguments do not support naturalism: It is a mistake to assume that normativism and naturalism are our only options.

Not long ago, 'meaning is normative' was the battle cry of the day. This was largely the result of the enthusiastic reception of Saul Kripke's book on Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations. There, Kripke argued that meaning is normative in the sense that it essentially involves certain 'oughts'. A candidate for what constitutes the state of my meaning something by a sign, Kripke argued, has to be such that "whatever in fact I (am disposed to) do, there is a unique thing that I *should* do."¹ This claim struck many people not only as true but also as teaching us something profoundly important about the nature of linguistic meaning. It was suggested that theories of meaning that do not allow for any genuine

¹ Kripke 1982, p. 24.

‘oughts’, such as dispositionalism, could be rejected out of hand, and many concluded that a terminal stumbling block for any type of naturalist theory of meaning had been found.

Today, Kripke’s thesis is heard of less often. Indeed, although the thesis still has its adherents, former champions of linguistic normativity now reject the claim that meaning is normative.² To some extent, this change of heart can probably be attributed to the increasingly critical discussion of Kripke’s semantic thesis.³ Upon closer scrutiny the thesis has proven highly problematic: the ‘oughts’ that can be found either do not have anything in particular to do with meaning, or they are not genuine ‘oughts’, that is, they do not involve any prescriptions. But this does not mean that normativity has left philosophy of mind and language. On the contrary, Kripke’s thesis is still with us, now as a thesis about *mental content*. Even if meaning is not normative, it has been suggested, mental content is, and this does indeed pose a serious obstacle to any theory of content that attempts to dispose of all ‘oughts’ or prescriptions.⁴

In this paper, we take on this revamped version of Kripke’s normativity thesis. Along with almost everyone else in this discussion, we take the relevant normativity to be *prescriptive* in nature. Prescriptions, we take it, involve genuine ‘oughts’; their very point is to *guide* our performances. This interpretation of the normativity thesis is by no means an arbitrary choice. It is well motivated both by the debate, and the subject matter, we are addressing. Not only have those involved in the normativity debate approached the matter in terms of prescriptivity, it also is entirely natural to do so. When it comes to normativity, linguistic

² See for instance Boghossian 2003, p. 39.

³ See, among others, Bilgrami 1993, Dretske 2000, Horwich 1995, Fodor 1990, Hattiangadi 2003 and 2006, Wikforss 2001, Glüer 1999a, 1999b, 2000, 2001, 2002, Glüer and Pagin 1999.

⁴ See for instance Boghossian 2003, Brandom 1994, Engel 2000, and Gibbard 2003. This idea was there from the start, of course, although the focus was on linguistic meaning. For instance, McDowell and Pettit (1986) took Wittgenstein to have shown that “our dealings with content must be understood in terms of the idea that mental activity is undertaken under the aspect of allegiance to norms” (p. 10).

meanings and mental contents alike come into view only as the meanings and contents of linguistic utterances or thoughts, that is, of performances of ours. Naturally, the relevant norms would seem to be those ‘governing’ our performances, norms that we, as their subjects, *ought to* live up to. Thus, for instance, it is the alleged need to account for how the individual ought to speak and think that is perceived to pose a difficulty for naturalist accounts of meaning and content.

In what follows, we shall therefore pursue the question whether mental content is essentially normative in the sense that it involves genuine oughts or prescriptions. We shall give a negative answer: Despite its wide acceptance, the normativity-of-content thesis is mistaken.⁵ The reasons for this, we suggest, teach us something important about the nature of content and its role in cognition. Since the attempts to show that content is normative typically go via the idea that *belief* is essentially normative, our arguments will also have implications for the normativity-of-belief thesis. Indeed, we shall argue, quite independently of the considerations against content normativity, the normativity-of-belief thesis is in trouble.

In the efforts to defend linguistic normativity, two main strategies can be discerned: One attempts to derive the normativity of meaning from the connection between meaning and semantic correctness, another tries to derive it from the connection between meaning and rules for correct use. The same two strategies can be found, somewhat transmogrified, in the current debate concerning mental content: The normativity of content is either said to result from the connection between content and what we shall call ‘noematic’ correctness

⁵ There might, of course, be other senses than the prescriptive in which content is normative. Thus, it might be investigated whether content essentially is subject to pure evaluations, or norms concerning ‘Sein-Sollen’, not ‘Tun-Sollen’. Some of the arguments presented below turn on specific characteristics of prescriptions, but some do not. Most importantly, our discussion of what we shall call the ‘simple argument’ for normativity would seem equally applicable to mere evaluations (see below, section 1.1. See also Glüer 2001).

(correctness of thought content), or from the connection between content and rules.⁶ The two strategies are not simply two sides of the same coin, but two distinct ways of construing the normativity thesis. The difference centers on the order of metaphysical determination: On the first construal, it is content (or meaning) that comes first, and the oughts in question depend on it; they can be (very directly) derived from it. We shall call this version of the normativity thesis ‘CE normativism’ and the norms in question ‘CE norms’ – content-engendered norms. CE normativism is the kind of normativism most typically associated with Kripke. On the second construal, however, the determination relation goes the other way: It is norms or rules that come first, and content depends on them. According to this version of normativism, there is content *because* there are certain norms or rules that govern thinking; moreover, *what* content it is that particular thoughts have depends on these norms or rules. Let us call this version of the normativity of content ‘CD normativism’ and the norms or rules in question ‘CD norms or rules’ – content-determining norms or rules.⁷

We shall examine these two strategies in turn and argue that they both fail. Neither CE normativism nor CD normativism can be upheld. CE normativism needs to forge a link between abstract content and the proper objects, if any, for the norms in question, namely, contentful mental states. Beliefs are the natural candidates, since many conceive of beliefs as essentially and normatively connected with truth and rationality. We argue that belief’s essential connection with truth is such that no guidance is to be had, no rules to be derived from it (sections 1.1 and 1.2). The suggestion that belief is essentially normative since it ‘aims at truth’, therefore, cannot be defended. And even if the ‘rules’ of rationality are, in some

⁶ Boghossian (2003) and Gibbard (2003) both distinguish these two strategies, but whereas Boghossian opts for the first strategy, Gibbard opts for the second.

⁷ Read as merely claiming the existence of relations of determination, the two can, of course, be combined: in this metaphysically neutral sense, one can hold that content determines norms that in turn determine contents. This is no more than to claim that there is precisely one norm for each particular content.

sense, constitutive of contentful belief, taking this idea seriously only shows that the ‘rules’ of rationality cannot be prescriptions for belief formation, either (section 1.3). Moreover, or so we argue in section 2, the very idea of rule-guided or motivated belief formation leads into what we call the ‘dilemma of regress and idleness’: the appeal to rules either leads to some form of regress of rules, or the notion of rule following reduces to an idle label (section 2.1). This becomes especially clear if the rules in question are supposed to be CD norms (sections 2.2 and 2.3). We end by suggesting what we take to be the proper moral of this (section 3): that both forms of normativism fail, we stress, does not mean that the road has been paved for a naturalist reduction of content. It is simply a mistake to assume that normativism and naturalism are our only options.

1. Content-engendered norms

1.1 The argument from correctness

Kripke presents his normativity thesis not as a substantive thesis about the nature of meaning, but as a pre-theoretical requirement that any plausible theory of meaning has to respect. If this is how one conceives of the normativity thesis, it is essential that the thesis can be derived rather immediately from rather uncontentious starting points. This explains the attraction of the first normativist strategy. Independently of how one conceives of meaning, it is suggested, it must be agreed that there is an essential connection between meaning and *correctness conditions*. Since correctness is a normative matter, such conditions are normative, the reasoning goes; thus, we have a quick argument for the essential normativity of meaning.⁸

⁸ Simon Blackburn, for instance, construes Kripke’s thesis this way: “The topic is that there is such a thing as the correct and incorrect application of a term, and to say that there is such a thing is no more than to say that there is truth and falsity” (1984, 281). See also Boghossian 1989, 513. For a recent defense of this claim, see Whiting 2007, for a response, see Glüer and Wikforss 2007.

In the parallel case of the normativity of content, the attraction of the first strategy similarly consists in its uncontroversial starting point. Just like meaning, *content* is essentially linked to correctness conditions. Hence, content is essentially normative. Paul Boghossian, in a recent paper, employs a version of this strategy to defend CE normativism, the claim that, as he puts it, “content attributions constitutively involve oughts”.⁹ This strategy, Boghossian says, is appealing since it proceeds from the “totally uncontentious observation that whether one is thinking correctly depends on what one is thinking, on the content of one’s thought.”¹⁰ Using Kripke’s familiar ‘plus’-example, Boghossian suggests that if one is thinking that $68 \text{ plus } 57 = 125$ then one is thinking correctly, whereas if one is thinking that $68 \text{ quus } 57 = 125$ then one is thinking incorrectly. Since, Boghossian continues, correctness is a normative matter, involving ‘oughts’, and, moreover, correctness conditions are plausibly constitutive of thought content, we have the beginnings of an argument for the normativity of content.

This line of reasoning, again, is familiar from the debate concerning linguistic normativity. Indeed, in his earlier papers Boghossian himself argued that because of the essential connection between meaning and correctness conditions, meaning is normative. If I mean green by ‘green’, it follows that ‘green’ applies correctly only to green things, he argued and claimed: “The fact that the expression means something implies, that is, a whole set of *normative* truths about my behavior with that expression (...).”¹¹

Let us call this argument for the normativity of meaning ‘the simple argument’. In order to evaluate the parallel argument in the case of content, let us first have a closer look at the simple argument as applied to meaning. The simple argument starts from the uncontroversial

⁹ Boghossian 2003, 34.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 35.

¹¹ Boghossian 1989, 513.

claim that meaningful expressions necessarily have conditions of correct use. Thus, for any expression w , the following principle holds:

(C) w means $F \rightarrow \forall x (w \text{ applies correctly to } x \leftrightarrow x \text{ is } F)$

Two things are particularly important here. First, the very point of the simple argument is to derive the normativity of meaning *directly*, that is, without the help of any further (substantive) premises, from (C). This not only precludes the use of what we might call ‘non-semantic’ premises; any argument for the claim that *semantic meaning* is essentially normative must derive this normativity exclusively from properly semantic sources. The additional point of the simple argument is that this can be done without any further (substantive) premises whatsoever. All we need to do to make the argument fully explicit, is to *analyze* the concept of correctness – as used in (C). The idea is that since correctness is a normative concept the conclusion immediately follows. The second important thing therefore is this: The simple argument depends on its being a *conceptual truth* that correctness – as used in (C) – is normative.

Where this proposal stumbles is precisely on the allegedly unproblematic step from correctness to ‘oughts’. Granted, if I mean green by ‘green’ then ‘green’ is true only of green things, and if I say ‘That is green’ while pointing at a red object I have said something false. But it does not immediately follow that I have failed to do what I *ought* to do – not even from a merely semantic point of view. There *are* non-normative uses of ‘correct’, and this is one of them. The relevant notion of correctness in this context is that of *semantic* correctness. What that precisely amounts to depends on the choice of basic semantic concept; we shall use *truth* as our example. The notion of semantic correctness is non-normative in precisely the sense that no normative truths, no truths about what we ought (not) to do with ‘green’ directly

follow from (C). In other words: That *semantic* correctness is normative, is no conceptual truth.¹²

Putting this point more positively, we have argued elsewhere that what (C) gives us is nothing more than the conditions for the application of the basic semantic concept to applications of *w*.¹³ Nothing in (C) shows that this has to amount to anything 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 be made of *w*. Semantic categorization is non-normative in precisely this sense: it has no direct normative consequences.

In this respect, semantic categorization is like sorting objects into tables and non-tables. Sorting things into tables and non-tables should clearly be non-normative. Of course, 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 *As* and *non-As*, 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

¹² This might look like nothing but a basic clash of intuitions. According to us, semantic correctness is not a normative concept, according to the normativist, it is. Thus, the normativist might feel safe in just digging his heels in in one of two ways: He might either be tempted to conclude that we do not talk about the same topic, or that his opponent has a poor grasp of the relevant concept and that the opponent's intuitions therefore can safely be ignored. Less dogmatically, he could move on and provide what we claim is required: *further* argument. And that would be wise, for there is no safety in dogmatism here. Since (C) is not disputed, any non-normative concept of semantic correctness will be co-extensional with its normative sibling. The latter provides nothing more than a normative gloss on the basic semantic categorization both equally effect. The need for an argument to the effect that this gloss is needed at all is, thus, very real. Unless such further argument is provided, the only correct conclusion to draw from these considerations is that normativity does not seem to be anything but an idle wheel in the theory of meaning.

¹³ See especially Glüer 2001: 60f; Wikforss 2001: 205ff.

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. Semantic categorization is like sorting objects into tables and non-tables: No immediate normative consequences ensue.¹⁴ The simple argument thus fails; to derive oughts from (C), additional premises are needed.

There is of course the familiar idea that there are constitutive rules for *assertion*, and one idea here would be that these rules provide the missing link between semantic categorization and what we ought to do with meaningful expressions.¹⁵ Relevant examples are Searles' sincerity rule

(S) Do not assert p unless you believe p

and Williamson's knowledge rule

(K) One must: assert p only if one knows p .

However, the notion of correctness implied by these rules does not coincide with that of truth, or semantic correctness. I can make a sincere assertion even though my utterance is false, and I can violate the sincerity rule even though my utterance happens to be true.¹⁶ And even

¹⁴ Since our argument turns on the *categorizing role* of the basic semantic concept, it does not matter which concept that is. The argument thus is not that, for instance, 'semantically correct' means *true*, and truth is not a normative concept (for such arguments, see for instance Horwich 1998, 187; Dretske 2000, 247). The argument is that no matter which concept is the basic semantic concept, what is essential to being the basic semantic concept is a certain *categorizing role* with respect to the use of meaningful expressions. Thus, the argument applies even if you think that predicating semantic correctness of an utterance is *not* predicating either truth or warranted assertibility of it, but rather "a higher order claim to the effect that the performance possesses that feature – whatever it may be – that makes for correctness in acts of that kind" (Rosen 2001, 620). Even if the concept of semantic correctness is the concept of a (first-order) *second level* property (to employ the terminology of Russell's ramified theory of types), what is essential to it still is semantic categorization, not normativity.

¹⁵ In our present take on the rules of assertion, especially in their relation to the simple argument, we are indebted to the comments of an anonymous referee prompting for greater comprehensiveness and clarity.

¹⁶ For a discussion of this point see Wikforss 2001.

though knowledge implies truth, I can still violate the knowledge rule by asserting what is true but not known to me. Moreover, even if the constitutive rule of assertion were the truth rule

(T) One must: assert p only if p is true,¹⁷

or any of its kin, using such a rule to derive normative consequences from (C) does not amount to vindicating the claim that meaning is normative. The rules in question are *pragmatic* rules, rules for the performance of speech acts. They are not semantic rules. If there need to be such rules for there to be assertions, say, then *assertion* is essentially normative.¹⁸

But *meaning* still is not.

The simple argument, as applied to meaning, therefore fails and it cannot be saved by an appeal to norms of assertion. In a later paper Boghossian concurs. However, he suggests, the situation is quite different with respect to mental content: “the linguistic version of the normativity thesis, in contrast with its mentalistic version, has no plausibility whatever (...).”¹⁹ Our next question is whether this is correct. Is the situation really essentially different when it comes to content? Is there any more chance here of deriving essentially ‘noematic’ oughts directly from the connection between content and correctness conditions?

Prima facie, the same difficulties appear to apply to the simple argument in the case of mental content: Granted, the concept *green* applies only to green things, but this does not in itself say anything about how the concept *ought to* be applied. Indeed, it is difficult for the argument even to get off the ground in the case of content. After all, in the case of meaning, there is a natural connection between an expression’s conditions of correct application and its

¹⁷ As discussed, and rejected in Williamson 2000, 242. That the norm of assertion is truth is suggested in Weiner 2005.

¹⁸ See Pagin 2008, however, for a critical discussion and defense of anti-normativism with respect to assertion.

¹⁹ Boghossian 2003, 39.

use, whereas in the case of concepts application first and foremost is a relation between an abstract object, the concept, and objects that ‘fall under’ the concept. For normativity to even enter the scene here, some connection therefore has to be made with *mental events*. Perhaps one can appeal to the role of content in thoughts? Thoughts, after all, have contents and, just like utterances, they can be said to be true or false, correct or incorrect, if their contents are. That thoughts have correctness conditions in this sense should, again, be rather uncontroversial. But this notion of noematic correctness would seem no more directly normative than the semantic one. That thoughts have such conditions is merely to say that thoughts can be sorted into two categories. Something has to be added in order to show that these categorizations have normative import. Moreover, what is added needs to be motivated from considerations having to do with *content*.

Boghossian’s proposal, as it turns out, is that the normativity thesis can be saved in the case of content because of an important difference between assertion and belief: “the reason is that it is not a norm on assertion that it should aim at the truth, in the way it is a norm of belief that it do so.”²⁰ Belief, Boghossian argues, is *constitutively* normative, whereas assertion is not. Thus, he suggests, it is a conceptual truth that belief is subject to “the norm for belief”:

(N1) One ought to believe that p only if p .²¹

This norm, Boghossian stresses, must be distinguished from the stronger norm:

(N2) One ought to believe that p if and only if p .

Boghossian rejects N2 on the grounds that it entails that every truth has normative consequences - ought implies can, and one is clearly not capable of believing everything that is true. N1, however, does not have this implication and can therefore, Boghossian suggests,

²⁰ Boghossian 2003, 39.

²¹ Boghossian 2003, 37.

be said to be constitutive of the notion of belief. This means, he continues, that it is “a condition on understanding what it is for *S* to believe that *p* that one understands that *S* ought to believe that *p* only if *p*”.²²

The proposal, therefore, is that the normativity of belief provides the missing link between contents and what we ought to do.²³ Again, there is a conceptual claim involved, but this time it does not concern the notions of semantic or noematic correctness, but that of belief. The obvious question then is how belief and content are related: Why should the fact that N1 is constitutive of *belief* tell us anything about the nature of *content*? In this respect, too, it would seem, the situation is perfectly parallel to that of meaning and assertion – even if it is granted that assertion (belief) is essentially normative, it does not follow that *meaning* (content) is normative.

Boghossian is quite aware of this difficulty. What can be established, he proposes, is that N1 is constitutive of the notion of belief. But content figures in other attitudes than belief. Showing that content is normative, Boghossian continues, would therefore require showing that the concept of belief plays such a fundamental role that we cannot understand the notion of content other than through the notion of belief. Supporting CE normativism, hence, requires (at a minimum) two distinct steps: First, it has to be established that the concept of belief is constitutively normative. Second, it has to be established that the concept of belief is fundamental in the way proposed by Boghossian, that one cannot grasp the notion of content other than by grasping the notion of belief.²⁴ Both steps, however, are very problematic.

²² Boghossian 2003, 40. Boghossian proposes that the notion of constitutivity should be construed in terms of the notion of conditions on understanding. To say that fact B is constitutive of fact A, he proposes, is to say that “grasping the concept of an A-fact requires grasp of the concept of a B-fact” (ibid. 37).

²³ See for instance Engel 2001 and Velleman 2000. Velleman puts it: “What one would be obliged to avoid, if snow weren't white, is not the mere thought of snow's being white but rather the belief with that content” (245).

²⁴ It should be noted that it is not obvious that these two steps suffice. If it can be shown that one cannot grasp the concept of content without grasping the concept of belief, does it follow that what is essential for belief must

Although Boghossian does not claim to have a conclusive argument in support of the second step, he proposes that it does seem as if the notion of belief is basic in the sense that our grasp of the concepts of the other propositional attitudes presupposes a grasp of the concept of belief. Thus, he suggests, one cannot have the concept of desire without having the concept of belief, since one cannot desire that p (at t) unless one believes that *not* p (at t) or, at least, is uncertain whether p .²⁵ However, Boghossian notes, a full defense of the thesis that belief is basic in this sense would require investigating the relation between belief and the other propositional attitudes as well. Hence, “the question whether content is normative will have to remain unresolved” until such an investigation is carried out.²⁶

This is a conclusion that is bound to be disappointing to the friend of CE normativism. Boghossian starts out with the idea that correctness conditions are both normative and constitutive of content, thereby suggesting a very direct argument in favor of the normativity of content. What he ends up with, however, is something very indirect, an argument that relies on the rather speculative ‘primacy of belief’ thesis. Indeed, there is evidence that the thesis, in fact, is false – today it is widely accepted in developmental psychology that children use the concept of desire in explanatory contexts long before they acquire the concept of belief.²⁷ This suffices to show that there cannot be a conceptual primacy of the sort proposed by Boghossian.

What, then, about the first step above, the claim that belief is constitutively normative? Even if Boghossian’s primacy of belief thesis is rejected, it might be thought that the normativity of belief thesis can be employed to support CE-normativism. For instance,

also be essential for content? This question was first raised by Philipp Keller at the ‘Norms and Content’ workshop in Geneva, December 2007.

²⁵ Boghossian 2003, 42.

²⁶ Boghossian 2003, 43.

²⁷ See Wellman 1993.

someone might argue that what is at stake here is not whether grasping the *concept* of content requires grasping the concept of belief. Rather, it might be said, our best theories of content show that we cannot account for content without appealing to the notion of belief. Hence, if belief is normative then so is content.²⁸ Let us, then, take a look at the normativity of belief thesis as well. We shall examine two distinct attempts to support it: By appealing to the so called ‘aim of belief’ and by appealing to the connection between belief and rationality.

1.2 Normativity and the aim of belief

It is often said that one essential feature of belief is that it ‘aims at truth’. One popular way of spelling this metaphor out is precisely by saying that belief is constitutively *normative*. To say that belief aims at truth, is to say that false beliefs are in some sense defective, that one ought only to believe that which is true.²⁹

How is this to be understood? There is, of course, a perfectly trivial sense in which belief aims at truth. To believe that p is to hold p true. Thus, the mental state of believing involves, essentially, being ‘directed’ at truth. Moreover, knowing what I believe involves (in some sense) knowing the conditions under which my belief would be true. However, that there is such a constitutive relation between belief and truth clearly does not show that belief is normative, that N1 holds.³⁰ Another familiar idea is that we, as epistemic agents, aim for truth, and that therefore we ought to do certain things (such as gathering evidence) in order to

²⁸ Alternatively, you might think that any plausible claim as to content’s essential normativity has to take something like the following form: Content is essentially such that *if* a content is the content of a *belief*, *then* certain normative truths follow. This was suggested by Ralph Wedgwood in conversation.

²⁹ See for instance Engel 2001, 49; Noordhof 2001, 249; Platts 1979, 257; Zangwill 1998, 174; Shah 2003, 474; Velleman 2000, 245, and Wedgwood 2002, 267. Boghossian, too, motivates N1 by appealing to the idea that “it is constitutive of belief to aim at truth” (Boghossian 2003, 38).

³⁰ As Donald Davidson puts it in a reply to Engel: “[A]nyone who has a propositional attitude knows, at least tacitly, what the truth conditions of the propositional content are. But this does not make truth a norm” (2001, 296).

fulfil this aim. It is of course disputed whether truth can be said to be the sole goal of inquiry. However, even if this is granted, it is clear that the ‘ought’ here is not only instrumental, a means-to-an-end ‘ought’, it is also not an ‘ought’ that applies to *beliefs*, but to human actions.

To support a normativist reading of the metaphor ‘belief aims at truth’ other considerations are required. One approach is to say that unless we appeal to N1, we will not be able to distinguish belief from other cognitive states, such as considering that p or imagining that p . These attitudes are all related to truth in the sense that they all have the same ‘direction of fit’; they are supposed to fit the world (unlike motivational states, such as desire where the direction of fit is the other way). Distinguishing belief from these other states therefore requires more than appealing to the idea that belief bears a relation to truth – we also have to appeal to the idea that one ought to believe that p only if p . This sets belief apart from considering p (it is not the case that one ought to consider p only if p), imagining p , etc. And it shows why belief is *constitutively* normative, why we ought to believe what is true whether or not we aim at truth in our inquiries.³¹

Now, we are not convinced that it is all that difficult to distinguish belief from these other attitudes. To believe that p , after all, is to take the attitude of *holding true* towards p , whereas considering p , or imagining p does not involve any such attitude.³² However, it might be objected that although this is correct, it is not very informative. It also has to be spelled out what holding true really consists in, and in order to do that we need to appeal to N1. David Velleman, for instance, has suggested that “believing involves regarding a proposition as true

³¹ See for instance Engel 2001. Engel argues that this norm is in place independently of our goals, since it is essential to the notion of belief: “It is a *conceptual* norm” (49).

³² Guessing, arguably, does involve the attitude of holding true; nevertheless, one might think that guessing either is more correctly described not as a mental state but as a certain way of acquiring beliefs, or that guesses do not involve the attitude of holding true to the degree required for belief.

with the aim of so regarding it only if it really is.”³³ What is distinctive of beliefs, unlike these other mental states, is that they are normatively *regulated for truth*.³⁴

The question is in what sense ‘norms of truth’ could guide our belief formation. Notice, first, that there is a difficulty concerning the form of N1. Boghossian, again, rejects N2 (‘One ought to believe that *p* if and only if *p*’) on the grounds that it violates the restriction ‘ought’ implies ‘can’. For this reason he opts for the weaker norm, N1. This weaker norm, however, does not actually tell the individual what she ought to do. After all, N1 simply entails that if *p* is false, then it is not the case that one ought to believe that *p*.³⁵ It does not follow that if *p* is false then one ought not to believe that *p*. By rejecting N2, thus, Boghossian falls back on a norm that is much too weak to serve a guiding function.

Wedgwood (2002) suggests a way out of this difficulty.³⁶ He construes the relevant truth norm in a way that avoids the difficulties concerning N2. The fundamental epistemic norm, he suggests, “says nothing about whether or not one should consider *p*, since this norm only concerns propositions that one *actually consciously considers*”. Hence it takes the following form:

(N2*) If one considers whether *p*, then one ought to believe *p* iff *p* is true.³⁷

³³ Velleman 2000, 278.

³⁴ Velleman 2000, 251. However, in Shah and Velleman (2005) being regulated for truth is construed non-normatively. The normativity of belief, they now suggest, derives rather from considerations having to do with *transparency*: That the concept of belief includes a standard of correctness provides the best explanation of the fact that the deliberative question *whether to believe that p* is transparent to the question *whether p*. On their view, thus, the concept of belief “is that of a cognition that is governed, both normatively and descriptively, by the standard of truth” (499). See Steglich-Petersen 2006 for critical discussion.

³⁵ Cf. Hattiangadi and Bykvist 2007, 280. As they point out, we must distinguish between ‘*S* ought not to believe *p*’ and ‘it is not the case that *S* ought to believe *p*’.

³⁶ Wedgwood 2002, 273.

³⁷ Notice that more would have to be said about the conditional involved in N2*. Presumably, it must be stronger than a material conditional; otherwise, for any *p* that we in fact do not consider, not only N2* would hold, but also

(N2**) If one considers whether *p*, then one ought to believe *p* iff *p* is false, as well as many other conditionals of this form.

N2*, in contrast with N1, does seem to tell one what to do, given that one considers whether p , and yet the principle that 'ought' implies 'can' is respected - if one can consider whether p , the thought is, one is also able to believe p .³⁸

However, this gives rise to a different problem concerning guidance, one that applies to all 'truth norms', independently of what form they take (be it N1, N2, or N2*). These norms, as noted by Boghossian, are 'objective norms' in the sense that it may not be transparent how to obey them.³⁹ N1 therefore differs from subjective norms such as N3:

(N3) Believe only that which is supported by the evidence.

N3 unlike N1 is transparent but, Boghossian argues, this is not in itself an objection to N1, since objective norms are norms as well (his example is 'buy low and sell high'). Boghossian is of course quite right to suggest that there are objective norms and that these can guide our actions. In the case of the 'truth norms', however, there is a special difficulty concerning guidance.

A guiding rule tells the subject what to do under certain circumstances C ('Do X when in C '). What is distinctive of an objective rule, in Boghossian's sense, is that it may not be transparent to the subject whether C obtains (whether, for instance, the market is at a low). This, in turn, is not an obstacle to guidance – it just means that the subject may believe that she does the right thing (she believes that C obtains) when she does not. Trouble arises, however, in the case of the truth norms since condition C , in this case, refers to the truth of a proposition. For instance, in order to follow N2*, the subject has to have a belief about whether or not p is true: If S considers whether p and comes to form the belief that p is true

³⁸ Hattiangadi and Bykvist argue that Wedgwood's proposal fails precisely because there are propositions that one may consider but which are not truly believable (such as the proposition *it is raining and nobody believes that it is raining*). Hence, they argue, Wedgwood's proposal violates a related principle, the principle that 'ought' implies 'can satisfy' (2007, 281).

³⁹ Boghossian 2003, 38.

then N2* gives her reason to conclude that she ought to believe that p . In other words, N2* tells her that if she believes that p , she ought to believe that p . It is rather obvious that no guidance can be had from this. If, instead, S considers whether p and she forms the belief that *not* p , N2* gives her reason to conclude that it is not the case that she ought to believe that p . This, clearly, does not give her any reason to revise her belief that *not* p . Hence, there cannot be truth-norms (of whatever form) that serve to guide our belief formation.⁴⁰

One response to these difficulties might be that the fault lies with the idea that truth-norms guide *by themselves*. Rather, it could be argued, a norm such as N1 has to be supplemented by subjective epistemic norms, or ‘rules of rationality’, such as N3. Thus, N1 guides, but mediately, *via* these subjective norms.⁴¹ Now, *prima facie*, these ‘epistemic norms’ are more plausible candidates for guiding rules. However, it should be clear, the *truth-norms* cannot be defended by appealing to epistemic norms, such as N3, since the truth-norms and the epistemic norms imply two *different notions of correctness*. I might believe that which is false, but on excellent grounds. Conversely, I might believe what is true on flimsy grounds.⁴² In both cases N1 (for instance) and N3 deliver different verdicts as to the correctness of my belief. The normativist’s goal, again, is to show that believing what is false is incorrect. But subjective rules such as N3 give no support for this conclusion, since the notion of incorrectness implied by N3 does not coincide with that of falsity. Of course, there is good reason to believe that there is a connection between truth (in the actual world) and the ‘epistemic norms’: Normally, following the epistemic norms will lead to truth. For instance, I am more likely to end up with true beliefs if I believe that which I have evidence for, than if I believe that which I do not have evidence for. But this connection is purely contingent,

⁴⁰ Thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting important clarifications here.

⁴¹ See for instance Boghossian 2003, 39, Shah 2003, 471 and Wedgwood 2002, 282.

⁴² See Fumerton 2001, 54-55, for a discussion of this.

whereas what is needed here is a constitutive, or metaphysical, connection such that it can be held that being guided by the objective norm just *is* being guided by the subjective norms.

The fact that belief is essentially directed at truth, therefore, cannot be employed to support the normativity of belief thesis. Boghossian's suggestion that there is an essential difference in this respect between the linguistic version and the mentalistic version of the normativity thesis fails. Having a false belief does not imply that one has failed to do what one ought to do, anymore than saying something false does.

1.3 Belief and the rules of rationality

The considerations of the previous section not only show that the second step in the argument for CE normativism (that we cannot account for content other than via belief) is disputable, but also that the first step (the normativity of belief thesis) is highly questionable. To support the claim that belief is normative a different strategy is required. A natural proposal might be that the 'rules' of rationality mentioned above, such as N3, are essential to belief and that, in this rather different sense, belief is normative. It is simply a mistake, it might be held, to try to derive the normativity of belief from truth, instead we have to look to the connection between belief and rationality. The rules of rationality concern how we *ought* to reason, and hence support the CE normativist claim that if one believes that *p* certain oughts follow immediately (for instance, that one ought not to believe *not p*).

Now, one worry that is often voiced concerning the idea that belief formation is guided by the 'rules' of rationality concerns doxastic voluntarism. That is, given that ought implies can, the idea that there are certain things we ought to believe presupposes that we have control over what we believe. However, as often pointed out, the kind of control we have is at best

indirect.⁴³ Belief just does not seem to have the characteristic voluntariness required for something that is subject to rules. We cannot “believe at will”, as Bernard Williams puts it; if you are aware that the evidence decisively points to the gardener’s being the murderer you cannot just decide not to believe that.⁴⁴

The extent to which we can control our beliefs is of course much debated. However, we shall not try to settle that issue here. Instead, we shall suggest, the issue of voluntarism is a bit of a red herring, since the problems concerning belief being guided by the rules of rationality lie deeper and are independent of the ‘control’-issue.

To bring this out, consider one common response to the voluntarism objection: that it overlooks the *constitutive nature* of the rules in question. Indeed, it is suggested, this constitutive nature explains why we cannot believe at will. Mistakes notwithstanding, a believer always has to try to follow the rules in question in order to be a believer at all. Just as you cannot play chess other than by following the rules of chess, you cannot be a believer other than by following the rules of rationality.⁴⁵ Now, the claim that the ‘rules’ of rationality are constitutive of belief is far from clear and precise. As found in the literature, there seem to be at least three important ideas connected with it. The most basic idea is that a rule *R* is constitutive of performances of kind *P* if such performances, in some sense, would not be possible without *R*.⁴⁶ In this basic sense, constitutive rules do not have to be prescriptions, however.⁴⁷ But that is what we are interested in here: CE norms capable of guiding the

⁴³ See for instance Alston 1986.

⁴⁴ Williams 1973. Williams’s claim is that the impossibility of believing at will is constitutive of belief. Some argue, instead, that the impossibility of believing at will is not constitutive, but a contingent feature of our psychology. See for instance Broome 2004.

⁴⁵ See for instance Feldman 2001, 88, Shah 2002, 437, and Wedgwood 2002, 268f.

⁴⁶ We find this idea, for instance, in Searle’s well-known treatment of constitutive rules in Searle 1969, chapter 2.5.

⁴⁷ In fact, one might even wonder whether prescriptions can be constitutive rules; Searle-type constitutive rules, for instance, typically have the form ‘Doing X in C counts as doing Y’. Rules of this form are not prescriptive in

performance of thinkers while being constitutive of belief as well. Accordingly, a second and third idea are in play when it comes to the ‘rules’ of rationality and the analogy with the rules of games. The second one concerns motivation: To be a believer, you need to try to follow the ‘rules’ of rationality. That is, you need to have a normative attitude towards these rules, and be motivated by them. And the third idea concerns your success: Believers not only need to try to follow the ‘rules’ of rationality, they also, by and large and in the most basic cases at least, need to *succeed*. To be a believer, that is, your beliefs, by and large, need to actually instantiate the ‘rules’ of rationality.

However, rather than support the normativity of belief, each of these further ideas, by itself, in fact spells trouble for it. If we take seriously the idea that believers need to have a normative attitude towards the ‘rules’ of rationality, the analogy with games turns out to be misleading. Whatever the merits of Wittgenstein’s game analogy in general, having beliefs or thoughts with content is not like playing chess in at least this, in this context decisive, respect: A subject can *decide* to play chess, that is, to follow the rules of chess in order to play a game of chess. Or she can decide to do something else instead. But if the ‘rules’ of rationality are constitutive of having any beliefs, any thoughts at all, no one can *decide* to follow the ‘rules’ of rationality in order to be a thinking creature.⁴⁸ Likewise, no-one can decide to do something else instead. By and large, accordance with the ‘rules’ of rationality might well be a condition of having any beliefs, but not something we can be *motivated* or *try* to achieve.⁴⁹

character; as Searle himself points out, they cannot be violated (1969, 41). It seems fairly obvious, however, that some of the rules constitutive of games such as ice-hockey, for instance, are both prescriptive in character, and can be violated. For a relevant alternative treatment of constitutive rules, see Glüer and Pagin 1999.

⁴⁸ Shah 2002 suggests that the sense in which the constitutivity of rationality renders belief involuntary is innocuous (since all practices have constitutive elements) and cannot pose any difficulty for deontologism. In this Shah is inspired by the account of normativity in Korsgaard 1996. However, Shah’s suggestion ignores the essential difference that we are stressing here between ‘the practice of reasoning’ and other practices.

⁴⁹ Cf. Glüer 2000, 2001. See also Kolodny 2005 where it is argued that rationality is only apparently normative since we cannot have reasons to be rational.

Now, you might think that this is not as devastating a problem as it seems to be. Even though we might not be able to decide to follow the ‘rules’ of rationality *in order to be believers*, we might nevertheless be motivated by them. We might, that is, have a normative attitude towards these rules, and consequently try to follow them, even though we cannot do this *with the aim of being believers or for the reason of wanting to be believers*. But that only means that we cannot have any *further* reasons for being motivated by these rules, not that we cannot be motivated by them at all. The required attitude itself is, so to speak, necessarily ‘blind’ or ‘brute’: It just needs to be there. But this reply misses the depth of the difficulty. The issue of further reasons is, in fact, irrelevant here. If the ‘rules’ of rationality are constitutive of thought in general, no-one can decide to follow, or be motivated by, these ‘rules’ – be it with or without further reasons. A creature without thoughts cannot decide to do anything. Nor can it try or be motivated to do anything. And for a creature that already has thoughts there is no longer any need to be motivated, be it ever so blindly, by the ‘rules’ of rationality.

If, therefore, we take seriously the idea that the ‘rules’ of rationality are essential to belief, there is good reason not to regard them as norms that we can be motivated to follow. The ‘rules’ of rationality, if constitutive of belief, cannot guide belief formation; this is a simple and direct consequence of trying to conceive of these very rules as prescriptive and constitutive at the same time. When it comes to the ‘rules’ of rationality, these two ideas simply do not go together. The essential link between rationality and belief thus cannot be used to defend the idea that the ‘rules’ of rationality are rules in anything like the sense we are interested in: prescriptions capable of guiding an activity or performance of a certain kind. Moreover, this is so quite independently of whether we have voluntary control over our beliefs.

It should also be noted that the point just made is independent of the issue we shall raise next. So far, no controversial assumptions about the degree to which believers actually need to be rational have been made. However, for those who, like us, *do* find it plausible that a certain degree of basic rationality is necessary for having any beliefs at all, there is an additional difficulty. Quite independently of the issue of guiding or motivation, this idea spells trouble for the normativity of belief.

This further point can be put in terms of the notion of *internal relations*.⁵⁰ The idea is that beliefs stand in basic internal relations to one another, such that being a believer requires that certain general patterns of very basic rationality are instantiated by one's beliefs.⁵¹ However, to say that beliefs stand in various internal relations to one another is not to say that these connections are *normative*.⁵² On the contrary, there is a clear sense in which states or performances that are internally related *cannot* stand in normative relations. To illustrate this, let us for a moment simplify considerably and examine an isolated example: Assume that there in fact is an internal relation between the beliefs that *p* and that *if p then q* on the one hand, and the belief that *q* on the other. Then, the claim is, it is *not* the case that a subject who believes that *p*, and believes that *if p then q*, ought to believe that *q*.

This result depends on two things: For one, we are still concerned with *content-engendered* norms, not content-determining norms. For present purposes, it does not matter

⁵⁰ The following discussion concerning the alleged normativity of internal relations was much sharpened as a result of comments from an anonymous referee, for which we are grateful.

⁵¹ These claims are inspired by Davidson, of course. Without the most basic rational connections in place it remains completely unclear which, if any, beliefs a subject has, according to Davidson (cf. for instance Davidson 1991, 211). We basically agree, but we are not going to argue for the requirement of basic rationality here. Note, however, that this requirement would go quite some way towards distinguishing belief from the other cognitive attitudes; clearly, there is no requirement of basic rationality on one's imaginings or entertainings.

⁵² The conflation of normative relations and internal relations goes back to Kripke 1982, p. 37. We discuss this in Glüer 1999a, 133ff, 2000, 2001 and Wikforss 2001.

how the contents in question are determined.⁵³ In particular, it does not matter what your account of content determination for the logical constants is. For all we care here, their contents might be determined by the ‘rules’ of inference, for instance, by their introduction and elimination rules. Equally, it does not matter what your particular *semantics* for the logical constants is. For all we care here, their semantics might be proof-theoretic rather than model-theoretic. So, whatever the correct semantics of the logical constants, the claim is that *if* there is an internal relation between, for instance, the belief that *p*, the belief that *if p then q* and the belief that *q*, then it is *not* the case that a subject who believes that *p*, and believes that *if p then q*, ought to believe that *q*.

The only other idea this result depends on is an intuitively very plausible claim about oughts: Oughts not only imply cans, they also imply the possibility of *violation*, of what we could call ‘forbidden combinations’.⁵⁴ In the example, what is supposed to be forbidden is this combination: believing that *p* and that *if p then q*, and not believing that *q*. But this is precisely what is impossible if the relation between believing that *p* and that *if p then q* and believing that *q* is internal.

As long as things are kept this simple, the point is completely clear, it seems to us. Unfortunately, real life is much more messy than this. People *are* capable of all sorts of rather basic irrationalities; they do make quite simple logical mistakes, they fail to draw the conclusions they have the strongest evidence for, and quite often, they simply fail to ‘put two and two together’. Not even to mention mistakes when it comes to very complicated

⁵³ The result that the internal relations in question cannot be CE-normative will, however, quite seriously reduce the prospects of CD-normativism; see below. What is important at this point is that our argument does not *presuppose* the falsity of any particular kind of CD-normativism.

⁵⁴ That forbidden combinations need to be *possible* for the notion of prescriptivity to get any grip, or to have any point, is also stressed by Williamson in his defense of the (normative) knowledge account of assertion; cf. Williamson 2000, 241. Nevertheless, the principle that ought implies the possibility of violation, although intuitive, might be disputed, just as the principle that ought implies can has been. As long as the normativity of content is supposed to be a very strongly intuitive claim, however, having to reject any one of these very intuitive principles would seem too high a price to pay.

inferences or terribly involved logical truths. And one might think that if such irrationality is possible, then so are the forbidden combinations required for prescriptivity. This, however, would be a mistake.

We by not means mean to deny that even if I (fully) believe that p and that *if p , then q* , I can fail to draw any conclusions from this, whether as a result of lack of attention, compartmentalization, extreme tiredness, or what have you. But this is not enough to establish the possibility of forbidden combinations required for prescriptivity. There are basically two reasons for this. One of them focuses on the possibility of forbidden combinations simpliciter, the other on the kind of forbidden combinations that are *required by prescriptivity*. The former starts from the observation that even if pretty basic irrationality is possible, it does not follow that the irrationality of a believer at a time is potentially limitless. That is, the claim that belief-systems necessarily show a basic rationality is not falsified by this. To put this in terms of internal relations again: From the possibility of pretty basic irrationality, it does not follow that there are no relevant internal relations in the vicinity. These might just be a bit more complicated than so far assumed. Thus, there might be further conditions such that a subject fulfilling them, and believing that p and that *if p then q* , cannot fail to believe that q .⁵⁵

That there in fact are such conditions is very plausible even if definitive lists might prove elusive. After all, the question whether to believe q is simply settled once I am completely awake, fully aware of all the relevant beliefs at the same time and give it all my attention – provided, at least, that the relevant beliefs are not too numerous or too complicated. No prescription is required to establish the connection, and no prescription can be violated.

⁵⁵ The point is not, of course, that a subject S believing that p and that *if p then q* invariably has good reason to believe that q . In this situation, S might have better reason to give up the belief that p , for instance. What we are concerned with is the outcome of the relevant process of belief revision (under certain further conditions): If S still believes that p , and that *if p then q* , then S will also believe that q .

But, you might feel like objecting at this point, are there not cases where all these conditions are fulfilled, and yet, the person forms an irrational belief?⁵⁶ We all know cases of *practical* akrasia, cases like that of the smoker who assesses and weighs his evidence, desires, and values and comes to the conclusion that he ought to stop smoking, but does not.⁵⁷ Are there not cases that could be described as cases of a kind of ‘theoretical akrasia’, where the subject is fully aware that all the evidence overwhelmingly points in the direction of a certain conclusion, their loved one’s death, for instance, and they still do not believe it?

Unlike cases of practical akrasia, cases that *prima facie* lend themselves to the description ‘theoretical akrasia’ are extreme cases. Not only are they rare, they also invariably involve a subject in an extreme psychological situation, for instance, a situation of immense emotional significance. Again, we do not mean to deny that such things, occasionally, do happen. Yet, to pose a problem for us, the relevant cases have to be described in ways that seem entirely inappropriate: To pose a problem for us, their subjects have to be portrayed as clear-headedly assessing and correctly weighing their evidence.⁵⁸ But the key to this kind of theoretical irrationality lies in the extreme psychological situations it requires, and their deeply disturbing effects on a subject’s cognitive faculties. These have to be either left out, or implausibly restricted to the rather superficial, and oddly selective, blocking of the last step of belief formation to generate problem cases for us. Therefore, we conclude that there are no such cases that are not better described as, for instance, cases of not correctly assessing or

⁵⁶ We are indebted to our editor at *Mind* for prompting the following discussion.

⁵⁷ There is a rather general consensus that in genuine cases of akrasia the agent is not forced to act as he in fact does. To be on the safe side, let us therefore assume that our smoker is not addicted to nicotine, or at least not so much that he cannot stop smoking.

⁵⁸ Note, too, that the analogy with practical akrasia would be far from perfect even if this condition were fulfilled. In cases of practical akrasia, the subject does draw the correct conclusion, the conclusion that, all things considered, he ought to stop smoking. The irrationality here is essentially practical: It lies entirely in not acting on that conclusion. To pose a problem for us, however, the ‘theoretical akratic’ needs to be one who does *not* draw the correct conclusion, does *not* form the correct belief.

weighing the evidence (and thus not (fully) believing the premises) or repressing the belief in the conclusion.

The second reason why (limited) irrationality does not suffice to establish the possibility of forbidden combinations *required by prescriptivity* is this: Considerations having to do with whether those who are subject to a prescription are awake, under the sway of powerful emotions, or pay full attention in any case seem quite irrelevant to the validity of the principle that ought implies the possibility of violation or forbidden combinations. The same holds for considerations of some sort of ‘cognitive overload’, i.e. considerations to do with the number and intricacy of the states involved. If a putative prescription can *only* be violated under ‘mitigating circumstances’ like these, the forbidden combinations thus realized would therefore not be of the right kind, the kind required by prescriptivity. This is very clear when considering uncontroversial cases of prescriptions, for instance the prescription that forbids resting your elbows on the table while dining in company. Would we think such a prescription was in force for us if we could ‘violate’ it only when half asleep or not paying any attention to what we are doing? Quite clearly not. And the same holds for any putative prescription to the effect that subjects believing that p and that *if p then q* ought to believe that q . Assume that there is such a prescription. The principle that ought implies the possibility of violation requires that it could be violated even by a calm, fully awake subject with rather simple states of mind. But it cannot. As long as we are concerned with CE norms, the normativity of belief thesis therefore cannot be supported by the claim that the ‘rules’ of rationality are constitutive of belief. Rules constitutive of belief cannot motivate or guide belief formation. That was our first point. This is so quite independently from the assumption that a basic rationality is essential to belief, the assumption on which our second point is based. This assumption makes good the idea that there is an essential connection between

content and belief, but precisely because of this, it fails to underwrite the normativity thesis: The very idea that content attributions have to respect the basic standards of rationality, implies that these standards cannot be taken to be prescriptive. That intentional creatures by and large do accord with the basic standards of rationality is, on this view, a condition of their being intentional creatures, a condition of being able to follow and accept norms, not something prescribed to already intentional creatures.

In a way, we could rest our case here. If the constitutive nature of the basic relations between our beliefs precludes these relations from being prescriptive, then that holds independently of whether these prescriptions are conceived of as CE or CD norms. CD normativism holds that content is essentially determined by norms or rules. A good candidate for CD norms would, again, be the ‘rules’ of rationality. But if there cannot be a prescription that a subject who, say, believes that p and that *if p then q* ought to believe that q , then there cannot be such a prescription – regardless of whether it is supposed to merely be *engendered* by the first two beliefs having those contents, or supposed to (partly) *determine* these very contents. As long as CD rules are conceived of as rules governing belief, and we shall soon see that they usually are, constitutivity and prescriptivity simply do not go together.

However, we would like to take a different tack. No matter how the relevant constitutivity claim is interpreted, it will be somewhat controversial. This already holds for the claim that a normative attitude towards these ‘rules’ is necessary for belief, but it holds of course dramatically more so for the assumption that basic rationality is essential to belief. Fortunately, we do not have to rely on any of these controversial assumptions. There are serious problems with the claim that reasoning is essentially rule guided that are completely independent of the claim that the ‘rules’ of rationality are constitutive of belief. We shall spell

these out in the second part of our paper, where we shall primarily be concerned with CD normativism.

2. Content determining norms

CD normativism has it that, as Gibbard once put it, “what I’m thinking is a matter of the rules I am following in my thinking”.⁵⁹ There is content *because* there are CD norms that govern thinking.

Candidates typically given for such CD rules are the rules of rationality mentioned above. These include not just N3, but rules of inference such as *modus ponens* or the ‘rule’ that, in the absence of background belief to the effect that the senses are not to be trusted in the given situation, a belief that *p* is to be formed on the basis of a perceptual experience as of *p*. They can also be ‘rules’ such as the law of non-contradiction,⁶⁰ or involve practical inference as well as theoretical.⁶¹ Or, they can be rules governing any kind of material implication, governing whatever a thinker might be ‘committed’ and ‘entitled’ to hold by holding a particular content to be true.⁶² In any case, typical candidates for content determining rules are rules governing (rational) *reasoning*, be it theoretical or practical. These are rules governing the *attitudes* (rational) reasoners take to contents. In what follows, we shall concentrate on rules for *belief*, but as far as we can see, the problems we point out apply equally to rules for practical reasoning. Nor do any of the problems we are going to consider depend on the

⁵⁹ Gibbard 2003, 86.

⁶⁰ Cf. e.g. Boghossian 2005, Gibbard 2003.

⁶¹ Cf. Wedgwood 1999.

⁶² Cf. esp. Brandom 1994.

particular kind of rules suggested; they are perfectly general problems arising for any kind of CD rules for belief.⁶³

Before we start, however, we need to get a little clearer on the position that we will be attacking. What exactly is it that rules or norms are supposed to do according to CD normativism? As we see it, there are two basic readings in play here. On the weaker reading of CD normativism, it simply is an answer to the foundational question of content determination. That is, on this reading, CD normativism does not provide an answer to the question *what content is*, but merely to the question *in virtue of what* thoughts have the contents they in fact have. On this reading, to adopt CD normativism is *not* (automatically) to adopt an inferential role semantics. The semantics of the thought constituents concerned can be whatever you think it should be; all that is claimed by our normativist is that *which* semantics a particular thought constituent has depends on the set of rules governing reasoning with it. Thus, a particular constituent might be a logical constant with a certain truth-functional semantics because reasoning with it is governed by certain rules of inference. On this reading of CD normativism, it is essential to *belief* that reasoning be governed by CD-rules, but not of content itself.

On the stronger reading, however, CD normativism claims to provide an answer not only to the foundational question, but also to the question *what content is*. On this reading, content *consists in* or is *constituted by* being governed by particular rules of reasoning. On this reading, CD normativism does amount to adopting an inferential role semantics for the

⁶³ For example, nothing we say depends on identifying the CD rules with the ‘epistemic rules’ or the ‘rules of rationality’. Nor on the assumption that these rules involve ‘oughts’, i.e. are prescriptive in character. On the assumption that CD rules are supposed to *guide* our reasoning (in some sense), our arguments can easily be adapted to, say, Searle-type constitutive rules, rules of the paradigmatic form ‘Doing *X* in *C* counts as doing *Y*’ (cf. Searle 1969). For more on constitutive rules and action-guiding, see Glüer and Pagin 1999. For simplicity’s sake, we shall continue to exclusively be concerned with prescriptions in what follows.

contents in question.⁶⁴ Brandom, for instance, adopts a CD normativism of this kind across the board, that is, for all kinds of thoughts. Here, being governed by CD rules is essential to *both belief and content*.⁶⁵

In what follows, we shall concentrate on problems that ensue for CD normativism in general, that is, independently of which version of it is adopted. What all versions of CD normativism have in common is the following claim:

(CD) The content of a subject *S*'s thoughts is determined by the rules governing *S*'s reasoning.

We are going to suggest that there *cannot be such rules*. CD normativism's distinctive combination of prescriptivity and content determination ultimately leads to a dilemma. A version of what we shall call the '*dilemma of regress and idleness*' was first pointed out by Quine in his classical attack on Carnap's conventionalist account of the meanings of the logical constants in *Truth by Convention*. If such conventionalism does not lead into a vicious regress, Quine argued, it threatens to remain an idle label.⁶⁶ This is precisely the situation facing present-day CD normativism – it either leads into (some form of) infinite regress of rules, or remains a perfectly idle label. Or so we shall argue in the remainder of this paper.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ On the assumption, that is, that the rules in question are rules of inference.

⁶⁵ Another question concerns the *validity* or *force* of CD rules. In virtue of what do they govern reasoning? In particular, are they, in some sense, *of our own making*? We shall have occasion to come back to this question at the end of the paper.

⁶⁶ Cf. Quine 1935. To be sure, meaning conventionalism leads to a regress of conventions, not of rules, but nothing here depends on whatever it exactly is that distinguishes a convention from a rule.

⁶⁷ For more on the relevance of "Truth by Convention" for meaning or content normativism see Glüer 2002, and for implicit definition accounts of meaning see Glüer 2003.

2.1 Regresses of rule-following

What does being ‘governed’ by a rule R in one’s reasoning require? Clearly, it does not require that every single thought or inference be in accordance with R . Nor is mere being in accordance with R sufficient for following R . Not even on a regular basis; no matter whether we are concerned with rules for action or rules for reasoning, a distinction between *merely regular* performance and *rule-following* is essential in this context. *This* is the significant difference on which, we claim, CD normativism ultimately falters.

Intuitively, what is required for following a rule R is that the performances in question can be explained by reference to R . This explanation is available because S herself takes a certain attitude to R : S , if you will, accepts a commitment to conform her behavior to R .⁶⁸ On a very natural reading, this simply means that R plays a role in the motivation S has for what she does. However, on a perfectly ordinary understanding of what it is to be motivated, these intuitions make it impossible for belief to be rule-governed.

The motivational impotence of the ‘rules’ of rationality can be brought out in terms of *practical reasoning*. Assume that S is motivated by a rule R in forming a belief B . On a widely accepted view about motivation, this means that S ’s forming of B can be at least partially explained in terms of the role R plays in S ’s practical reasoning. This is, of course, not to say that S has to run through any conscious practical inferences in forming B . However, for it to be plausible that S was in fact motivated by R , a reasons-explanation of S ’s forming of B has to be available. Whatever exactly our model of practical reasoning for rule-following is,⁶⁹ in order to be motivated by R , S needs to have a pro-attitude towards what is in

⁶⁸ Cf. Boghossian 2005, 187.

⁶⁹ In Glüer and Pagin 1999 such a model is suggested.

accordance with *R*. An instance of such reasoning would, therefore, minimally involve something like the following practical inference:

(P₁) I want to believe what is in accordance with *R*.

(P₂) To believe that *p* is in accordance with *R*.

(C) I want to believe that *p*.⁷⁰

The trouble is that such an inference necessarily involves *another belief*, in this case the belief *that to believe that p is in accordance with R*. No matter what your preferred model is, whether it is the standard belief-desire model or some modification of it, there simply is no practical reasoning without a ‘doxastic slot’ of this kind. According to CD normativism, the belief taking that slot itself has to be motivated by a rule, that is, has to be explainable by yet another practical inference. Which in turn would have a doxastic slot of the kind in question. Thus, belief formation motivated by rules turns out to be impossible; a vicious regress ensues.⁷¹

Let us call this regress of rules the *regress of motivations*. Note that this particular regress does not yet even involve the idea that the rules in question are CD rules. It depends on nothing more than the idea that rule-governed performances can be explained in terms of the subject’s attitudes in combination with the idea that belief formation in general is rule-governed. The regress of motivations thus poses a fundamental problem for *the very idea of general rules for reasoning*, be they epistemic rules, or whatever. Thus, the regress of motivations poses a fundamental problem not only for CD normativism and normative epistemology, but for CE normativism as well. This is one more reason to think that not even

⁷⁰ Note that we do not here require that *S* wants to believe what is in accordance with *R* *because* it is in accordance with *R*. All that is required to start the regress we are after is a pro-attitude towards what happens to be in accordance with *R*, no matter how this pro-attitude itself is motivated or even under which description *S* thinks of what, in fact, is in accordance with *R*. Thanks to Adam Green for prompting this clarification.

⁷¹ This regress is, of course, reminiscent of the Carroll regress presented in Carroll 1895. Carroll’s point, too, is similar to ours, even though made in terms of theoretical reasoning, not practical: On pain of regress, the ‘rules’ of logic cannot themselves figure as further premises in our reasoning.

norms like N3 above can be motivating belief. As we see it, this is another serious problem underlying the issue of doxastic voluntarism, a problem, moreover, that is completely independent both of the amount of control we have over our beliefs and the question whether a basic rationality is constitutive of belief. The regress of motivations would arise even if we were free to believe at will. Actions, on the other hand, simply do not have any such problem; consequently, what the regress of motivations shows is why beliefs cannot be subject to guidance by rules the way actions can.⁷²

When it comes to CD normativism, the situation is even more problematic. Once we take into account that the rules in question are supposed to be CD rules, yet another regress problem arises. As we said, all CD normativists are committed to the following:

(CD) The content of a subject *S*'s thoughts is determined by the rules governing *S*'s reasoning.

This holds for *S*'s beliefs quite as well as for any other of *S*'s intentional states, including *S*'s intentions and other pro-attitudes. Thus, already the requirement of a pro-attitude toward what is in accordance with a rule *R* clearly leads into a rule-regress for CD normativism. Let us call this the *regress of contents*. Its moral is the following: CD normativism cannot, on pain of vicious regress, construe *any kind of intentional mental state* as a condition on rule-following.

Boghossian repeatedly points out how a version of this *regress of contents* is generated for adherents of CD normativism if an *intention* to conform to *R* is required for following *R*.⁷³

⁷² David Owens makes a related point. Belief motivations, or aims, do not interact with other aims or motivations in the way ordinary motivations or aims do. It is, for example, never rational to believe a contradiction – be the reward you are offered for doing so ever so valuable. But, Owens asks, if ‘motivation’ here is not to be understood in the ordinary sense, what does it amount to? He concludes that these notions remain perfectly idle as long as no explication of the relevant non-ordinary ‘motivation’ is forthcoming (cf. 2003, esp. 295f).

⁷³ Cf. Boghossian 1989, 517, Boghossian 2005, 187f and 193ff. The argument is also made use of in Glüer 1999a, esp. ch. 6. In Glüer 2002, it is argued in some detail that Baker and Hacker’s Wittgenstein would in fact fall prey to precisely such a regress of contents.

Boghossian used to say that mental content is not rule determined. He subsequently changed his mind, however: “I am now inclined to think that the correct issue about rule-following is: How could we be said to operate according to certain rules – especially according to certain epistemic rules – given that we could not be said to have accepted those rules by forming the *intention* to conform to them”.⁷⁴ What Boghossian is perfectly right about is that there is a stark choice to be made: The regress of contents forces us either to give up CD normativism or to accept that there is rule-following that does not require any kind of prior intentional state. There are no other options. And given how overwhelmingly intuitive the idea of an intentional condition on rule-following is, for the determined CD normativist, the choice might well seem to be between Scylla and Charybdis. For how could there even be any distinction between following a rule *R* and merely regularly according with *R*, if the intentional condition goes by the board?⁷⁵

It might be thought that Wittgenstein's well-known rule-following considerations provide a way out. After all, Wittgenstein also considers a regress argument, and he seems to suggest that the regress can be stopped by appealing to the notion of a practice. Thus, in response to the paradoxical conclusion that no course of action could be determined by a rule, Wittgenstein famously writes: “What this shews is that there is a way of grasping a rule which

⁷⁴ Boghossian 2005, 196.

⁷⁵ Indeed, in an even more recent, so far unpublished paper, Boghossian argues that considerations like the preceding ones land us in something like an “antinomy of pure reason: we both must – and cannot – make sense of someone’s following a rule” (Boghossian 2008, 2). *Pace* his own earlier self, he now argues that this is not anything specifically to do with meaning or content; rather, the antinomy is supposed to arise for the very possibility of rule-following in general. More precisely, it is supposed to arise from the combination of the intentional condition on rule-following with the claim that “inference involves following a rule”, a claim that Boghossian holds to be “analytic of the very idea of deductive inference” (ibid., 17). We do not share the intuition here, either; according to us, it is no conceptual truth that inference is normative. For us, the choice thus remains between CD norms and the intentional condition, and it remains easy: It is the CD norms that have to go. Moreover, it *is* the idea that there are rules determining meaning or content that is the root of all our troubles here.

is *not* an *interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call 'obeying the rule' and 'going against it' in actual cases.”⁷⁶

It should be clear, however, that Wittgenstein’s regress is distinct from either of the regresses discussed here, the regress of motivations and the regress of contents. The regress Wittgenstein discusses is one of *interpretations*, where an interpretation is understood as “the substitution of one expression of the rule for another”.⁷⁷ Arguably, the question that preoccupies him in paragraphs 185-202 of the *Investigations* is meaning determination. Wittgenstein takes meanings to be similar to rules in that the meaning of a term determines its correct application in much the same way that a rule determines a certain set of actions as being in accordance with it. The question, then, is in virtue of what a given sign (such as '+') expresses a certain meaning, a certain rule; i.e. what are the facts that determine that a certain application of the term is correct/incorrect? It is natural, Wittgenstein suggests, to think that the sign is given a meaning by being given an interpretation. However, this immediately leads to a regress since whatever it is that provides the supposed interpretation is just another sign (such as a mental image) and hence stands in equal need of interpretation. By appealing to the notion of a practice, Wittgenstein suggests that the regress can be stopped if we take meaning not to be determined by interpretations (further signs) but by the *use* of language, by our practice of applying the terms.

It is obviously contentious how to understand Wittgenstein’s positive proposal and what exactly he might have meant by a practice. However this may be, it should be clear that the notion of a practice (even one involving correcting others and standing corrected) cannot solve the problem that confronts us here. A practice, after all, is a regularity in behavior

⁷⁶ Wittgenstein, PI 201-202.

⁷⁷ PI 202. The notion of an expression employed here is wide enough to encompass not only linguistic expressions but also things like mental images or phenomenal qualities.

(social or individual) and this notion cannot be employed to secure the distinction between merely acting in accordance with a rule, acting in regular ways, and being guided by a rule. If the notion of a practice is to do any work in Wittgenstein's discussion, therefore, it must be in a different context: on our view, in the context of the question concerning meaning determination.⁷⁸

It is sometimes suggested, instead, that what Wittgenstein really teaches us is a form of *quietism* concerning rule-following: We follow the rule 'blindly', without intentionally conforming to it and yet we are genuinely guided. The mistake is the assumption that something informative can be said about the conditions that separate genuine rule-following from mere regularities.⁷⁹ However, leaving aside whether quietism can ever be a satisfying response to a philosophical query, it should strike one as obviously unsatisfactory in this context. After all, it seems quite clear that something very informative *can* be said about the distinction; in all 'normal', everyday contexts, whether something is genuine rule-following seems to turn exactly on an intentional condition. That there is such a condition, we might say, is essential to our pre-theoretic, everyday conception of rule-following. The trouble starts precisely when it comes to CD norms, to rules supposed to determine meaning and content in the first place. But then, such trouble should not really come as a surprise here: Thinking of CD norms as genuine rules seems to require giving up on what intuitively is *the* essential

⁷⁸ Kripke (1982) also reads Wittgenstein as being concerned with the question of meaning determination, although he suggests Wittgenstein's conclusion to be a skeptical one: there are no meaning determining facts. Along with many other interpreters, we take this to be an implausible interpretation of Wittgenstein's remarks. Unlike many others, however, we take one of Wittgenstein's central points to be precisely that rules are *not* among the meaning determining facts. This is arguably the very point of appealing to the notion of a practice, a linguistic regularity. For this non-normativist reading of Wittgenstein see Glüer 1999a, 168ff; Glüer and Wikforss 2008.

⁷⁹ Someone who early on may have seen the impossibility of having an intentional condition on CD norms was McDowell. In 1984, he wrote: "It is important, also, not to falsify the connection between the patterns and meaningfulness – for instance, by suggesting that the idea is that making sense depends on conforming to the appropriate commitments" (359, fn. 3) McDowell's conclusion, however, is not that CD normativism should be rejected; rather, he adopts quietism about the conditions on rule-following (cf. McDowell 1992).

characteristic of rule-following. In such a situation, where the characteristic intuitively essential to a phenomenon needs to be given up precisely for the sake of some controversial instance, adopting quietism clearly is too desperate to be an option; if nothing else can be said about the difference between genuine rule-following and mere regularity, what reason could there possibly be for believing that we have *not* reduced the notion of a CD norm to an idle label?

2.2 Implicit rules and yet another regress

A very common reaction to Quine's original regress, a regress of linguistic conventions, is that it can easily be avoided by 'going implicit'. The regress, it is often held,⁸⁰ arises only if we think that conventions need to be explicitly formulated, and the same is taken to hold for rules in general. "Surely", Boghossian writes, "it isn't compulsory to think of someone's following a rule *R* with respect to an expression *e* as consisting in his *explicitly stating* that rule in so many words in the way that Quine's argument presupposes. On the contrary, it seems far more plausible to construe *x*'s following rule *R* with respect to *e* as consisting in some sort of fact about *x*'s *behavior* with *e*".⁸¹

Maybe so, but, and that is the point of this exercise, mere vague gesturing towards 'some sort of fact about behaviour' certainly does not get the CD normativist off the hook. That is precisely Quine's point; he freely admits that a notion of implicit convention *prima facie* fits our actual linguistic practice much better. What we must not forget, however, is that these conventions not only happen to never have been formulated, they are conventions that are *necessarily implicit*. They *cannot* even be formulated prior to adoption. "[B]ut when a

⁸⁰ For instance by Baker and Hacker: 1985, 338ff.

⁸¹ Boghossian 1996, 381.

convention is incapable of being communicated until after its adoption”, Quine says, “its role is not so clear. In dropping the attributes of deliberateness and explicitness from the notion of linguistic convention we risk depriving the latter of any explanatory force and reducing it to an idle label”.⁸² This risk is dramatically higher for the CD normativist. After all, CD normativism has to back off yet another step; it not only reckons with necessarily implicit rules, but with rules you *cannot even intend* to follow.

Still, it might be thought that the notion of an implicit rule can be rescued from idleness. Robert Brandom, for instance, has presented an elaborate attempt to account for intentional content, be it linguistic or mental, in terms of a *pragmatic phenomenalism* about norms. Phenomenalism is the claim that objective ‘deontic statuses’ are to be explained in terms of our normative attitudes. Something’s *being correct*, that is, is to be explained in terms of the attitude of *taking it to be correct*. Consequently, the norms in question are “in some sense creatures of ours”.⁸³ And precisely to avoid a fatal regress of rules, such phenomenalism needs to ‘go pragmatic’. The most basic form of norm, that is, are norms that are implicitly ‘instituted’ by our practices; “[t]he direction of explanation to be pursued here first offers an account of the practical attitude of taking something to be correct-according-to-a-practice”, he explains, “and then explains the status of being correct-according-to-a-practice by appeal to those attitudes”.⁸⁴ Brandom’s overall project has reductive ambitions, but not in any naturalistic sense. He wants to reduce the intentional to the normative, but the normative

⁸² Quine 1935, 106.

⁸³ Brandom 1994, 626. Nevertheless, it is very important for Brandom's project that he secures, and explains, the “objectivity of concepts” (1994, xvii). This explanation, he elaborates, “takes the form of a specification of the particular sort of inferential structure social scorekeeping practices must have in order to institute *objective norms*, according to which the correctness of the application of a concept answers to the fact about the object to which it is applied, in such a way that anyone (indeed, *everyone*) in the linguistic community may be wrong about it” (ibid. first emph. ours). Pragmatic phenomenalism thus clearly is not meant to imply any naive form of emotivism denying the objectivity of norms.

⁸⁴ Brandom 1994, 25.

itself, he claims, cannot be reduced to anything else. In this sense, it is “norms all the way down”.⁸⁵

But Brandom himself ultimately falls prey to the very regress he so studiously tries to avoid. This failure, we tend to think, is quite paradigmatic; it indicates that even pragmatic conceptions of rule-following do not escape the dilemma of regress and idleness.⁸⁶ Here is how Brandom construes the regress to be avoided:

Norms explicit as rules presuppose norms implicit in practices because a rule specifying how something is correctly done (how a word ought to be used, how a piano ought to be tuned) must be applied to particular circumstances, and applying a rule in particular circumstances is itself essentially something that can be done correctly or incorrectly. (...) If the regulist understanding of all norms as rules is right, then applications of a rule should themselves be understood as correct insofar as they accord with some further rule. (...) To conceive these practical proprieties of applications as themselves rule-governed is to embark on a regress.⁸⁷

In Brandom’s terminology, ‘rules’ are explicit, while ‘norms’ can be explicit or implicit. ‘Regulism’ is the claim that all norms have to be rules, that is, have to be explicit. And the regress of rules is taken to show that rules are not “the fundamental form of norm”⁸⁸. The fundamental form of norm is that implicit in a practice.

Applying an implicit norm, of course, is ‘essentially something that can be done correctly or incorrectly’, too. As we saw, such correctness, or incorrectness, is supposed to be explained in terms of the ‘practical attitude of taking something to be correct-according-to-a-practice’, in terms of *assessments* of correctness. These assessments themselves have to be

⁸⁵ Brandom 1994, 44; 625.

⁸⁶ In Glüer 2002, a number of more or less pragmatic proposals, among them those of Brandom, Baker and Hacker, and v.Savigny, are considered and it is argued that none manages to escape the dilemma. Moreover, quasi-evolutionary models of rule-governedness, initially suggested by Sellars (1954) as a way of avoiding rule regresses, and adopted by Searle (1995), among others, are shown to achieve no more than push the problem one step away.

⁸⁷ Brandom 1994, 20.

⁸⁸ Brandom 1994, 21.

practical in character, i.e. they have to be manifest in the relevant practices. Normative attitudes, the idea then is, can be manifest in practice through *sanctioning*; subjects that do not do what is deemed correct might, for instance, be beaten with sticks. But, of course, sanctioning itself is ‘essentially something that can be done correctly or incorrectly’. That is, sanctioning, and the attitudes and assessments it expresses, is itself something essentially normative. As Brandom explains, his account “incorporates a phenomenalist approach to norms, but it is a *normative* phenomenism, explaining having a certain normative status in effect as being *properly* taken to have it”.⁸⁹

The worry that there is a regress lurking here is shared by Gideon Rosen. He comments: “The account this suggests (...) is no longer even seemingly reductive. One normative status is explained in terms of another”.⁹⁰ And he continues

There is some temptation here to take refuge in regress. We have been told that [an episode] *E*’s normative status depends on the correctness of adopting a certain practical stance towards it. When it is asked what this second correctness consists in, we can repeat the move:

To say that it is correct to treat *E* as permissible (say) is to say that treating an episode of permitting *E* as correct is itself correct.⁹¹

One might thus think that what is lurking here is *not* a *vicious* regress, but just the possibility of an infinite ‘hierarchy of critical stances’.⁹² Rosen himself comes to the conclusion that there nevertheless is no refuge in this regress, be it ever so benign. He writes:

But this does not help. It is true that for any given normative fact, the regress permits us to cite another fact in virtue of which it obtains. But at no stage is this further fact one that

⁸⁹ Brandom 1994, 627.

⁹⁰ Rosen 1997, 167.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² As this objection was put by an anonymous referee.

is in any clear sense of our making. The regress provides no insight into how anything we do determines what is correct according to the norms implicit in our practices.⁹³

Rosen complains, that is, that a *normative* phenomenalism about norms, a phenomenalism according to which it is ‘norms all the way down’, does not provide any insight into how any one of these implicit norms actually is ‘instituted’, or made, by us. To provide such insight, we would, at some stage of the hierarchy, need to be told *in non-normative terms* what the norm-instituting behaviour exactly consists in. That criticism might, or might not, be off target: There clearly is a, somewhat facile, rejoinder available here in terms of Brandom’s explicitly avowed anti-reductivism with respect to the normative. Nevertheless, one might be left feeling that the regress above, be it ever so benign, at least indicates a serious flaw in such anti-reductivism.

There is, however, no need to further pursue the matter here. The Brandomian regress of norms is *not* benign. It is not just the case that for any normative status assessed at any stage of the process, it is the case that the assessment *can* itself be assessed at the next level. According to Brandomian pragmatic phenomenalism, normative statuses are *explained by* normative assessments. This is a view about the *metaphysics* of norms. Metaphysically, assessment is prior to normative status.⁹⁴ But assessment itself is essentially normative. An assessment, that is, already needs to *have a normative status* to even *be* an assessment. For any particular assessment, a further norm determining the assessment’s own normative status therefore already needs to be instituted. Which, of course, can only be done by means of further assessments. And so on. Thus regress: The metaphysics of pragmatic phenomenalism

⁹³ Rosen 1997, 168.

⁹⁴ That Brandom indeed offers such a metaphysics, even though a phenomenal one, seems fairly obvious to us. See also above, note 83. Moreover, it would not be wise to try to separate the order of *explanation* from the metaphysical order here. Even if it were *only* in the order of explanation (whatever that might exactly mean) that assessment is prior to normative status a regress (of explanations) would ensue. Such a regress would be no less fatal to the explanatory project pursued than the metaphysical regress.

makes it the case that for any norm to be instituted at all, an infinity of prior norms already needs to be instituted. To be sure, this time the regress is one of implicit norms, but that doesn't make it any less bottomless. We cannot but conclude that even a pragmatic version of CD normativism à la Brandom does not escape the dilemma of regress or idleness.⁹⁵

3. Conclusion

We have argued that content normativism fails in both of its predominant versions: Neither CE normativism, the view that norms or rules can be (fairly directly) derived from content, nor CD normativism, the view that content is determined by norms or rules, withstand closer scrutiny. In the course of our argument, we have also contended that belief is not essentially normative, a claim associated with the alleged normativity of content.

To be sure, there is no content without correctness conditions. But this fairly trivial fact is, by itself, normatively completely innocent. A mere classification of performances into the semantically or noematically correct and incorrect becomes normative only if we add a norm prescribing performance of actions of one (or the other) of those kinds. Having thoughts, or even beliefs, with content, however, does not require the existence, or being in force, of such norms. If naturalism in the theory of content was supposed to be rejected because of its mere inability to derive the requisite oughts, this obstacle has been removed, indeed. Nevertheless, nothing we have argued for forces us to embrace naturalism about content, that is, as an

⁹⁵ An intriguing line of further thought suggests itself here: In Brandom's case the regress seems to result from giving up the intentional condition on rule-following and, thus, going 'implicit' *in combination with a normative phenomenalism* about norms. This, we think, provides us with an object lesson when it comes to the dilemma of regress and idleness. One might think that the notion of implicit CD rule or norm can still, somehow, be rescued from the dilemma. And to be sure, we have not shown that it cannot. Nevertheless, we are back to square one; in order to show that the notion of implicit CD norms is not an idle label, the CD normativist still needs to provide us with a difference; he still needs to tell us what the difference is between mere regularity and genuine rule-following. Moreover, by now we have good reason to suspect that, in order to escape the dilemma of regress and idleness, he needs to do so in *non-intentional and non-normative terms*. Ironically enough, it might thus turn out that CD normativism can only be restored by playing right into the hands of the normativists' arch-enemy, by providing, that is, a naturalistic reductive account of normativity.

account of *what content is*. It is perfectly possible to hold that non-normative, even non-intentional facts determine content, and at the same time to deny that the determination relation in question is such that it allows for a naturalist reduction of content.⁹⁶

Just as there is no content without correctness conditions, there is no content without ‘rational’ relations between contents, that is, without logical or evidential relations. But even the fact that p follows from or is evidentially supported by q is normatively innocent; no rules for reasoning can be derived from such relations. What is more, regardless of whether they are conceived of as CE rules or as CD rules, rules governing reasoning in the required sense seem positively impossible. This is, of course, not to deny that there are rational connections between thoughts, or that beliefs stand in reasons relations. What we are disputing is that these can in any sense be reduced to, or explained in terms of, normative notions.⁹⁷

What remains might be the idea that the ‘rules’ of rationality are like rules or norms at least in the sense that they are not given in nature, but, somehow, *of our own making*. We have taken the positive view that by and large accordance with the ‘rules’ of rationality is a condition on mental content. Insofar as that is right, by and large accordance with the ‘rules’ of rationality would at the same time be a condition on doing or making anything. Consequently, these very ‘rules’ cannot themselves be of our own making.⁹⁸ But then, what kind of status do they have? Do we not have to say that the ‘rules’ of rationality are nothing but certain psychological regularities characterizing the states and behaviour of intentional

⁹⁶ This is the case, for instance, for certain kinds of supervenience relations.

⁹⁷ This includes the idea that the notion of a rule or norm somehow is part of a ‘wide’, or ‘hermeneutical’ circle formed by the concepts of the intentional, and, thus, could play a role in what is sometimes called ‘connective analysis’ (the term is Strawson’s). We have argued that the very idea of rules guiding belief leads into the dilemma of regress and idleness, and regresses are not circles, not even ‘hermeneutic’ ones.

⁹⁸ This is why Davidson is *not* a normativist (despite his own admittedly somewhat freewheeling use of the term ‘normative’). Cf. Glüer 2001, esp. fn. 17 and Davidson’s reply in Davidson 2001.

creatures? Thus, the issue of naturalism returns once more; it might seem as if we were, ultimately, driven into the arms of latter day psychologism.

That conclusion would be mistaken, however. Nothing we have assumed or argued for in this paper forces us to embrace this kind of naturalism, either. Nothing we have said prevents us from doing what Frege did: reject both psychologism and normativism. Here is one of his final statements on the status of the so-called ‘laws of logic’:⁹⁹

The word ‘law’ is used in two senses. When we speak of laws of morals or of the state we mean prescriptions that ought to be obeyed but with which actual events are not always in accordance. Laws of nature are the generalization of natural events with which these events are always in accordance. It is rather in this sense that I speak of laws of truth.

This is, however, not a matter of what happens but of what is.¹⁰⁰

Thus, Frege distinguished the ‘laws of logic’ from both the laws of the state and the laws of nature; to mark this distinction, he called them ‘laws of truth’. These ‘laws’ are neither prescriptions for thinking, nor nomological generalities of our psychology. Their ‘validity’ or necessity is *sui generis*; if anything, it is what we might today call metaphysical.

Now, underlying Frege’s anti-psychologism is a radical dissociation of the logical relations between propositions from the reasoning instantiating them. Frege himself came to the conclusion that there is *no* essential connection between the laws of truth and actual reasoning. According to him, there only are merely *hypothetical imperatives* derivable from the laws of truth, imperatives as to how to judge or reason *if* the judged is to be true.¹⁰¹ In this,

⁹⁹ The ‘laws of logic’ are what the psychologism debate at the turn of the previous century was about. This debate shows remarkable parallels with today’s debate regarding the normativity of meaning and content. It is rather nicely documented in Husserl’s *Prolegomena* (1913). He was the first to reject both psychologism and naturalism about logic, and in this strongly influenced Frege.

¹⁰⁰ Frege 1918, 30, our transl. Here is the German: “Man gebraucht das Wort ‘Gesetz’ in doppeltem Sinne. Wenn wir von Sittengesetzen und Staatsgesetzen sprechen, meinen wir Vorschriften, die befolgt werden sollen, mit denen das Geschehen nicht immer im Einklang steht. Die Naturgesetze sind das Allgemeine des Naturgeschehens, dem dieses immer gemäß ist. Mehr in diesem Sinne spreche ich von Gesetzen des Wahrseins. Freilich handelt es sich hierbei nicht um ein Geschehen, sondern um ein Sein.”

¹⁰¹ Cf. Frege 1918, 30.

he went too far. If by and large accordance with the ‘rules’ of rationality (including the ‘laws’ of logic) is a condition on mental content, there are no imperatives corresponding to these ‘rules’ that are merely hypothetical (i.e. contingent) on any merely optional pursuit of truth. This does amount to acknowledging an essential connection between the ‘laws’ and actual reasoning, in that it makes reasoning dependent on sufficiently well instantiating the abstract patterns of logical and evidential relations between contents, but it in no way is committed to conceiving of these ‘laws’ themselves as in any way dependent upon such instantiation. What the arguments of the present paper suggest, we conclude, is not naturalism but a generalized version of Fregean anti-psychologism.

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