

# The Normativity of Meaning (Steadfastly) Defended: Reply to Glüer and Wikforss

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## 1 Introduction

In a recent article,<sup>1</sup> I defend the claim that meaning is an *intrinsically normative notion*. To say that meaning is normative is, for present purposes, to say that from a statement of an expression's meaning there follows immediately and without further ado a statement concerning how that expression should (not) or may (not) be used. Call this *Normativism*. In a reply,<sup>2</sup> Kathrin Glüer and Åsa Wikforss (hereafter, G&W), both prominent anti-Normativists,<sup>3</sup> argue that I fail in my attempt to defend Normativism against the objections I consider.

While I am grateful to G&W for the close and careful attention they have paid to my paper, and for the clarity with which they express their reservations, I do not think they have shown my attempted defence of Normativism to be unsuccessful. In this short response, I shall explain why.

Since what follows is a reply to a reply, and so will presumably be read—if at all—only by those already interested in and conversant with the terms of the exchange, I

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<sup>1</sup> D. Whiting, 'The Normativity of Meaning Defended', in *Analysis* (2007) 67: 133-140.

<sup>2</sup> K. Glüer and Å. Wikforss, 'Against Normativity Again: Reply to Whiting', unpublished manuscript. <http://people.su.se/%7Ekgl/Reply%20to%20Whiting.pdf>. Date accessed: 29<sup>th</sup> May 2008.

<sup>3</sup> See K. Glüer, 'Sense and Prescriptivity', in *Acta Analytica* (1999) 14: 111-128; Å. Wikforss, 'Semantic Normativity', in *Philosophical Studies* (2001) 102: 203-226.

shall not spell out the details of my original article, and shall presuppose familiarity with G&W's response.

## 2 Correctness

Consider (where ' $w$ ' is a word, ' $F$ ' gives its meaning, and ' $f$ ' is that feature in virtue of which the word applies):

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

All parties agree that some such principle holds trivially. All parties agree also that correctness-conditions serve to *categorize* or *sort* applications of an expression. For the anti-Normativist, they serve only to categorize applications into those that are true (or warranted) and those that are false (or unwarranted). For the Normativist, in so categorizing applications, they further serve to categorize them into those that should (not) or may (not) be made. Hence, the dispute concerns whether correctness-conditions have normative consequences in the sense explained above.

G&W write, 'Nothing in (C) shows that correct applications of  $w$  are those that ought to, or may, be made of  $w$ ' (p. 2). The Normativist argues, on the contrary, that the very presence of the term 'correct' (or the concept it expresses) shows precisely this. Accordingly, as G&W note, the disagreement turns on whether "'correct" can be used in [...] non-normative ways'. If it cannot, the Normativist has the upper-hand. If it can, the onus is on the Normativist to show that the correctness-condition that follows from a term's meaning is not an instance of this.

Now, it seems to me pretty obvious that correctness is a normative notion. But that hardly constitutes an argument. Although I do not do so in my original paper, one

might support the claim by pointing out that sentences such as the following are hard to make sense of or, at the very least, sound rather strange.<sup>4</sup>

- 1) It is incorrect to punch a police officer and you should do it.
- 2) If it is correct to park your car in this space, you may not do so.
- 3) Handling the ball in that way is incorrect so you may do it.
- 4) You should not tell people that the sea levels are rising; it is correct.

While the unhappy ‘ring’ of these sentences is hardly a decisive consideration in support of Normativity, one might ask the anti-Normativist for an *uncontroversial example* of a non-normative use of ‘correct’. Hattiangadi tries to provide one by using the analogy of a height requirement for a ride at a theme park.<sup>5</sup> In my original paper, I argue that the analogy fails to establish that correctness may be non-normative.

G&W summarise my line of argument as follows (p. 3):

Whiting agrees that in order for the child to meet the standard certain descriptions concerning her height must be true of her. However, he argues, given that the ‘standard is in force’ (136), the fact that the child meets this standard has immediate implications for whether she *may* (or *should not*) go on the ride: ‘If she were to do so incorrectly, *with the norm in place*, sanctions or criticism [...] would be appropriate’ (136, emphasis ours).

However, they continue,

this simply illustrates the point that a given non-normative categorization [...] can be used to derive normative consequences – *if* a norm to that effect is ‘in force’. Here, this is the norm that children under a certain height may not go on the ride in question.

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<sup>4</sup> For a similar observation, see H-J. Glock, ‘The Normativity of Meaning Made Simple’, in *Philosophy – Science – Scientific Philosophy*, ed. A. Beckermann and C. Nimtz (Paderborn: Mentis, 2005), pp. 232-233.

<sup>5</sup> See A. Hattiangadi, ‘Is Meaning Normative?’, in *Mind and Language* (2006) 21: 220-240.

That does nothing to show that we would not be able to sort children by height if no such norm were in force – clearly, we could.

The first thing to note is that it was never my intention to deny that ‘we would not be able to sort children by height if no such norm were in force’, and I cannot see anything in the text to suggest otherwise. The claim (on behalf of the Normativist) is that the standard (or statement of correctness-conditions) sorts certain people into those that are above a certain height and those that are below, and *thereby* sorts them into those that may go on the ride (because doing so is correct) and those that may not go on the ride (because doing so is incorrect). Evidently, there are other means of sorting people by height that have no normative consequences and the Normativist has no reason to deny this truism.

G&W’s more important claim is that the height-requirement or standard (a.k.a. correctness-condition) only has normative consequences given that a *distinct* norm is in place, ‘but not directly’ (p. 2). The remark in the quotation from my paper that they italicise appears, G&W suggest, to concede, or rather to betray, precisely this.

Perhaps the remark does indeed suggest this, due in part to my somewhat careless use of the term ‘norm’. Maybe it would have been less misleading to use ‘standard’ or ‘requirement’ instead, for example:

If she were do so incorrectly, in view of the standard, sanctions or criticism of one form or another would be appropriate.

or:

If she were do so incorrectly, with the height requirement in place, sanctions or criticism of one form or another would be appropriate.

However the point is made, the crucial claim is that what is being picked out is *not* a distinct norm upon which the normative consequences of the standard are conditional—the standard/height requirement *itself* has normative consequences; it *is* the norm mentioned in the original passage. Given only that *it* is in place, plus the height of the child, criticism or sanction might be appropriate. That is, *if* there is a height requirement, a child of such-and-such height may (not) go on the ride. Thus, we have yet to be shown a case in which something analogous to correctness-conditions is in place without its having normative consequences.

The same holds for a correctness-condition for the use of an expression. Given only that *it* is in place, it follows (‘directly’) that one may or should not apply the expression in such-and-such circumstances. This is *not* to deny that a statement of correctness-conditions implies that certain applications fall into one of two kinds, namely the true and the false, which might be otherwise specifiable in non-normative terms; that is, it is not to deny that an equivalent categorization might be made without invoking any norm; it is only to insist that *in addition* a statement of correctness-conditions implies that certain applications should (not) or may (not) be made. So far as I can tell, G&W do not offer any new considerations, additional to those I address in the paper, that speak against this.

I am not sure I have here added anything to the original argument, but I hope to have shown that I do not concede the point G&W take me to. It seems to me a clear example of a non-normative use of ‘correct’ remains outstanding.

## 2 Prescriptivity

Consider now:

(P\*\*)  $w$  means  $F \rightarrow \forall x (w \text{ ought to be applied to } x \rightarrow x \text{ is } F)$ <sup>6</sup>

In my paper, I suggested that a principle such as this, which Normativists take to stand in a suitable relation to (C), is defensible so long as the relevant prescription or obligation it expresses is understood to be *prima facie*, i.e. capable of being overridden by other normative considerations (say, moral), though not by mere desires (as it would be if the obligation were merely hypothetical).

On this issue, G&W suggest that there is a clash of ‘intuitions’. The Normativist does not intuit that alleged semantic obligations can be overridden by desires, the anti-Normativist does. We have reached, say G&W, an ‘impasse’ (p. 5). In their view, mere ‘intuition-mongering’ will not get us anywhere fast.

While no doubt G&W are right about the likely diminishing returns of appeals to intuition, one must be careful to note where the dialectic stands. The paper to which they reply does not seek to argue *for* the normativity thesis but only, as its title makes clear, to defend it against objection. Hence, the suggestion that putative semantic obligations are *prima facie* is intended to block an otherwise serious criticism. Now, the fact that the anti-Normativist’s intuitions speak against this possibility does not show it to be false (any more than the Normativist’s show it to be true). Thus, it seems to me that the anti-Normativist has yet to demonstrate the view to be untenable, as she is trying to do (in the texts I address in the paper). Since this is her aim, and since she has yet to achieve it, the onus to provide further argument with respect to this issue

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<sup>6</sup> I now think this is the wrong way to formulate the semantic norms governing the use of expressions, but it will do for present purposes.

lies with her rather than the Normativist. Or, at the very least, all parties should acknowledge the stalemate as precisely that, rather than concluding, as G&W do in favour of the anti-Normativist, ‘that normativity does not seem to be anything but an idle wheel in the theory of meaning’. An alleged standoff of intuitions hardly warrants this verdict.

Strategic considerations aside, G&W note that I attempt to bolster my Normativist ‘intuition’ with additional considerations, specifically concerning what kind of criticism would or would not be appropriate in light of the misapplication of an expression. G&W quote:

True, I might not follow the norm for the use of an expression simply because I do not feel like doing so. But that alone does not show that there is no norm in force; my use of the expression should still be judged *incorrect* (139).

G&W swiftly respond that this only ‘brings us back to square one’, i.e. to the suggestion that the use of an expression might (in light of its meaning) be incorrect, which does not show, in their view, that this has normative consequences (p. 5).

Admittedly, I might have taken for granted at that stage in my paper that whether an application is correct has normative consequences. Hence, to that extent my reply only speaks in favour of (P\*\*), and so only supports Normativism, if correctness is a normative notion—a claim I defend earlier in the paper. Insofar as that assumption stands fast—and I hope to have shown in the previous section that for all G&W have shown it does—the reply succeeds.

However, it is anyway not the case that, in the paper, I rely only on the controversial assumption and, where I do, I need not. The same point can be made without appeal

to disputed terms like ‘incorrect’. Elaborating the same thought later in my article, I write:

given what ‘rich’ means, that I ought to apply the term to a person only if she is rich does not seem contingent upon (say) my desire to speak truthfully. If that desire changes, and I apply the term to a poor person, it remains the case that I am not applying it as it *should* be applied [...] Here, it seems one is properly entitled and it makes full sense to judge that, desire notwithstanding, I am using the expression *wrongly*.<sup>7</sup>

Here, I do not appeal to any notion of correctness but rather suggest that, when a term is misapplied, it is natural to criticise a person for not applying an expression as she should (or, better, for applying it as she should not). Moreover, I stress, doing so does not appear obviously senseless and unwarranted, as it does in cases involving paradigmatic examples of hypothetical obligations. Thus, appearances *strongly suggest* that semantic prescriptions are not contingent upon mere desires. As far as I can see, G&W do not address this point (so formulated) in their reply, a point which goes beyond a brute appeal to intuition.

At this stage, it seems to me that the anti-Normativist needs to show that appearances here are misleading, i.e. provide some reason to think that such criticism could not be called for or appropriate, that it would somehow be wrong to criticise a person misapplying an expression for doing what she should not. Until this is provided, Normativism stands.

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<sup>7</sup> Admittedly, I have deleted ‘but rather *incorrectly*’ from the original since, as G&W have highlighted, invoking the notion of correctness here obscures the point, one which can be motivated independently of the earlier defence of the claim that correctness is a normative notion

#### **4 Conclusion**

I hope to have shown that my defence of Normativism is successful, or at least that G&W's reply has not shown otherwise. Admittedly, some of their reservations about its force seem on occasion to stem from points of unclarity in the way I formulate my arguments, and so I am pleased to have had the opportunity to clear these up. I hope that I have succeeded in that respect, and that in doing so lent further support to the idea that the normativity of meaning might be *more* than 'an idle wheel in the theory of meaning'.