

# Is meaning fraught with ought?\*

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## 1 Introduction

According to *Normativism*, linguistic meaning is intrinsically normative (I shall explore what this amounts to below). One, though not the only, reason for Normativism's importance is that it bears on the prospects of providing an account of meaning in the terms available to the natural sciences. In turn, since linguistic behaviour is inextricably bound up with both non-linguistic behaviour and the psychological attitudes informing it, Normativism might (if true) pose a serious challenge to the project of accommodating creatures such as ourselves within the worldview the natural sciences afford.

In this paper, I shall not focus on such heady themes but rather on the prior issue of whether or not one should accept Normativism. Though certainly in circulation beforehand, it is fair to say that Saul Kripke's (1982) was largely responsible for bringing the thesis to the philosophical forefront.<sup>1</sup> In the years following its publication, Normativism looked close to achieving the status of orthodoxy. At one stage, Crispin Wright felt able to remark assuredly that the view 'strike[s] most people now as a harmless platitude' (1993: 247).<sup>2</sup> In recent years,

however, both the considerations in support of Normativism and the view itself have come under increasing scrutiny and considerable critical pressure. Several powerful challenges to Normativism have been mounted and, to date, there have been relatively few attempts to meet them.<sup>3</sup> In a more up-to-date assessment of Normativism's standing in contemporary philosophy, one which stands in sharp contrast to Wright's, Kathrin Glüer and Åsa Wikforss (both critics of Normativism) note that the thesis 'has grown increasingly suspect' and as a result 'is heard less often' nowadays (2009a: 31).

In this paper, I shall attempt to decrease the suspicion with which Normativism is viewed—and, perhaps in turn, contribute to its being heard a bit more often—by defending the thesis against recent criticisms.<sup>4</sup> I do not, of course, attempt here to rebut *all* objections to Normativism but only to forestall certain prominent lines of attack that are common to a number of different anti-Normativist discussions.<sup>5</sup> I shall argue that, while the pertinent anti-Normativists make some important points that the Normativist must accommodate, the thesis ultimately withstands their assaults.

## **2 Normativism unpacked**

Before proceeding to evaluate objections to Normativism, it is worth pausing to spell out more carefully just what the thesis amounts to. As said above, Normativists hold that meaning is intrinsically normative. One way to shed some light on this pregnant claim is as follows. Facts about meaning, according to it, are inherently action-guiding or prescriptive; specifically, they have implications for what a subject *may* or *should* (not) do.

Crucially, as Anandi Hattiangadi (another critic of Normativism) stresses, Normativism requires that such implications are arrived at ‘quite independently of moral, prudential, legal and other considerations, and independently of your desires or communicative intentions’ (2009: 54-5).<sup>6</sup> The independence from moral, prudential and legal considerations ensures that *semantic* normativity is a distinctive kind of normativity, additional to those philosophers already recognise or have to deal with. The independence from desires and the like ensures that semantic normativity is not simply a species of, say, instrumental normativity, where the relevant implication would concern what a subject is to do if she is to satisfy her contingent desires, interests, aims, etc.<sup>7</sup> Again, this would not constitute a distinctive kind of normativity, additional to those philosophers already recognise or have to deal with (cp. Boghossian 2005: 207; Miller 2006: 109-10).<sup>8</sup>

More generally, if the relevant normative implications for how a subject is to employ an expression result from anything other than facts about what the relevant expression means, then such normative import would seem not to belong to the nature of meaning as such—and so would not impose any substantive constraints on theories of meaning. By the same token, meaning would no longer appear to pose a *special* problem for the project alluded to at the outset.

An alternative way to cash out Normativism is as claiming that what an expression means (alone) gives one *reason* to employ it in certain ways (or not to do so). This formulation dovetails with that given above. If facts about meaning have implications for what one ought to do (or what one ought not to do), then they have implications for what one has reason to do (or reason not to do).

These remarks will be qualified in what follows, but enough has been done for present purposes to lend some substance to the undoubtedly catchy but nonetheless

dark slogan, ‘meaning is normative’, and so to provide sufficient indication of the thesis I shall be defending.

### 3 Correctness and truth

One consideration—though not the only—that seems to speak in favour of Normativism is the platitude—accepted by critics and advocates of Normativism alike—that from the fact that an expression has a particular meaning it follows that certain uses of it are *correct* or *incorrect* (cf. Boghossian 1989: 513). One might capture this idea in the following principle (where ‘*S*’ is a subject, ‘*w*’ is a word, ‘*F*’ gives its meaning, and ‘*f*’ is that feature in virtue of which *w* applies):

$$(C) \quad w \text{ means } F \rightarrow \forall x (S \text{ correctly applies } w \text{ to } x \leftrightarrow x \text{ is } f)^9$$

According to (C), from an expression’s meaning there follows a standard that might be used to evaluate and guide linguistic behaviour, for example (given what ‘red’ means):

$$(C1) \quad \forall x (S \text{ correctly applies ‘red’ to } x \leftrightarrow x \text{ is red})$$

It might seem that to accept (C) is to accept Normativism. The anti-Normativist denies this on the grounds that, while terms like ‘correct’ sometimes express normative notions, they do not do so in all contexts. For example, according to Paul Boghossian (yet another critic of Normativism),<sup>10</sup> ‘it is not clear that, at least as it is being used here, “correct” expresses a normative notion, for it may just mean “true”’ (2005: 207). Slightly more guardedly, Glüer suggests that ‘correct’ here is ‘some kind of variable, to be replaced by your favored basic semantic concept’, such as truth (2001: 60; cf. Glüer and Wikforss 2009a: 36). Likewise, Hattiangadi states that, as it occurs in (C), ““applies correctly” is a placeholder for various word-to-

world relations, such as reference or true predication, none of which are obviously normative notions' (2009: 55; cf. Hattiangadi 2006: 224).<sup>11</sup>

Note first, however, that the anti-Normativist appears to accept that 'correct' does sometimes express a normative notion. Glüer and Wikforss, for example, maintain that "'correct" can be used in normative and non-normative ways' (2008: 2). Likewise, Hattiangadi suggests that 'deontic terms, such as 'correct' [...] are not *always* normative' (2006: 224, italics mine). In light of this, one might sympathise with Ralph Wedgwood's complaint<sup>12</sup> that

this objection seems to amount to the suggestion that it is simply a chance ambiguity that the word 'correct' is used both in a normative sense and in a sense where it just means [*true*] (just as it is a chance ambiguity that 'bank' can mean both *money bank* and *river bank*) and that suggestion is surely implausible, to say the least. (2007: 157-8)

Wedgwood does not back up his charge of implausibility but one might find support for it by reflecting on the following argument:

- (1) Sophie behaved correctly when she returned the wallet she found to its owner.
- (2) Sophie correctly applied 'red' to the red object.
- (3) So, Sophie behaved correctly twice.

One would surely not want to convict this seemingly innocuous inference of fallaciously equivocating. But, if one grants that as it occurs in (1) 'correct' expresses a normative notion,<sup>13</sup> and if one agrees with the anti-Normativist that as it occurs in (2) it does not so, one would have to deliver such a verdict.

Admittedly, this point is not decisive but it does place a burden on the anti-Normativist to provide reason to think that 'correct' behaves in the way that she suggests, when appearances suggest otherwise, or to present an uncontroversial

example of a context in which ‘correct’ expresses a non-normative notion. Fortunately, the anti-Normativists offer such examples, which I shall discuss below. Before doing so, it is worth examining further considerations, which Gideon Rosen offers, that count against the anti-Normativist’s claim that “‘correct’ in this context is just another word for ‘true’” (2001: 619).<sup>14</sup>

Rosen begins by noting that “‘correct’ has application where ‘true’ does not” (2001: 619). In playing certain notes in a particular way, for example, one might perform Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata* correctly. Again, in laying a table for dinner, one might place a fork correctly. It is not plausible that ‘correctly’ so used is a placeholder for some ‘word-to-world relation’ or synonymous with ‘truly’. Moreover, Rosen continues, these cases exhibit a ‘a common structure’, in which one can

distinguish correctness itself from the *correct-making feature*: the property the performance must manifest in order to count as correct. The correct-making feature need not be normative [...] But the claim of correctness does not predicate the correct-making feature. It is 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. (2001: 619-20)

Whether or not one accepts the precise details of his analysis, Rosen’s remarks warn us against identifying correctness with the correct-making feature. Just as one should not identify correctness with playing notes in a particular way, though that might be what makes a given performance of *Moonlight Sonata* correct, one should not identify correctly applying an expression with truly applying it, though that might be what makes the application correct. Hence, even if one agrees with the anti-Normativist that the pertinent ‘word-world relation’ is not normative, this does not undermine the view that the property of correctness—possessed in this instance in virtue of the obtaining of the ‘word-world relation’—*is* normative.

Correlatively, at the level of (as it were) sense rather than reference, Rosen's remarks serve as a reminder that, even if it is true that 'correctly' in contexts such as (C1) can be replaced with 'truly' *salva veritate*, that does not demonstrate that what is thereby expressed remains the same, that there has been no loss of or change in content. Indeed, the reflections on the inference above underscore this point. In the absence of additional premises, that inference ceases to appear valid if one replaces (2) with:

(2\*) Sophie truly applied 'red' to the red object.

This supports the suggestion that (2) and (2\*) differ in what they express, even though, whenever (2) is true, (2\*) is true.

The upshot of this is that, even if one agrees with the anti-Normativist that truth is a non-normative notion and that claims concerning correctness can be straightforwardly transformed into claims concerning truth, this does nothing to show that claims concerning correctness are non-normative.

What the discussion in this section shows, I think, is that the considerations, which the anti-Normativist introduces, pertaining to the substitutability of 'correctly' with 'truly' as it occurs in (C1) and similar contexts, is just a red-herring. What the anti-Normativist really needs to establish is not simply that from (C1) and the like one can derive a non-normative statement about, say, the conditions under which an expression truly applies—the Normativist has no reason to deny this<sup>15</sup>—but that one cannot *also* derive normative statements about what a subject may, should or has reason (not) to do. In the next section, I shall turn to this matter.

#### **4 All the fun of the fair**

The anti-Normativists typically bolster their claim that one might accept (C) without accepting Normativism as follows. A principle such as (C), Glüer says, is just a means of ‘*categorizing* utterances, of *sorting* them into true [...] and false ones’ (2001: 60; cf. Glüer 1999: §7). Moreover, ‘semantic categorization is like sorting objects into tables and non-tables: No immediate normative consequences ensue’ (Glüer and Wikforss 2008: 2; cf. Glüer and Wikforss 2009a: 36; Glüer and Wikforss 2009b: §2.1.1).

Hattiangadi elaborates, claiming that statements of correctness-conditions do not tell us what to do but supply ‘a *description* of uses of [*w*] as those that are “correct” and those that are “incorrect”’. Moreover, she continues,

Sometimes to say that something is right [or correct] does *not* imply a prescription; rather, it is say that it meets a certain *standard* [...]. To say that some use of a term is ‘correct’ is thus merely to describe it in a certain way—in light of the norm or standard set by the meaning of the term. (2006: 223-5; see also Kusch 2006: 60; Wikforss 2001: 205f)

Thus, the banal observation that meaningful expressions possess conditions of correct use does not support Normativism. Standards—by which one might judge an act to be correct—do not *as such* have normative import.

In support of her claim that the statement that a certain act is correct ‘does not imply’ a statement concerning what a subject may, should or has reason (not) to do, Hattiangadi offers an example of ‘a fairground where there is a height restriction of 1 meter for certain rides’ (2009: 55; cf. Hattiangadi 2006: 224). If convincing, the example would show that platitudes such as (C) are not sufficient to establish Normativism (and, one might note, would lend support to the anti-Normativist’s claim concerning the behaviour of ‘correct’ about which Wedgwood, above, expresses incredulity).



Hattiangadi spells out the significance she takes her example to have as follows:

Whether or not children meet the [fairground] standard is not in itself a normative matter. The fact that Vikram meets the standard is the straightforwardly non-normative fact that he is more than 1 meter tall. By analogy, the fact that I have applied the word 'cat' to a cat, and thereby met the standard for the 'correct' application of 'cat', does not imply that I have done what I ought to have done, and is therefore not a normative matter. (2009: 55)

This is, however, a bit swift. A matter might qualify as normative by implying, not statements about what *ought* to be done, but statements about what *may* or *should not* be done. With this in mind, consider my earlier remarks regarding Hattiangadi's example:

It is true that, in order to meet the standard, and so for her going on the ride to satisfy the conditions of correctness, certain descriptions must be true of a child, namely that she is sufficiently tall. That is, certain 'straightforwardly non-normative, natural facts' must hold, and can be derived from the statement that she satisfies the relevant norm. Nevertheless, given that the standard is in force, that the child does as a matter of fact meet it (or fails to) certainly has implications for whether or not she *may* (or *should not*) go on the ride. If she were to do so incorrectly, with the norm in place, sanctions or criticism of one form or another would be appropriate. Hence, [...] to say that there are correctness-conditions for a child's going on a ride is to say that going on that ride is a normative matter.

Likewise, if a statement about the meaning of an expression does indeed imply that there are conditions for its correct application [...] then it equally has implications for whether it may or should be used in certain ways. (2007: 136)

In reply to these remarks, Hattiangadi invites us to consider what kind of standard might be operative at the fairground. Compare:

(S1)  $S$  is permitted (to ride)  $\leftrightarrow S$  is over 1 meter tall

(S2) Ride  $X$  is safe for  $S \leftrightarrow S$  is over 1 meter tall

Hattiangadi grants that, if (S1) holds, Vikram's height has normative consequences with respect to going on the ride. However, this is because (S1) is 'explicitly normative'. In contrast, if (S2) holds, Vikram's height 'does not imply anything about what he ought (not) or may (not) do'. To assume, Hattiangadi continues, that a standard such as (C1) is akin to (S1) rather than (S2) is question-begging; it is to presuppose that 'correctly' expresses a normative notion. Moreover, since (C1) 'does not say anything about what anyone ought (not) or may (not) do', it seems that it is in fact more like (S2) than (S1) (2009: 56-7).

In light of this, my past remarks about Hattiangadi's example seem too hasty; they overlook the possibility that the relevant standard might take the form of (S2). Evidently, (S2) does not as such have prescriptive import. 'Safe' does not express an intrinsically normative notion—that something is safe does not have immediate implications for whether or not it should or may be done.<sup>16</sup>

One can, however, use this to turn the tables on the anti-Normativist. Recall, as stressed above, that the fairground case is supposed to provide a clear example of a standard by which one can judge that a certain act is correct *and* which, on its own, has no implications for what a subject should, may or has reason to do (or not to do) (cf. Hattiangadi 2006: 224). Only as such could it show that (C1) and the like, despite the occurrence of 'correctly', might be non-normative. However, if the fairground standard is along the lines of (S2), it no longer appears possible, without further ado, to derive from it, and the statement that Vikram is over 1 meter tall, the statement that his going on the ride would be correct (as opposed to the statement that Vikram's going on the ride would be safe). Once the content of the standard is made explicit in

this way, the inference ceases to seem legitimate. Hattiangadi has, therefore, failed to provide an uncontroversial example of a standard that is non-normative *and* by reference to which an act can be judged correct. Hattiangadi has thereby failed to cast doubt on the normative status of (C1). Indeed, one might venture, the fact that one is unable to arrive at judgements of correctness by appeal to the fairground standard purged of normative vocabulary provides support for the view that correctness is a normative affair (and so for the view that the platitudinous status of (C) speaks in favour of Normativism).

Nonetheless, Hattiangadi's elaboration of her example serves to show that I was too uncritical in my former acceptance of the analogy. (C1) is *unlike* a standard for going on a fairground ride. 'Correctly' *does* appear to express an intrinsically normative notion—while, as Hattiangadi notes, it might not explicitly 'say anything about what anyone ought (not) or may (not) do', it seems to have implications for such matters; it appears possible to derive immediately from (C1) a statement such as that *S* should not apply 'red' to *x*, or has reason not to do so, if *x* is not red.

However, Alex Miller (Forthcoming b: §5; cf. Hattiangadi 2009: 57), in another reply to (Whiting 2007), offers additional considerations intended to cast doubt on this claim, and thereby the Normativist's attempt to appeal to (C) in support of her thesis. According to Miller, the mere fact that a standard is operative—even one involving a statement of correctness-conditions—has no normative consequences for how a subject is to behave. What is needed in addition is for the standard to be one '*that we ought to subscribe to*' or, one might add, that we have reason to subscribe to. Consider:<sup>17</sup>

(S3) *S* correctly rides the rollercoaster ↔ *S* has eaten cornflakes for  
breakfast on a Tuesday sometime in the past year

In Miller's view, it would be 'crazy' to think that (S3) generates prescriptions (or, for that matter, proscriptions) for going on rides.

Perhaps, then, Miller has provided the kind of example the anti-Normativist seeks, one in which there is a standard by which an act can be judged correct *and* that one would certainly not judge to have prescriptive import. Thus, to return to Normativism, the mere fact that (in light of its meaning) there are standards for the correct use of an expression might not show that Normativism is correct, unless one question-beggingly assumes that the principles that according to (C) are in place are among those one ought or has reason to subscribe to.

Note, however, that the present dispute concerns whether normative consequences flow from a *true* statement of correctness-conditions. *All* participants to the debate agree that a principle such as (C1) is true, indeed that it is *trivially* true.<sup>18</sup> Miller appears to hold that (S3) could be true—presumably if the standard were enforced at a fairground—and yet possess no normative implications. But it would surely be reasonable to deny that, in the envisaged situation, (S3) would or could be true.<sup>19</sup> What a person eats for breakfast on an arbitrary day of the week during an arbitrary period of time has nothing to do with the rights and wrongs, the correctness or otherwise, of going on fairground rides. Indeed, the considerations that speak against the idea that one has reason or ought to subscribe to (S3) are the *very same* considerations that speak against its being true.

Importantly, and while I grant that my erstwhile remarks above might suggest otherwise, it is no part of Normativism that anything purporting to be a norm really is one, that any sentence containing a normative term expresses a truth. So, should a fairground proprietor formulate (S3), and even enforce it, it does not follow that (S3) is true. In which case, Miller fails to provide an uncontroversial example of a

correctness-condition with no normative consequences. The Normativist is committed only to holding that, due to the presence of the term ‘correct’, *if* (S3) were true, it would have implications for what one should, may or has reason to do (or not to do). This is hardly a ‘crazy’ view or, if it is, that needs to be demonstrated.

So, Miller’s example fails to show that statements about what is correct do not (when true) immediately imply prescriptive statements. Thus, he fails to show that acceptance of (C) falls short of acceptance of Normativism.

In response, the anti-Normativist might concede that correctness is normative—i.e. has implications for what a subject should, may or has reason to do—but, since the Normativist allows that a professed norm might turn out to be bogus, ask what reason there is to be confident that (C1) and the like express genuine truths.

This, however, would be disingenuous since, as mentioned, the truth of (C1) is not at issue. *All* agree that (C) is the merest platitude, and for good reason. As Hattiangadi unequivocally remarks, it is not ‘open to us to deny that in order to have meaning, terms must have correctness conditions. This is what distinguishes the use of language from the making of mere noise’ (2006: 222). Miller agrees: ‘The claim that there is a fact in virtue of which Jones means something by an expression but that the expression has no determinate conditions of correct application is barely coherent’ (Forthcoming a: §7). Likewise Glüer and Wikforss insist that ‘it can hardly be challenged: Meaningful expressions have semantic correctness conditions’ (2009b: §2.1.1).

## **5 Prescribing and proscribing**

In the preceding sections, I defended the claim that ‘correctly’ expresses a normative notion as it occurs in (C). So, insofar as (C) is trivially true, Normativism is too. This

is an appropriate stage, then, at which to turn to assess the very idea—whatever motivates it—that facts about meaning possess prescriptive import.

Consider, as a first attempt to capture Normativism (and thereby the normative import of (C)):

(P)  $w$  means  $F \rightarrow \forall x (S \text{ ought to (apply } w \text{ to } x) \leftrightarrow x \text{ is } f)$ <sup>20</sup>

Hattiangadi and I agree that (P) is false:

Given what it means, one is not obliged to employ an expression such as ‘dog’ to all dogs. Indeed, doing so is not even possible and, in so far as ought implies can, there can be no such requirement. (Whiting 2007: 137; cf. Hattiangadi 2009: 58)<sup>21</sup>

In its place, I previously advanced the following, weaker principle:

(P\*)  $w$  means  $F \rightarrow \forall x (S \text{ ought to (apply } w \text{ to } x) \rightarrow x \text{ is } f)$

Norms of the kind that according to (P\*) are in force, I claimed, ‘are action-guiding’ in the required sense (2007: 137). This, I now see, is simply mistaken. As Hattiangadi forcefully points out,

Obviously, if  $x$  is  $f$ , nothing follows about what you ought to do. Less obviously, perhaps, if it is not the case that  $x$  is  $f$ , what follows is that it is not the case that you ought to apply  $w$  to  $x$ . That is, if it is not the case that  $x$  is  $f$  it follows that you *lack* an obligation to apply  $w$  to  $x$ , not that you are obligated *not* to apply  $w$  to  $x$ . (2009: 58)

For these reasons, one should reject (P\*) and so (P). But, for the Normativist, all is not lost. Consider instead the following:

(P’)  $w$  means  $F \rightarrow \forall x (S \text{ ought not to (apply } w \text{ to } x) \leftrightarrow x \text{ is not } f)$

(P’) is equivalent to:

(P’’)  $w$  means  $F \rightarrow \forall x (S \text{ may (apply } w \text{ to } x) \leftrightarrow x \text{ is } f)$

Formulating Normativism in this manner is not simply an ad hoc attempt to avoid the serious objections that bedevil (P), mentioned above. Not only, as I hope to show, is the principle so-formulated defensible but, insofar as Normativists widely

view the triviality of (C) as speaking in favour of the thesis they advance, (P') seems a more faithful rendering of Normativism. This is because what is correct is more closely related to what one may do than it is to what one ought to be do.<sup>22</sup>

To say, for example, that moving a rook horizontally is correct is, surely, not to say that one should move it horizontally—perhaps one should move it vertically or not at all—although it is certainly to imply that one is allowed to do so. Likewise, to say that to play certain notes in a particular way is to perform Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* correctly is, surely, not to say that one ought to play it in that way—perhaps there are indefinitely many suitable renderings of the piece—but it is to suggest that it is alright to do so. Again, suppose that in the course of constructing a proof, one correctly derives 'P v Q' from the assumption 'P'. One might well be prepared to judge that doing so is acceptable—the move accords with the rules of inference—but reluctant to judge that one ought to do so—there might be other, equally good ways of reaching the desired conclusion. Finally, to hammer the point home, consider political correctness. While the claim that a certain epithet is politically incorrect certainly implies that you should not use it, the claim that another is politically correct surely does not imply that you should employ it but, at most, that it is okay to do so. Judgements of political correctness and incorrectness serve principally to license and prohibit certain forms of behaviour, rather than mandate them.

Importantly, I am not claiming that what is correct is equivalent to what may be done; there are many things that one may do—cross one's legs when sitting, for example—that one would not ordinarily deem correct. Moreover, I am not claiming that in saying that such-and-such is correct one is saying no more than that it may be done. For all that I claim here, describing an act as correct might convey much more besides. The suggestion is only, first, that the statement that an act is correct implies

without further ado that one may perform it (but not that one ought to do so) and, second, that the statement that an act is incorrect implies without further do that one ought not to perform it (and not merely that it is not the case that one ought to do so). Thus, in retrospect, one might take the anti-Normativist's successful objections to (P) as precisely showing that it fails as an attempt to capture the normative import of (C), rather than as showing that (C) has no such import whatsoever.

In light of this, it seems that (P') is motivated quite independently of the problems facing (P) and the like. Either (C) implies (P') or, if one wishes not to take a stand on the disputed normative status of (C), (P') captures better than (P) what the Normativist has in mind. Either way, it is the formulation to focus on.

Whatever thoughts might lead someone to advance (P'), Hattiangadi rejects it on the grounds that it

is highly counterintuitive. It implies that whenever you express a false proposition—whether this is because you want to lie, speak with irony, make a joke, or simply because you have a false belief—you are contravening your semantic obligations, you are doing something you ought not to do. (2009: 59)

Similarly, Glüer and Wikforss protest,

it might be the case that under certain circumstances I ought to lie, i.e. ought to apply  $w$  to something that is not  $f$ , but that does not mean that  $w$ , in those circumstances, does not mean  $F$ —quite the contrary. (2008: 4; see also Boghossian, 2005: 207; Hattiangadi 2006: 227; Miller Forthcoming b: §3; Wikforss 2001: 206)<sup>23</sup>

By way of response, note in the first instance that the view sketched above, and embodied in (P'), to which the anti-Normativist objects, can be no worse off in light of the considerations adduced than one that the anti-Normativist is, by her own admission, committed to. Recall that the anti-Normativist accepts (C). But, if one grants the anti-Normativist's complaint concerning (P'), parity of reasoning should



surely lead to the conclusion that (C) is equally ‘highly counterintuitive’. Taken at face value, (C) seems to imply that when one misapplies an expression to save a person’s life, for example, one is doing something incorrect, when misapplying the expression is (intuitively) precisely the correct course of action (this does not turn on whether or not ‘correct’ here is understood to express a normative notion). Thus, if the anti-Normativists complaints are persuasive with respect to (P’), they should equally lead to the rejection of (C). For good reason, this is not something that would appeal to the anti-Normativist. Recall Hattiangadi’s apposite remark, quoted above, on what distinguishes the meaningful use of language from mere noise.

Fortunately, rejecting the seemingly inviolable (C) is not forced upon us. Consider first (P’). Contra the anti-Normativist, (P’) is not counterintuitive so long as the ‘semantic obligation’, or rather the statement concerning what one ought to do, is understood as *prima facie* (cf. Whiting, 2007: 138-9). What an expression means provides one with *some* (not necessarily conclusive) reason to employ it in a certain way. Such reason is not dependent on what a subject happens to desire, though it might be defeated, overridden, silenced, outweighed, etc, by other considerations, say moral or pragmatic. On this account, (P’) does *not* imply that when you wittingly misapply an expression to save a person’s life, for example, ‘you are doing something you ought not to do’, understood as an all-things-considered judgement; it implies only that one is doing something that one has, or would otherwise have, some reason not to do, reason that on this occasion is defeated, overridden, silenced, outweighed, etc, by more important considerations.<sup>24</sup>

This in turn suggests a way for the Normativist and anti-Normativist alike to accept (C) without embracing the implausible consequence that it would be incorrect to misapply an expression in order to save a person’s life (I am not suggesting, of

course, that this is the only way for either party to resolve this matter). Taking into account only what the expression means, misapplying the expression is incorrect, but taking into account all salient factors, it is correct. The act is, one might say, semantically correct but all-things-considered incorrect. Since the anti-Normativist will have to tell some such story with respect to (C), and since some such story seems readily available and innocent enough, there appears to be no principled reason not to provide a similar account with respect to (P'). Hence, I conclude, the anti-Normativist's complaint that (P') is 'highly counterintuitive' is unjustified.

## 6 Overriding desires

Anti-Normativists are typically not impressed with the appeal to prima facie 'ought's. According to the anti-Normativist's intuitions, Glüer and Wikforss report, 'the alleged semantic obligations can be overridden by mere desires, such as the desire to lie or mislead. That is not how prima facie obligations behave, however; genuine prima facie obligations can only be overridden by other (prima facie) obligations' (2008: 4).

The positive claim above regarding what *can* override a prima facie 'ought'—namely, only another prima facie 'ought'—is contentious, to say the least.<sup>25</sup>

Supposing that a subject ought prima facie to  $\Phi$ ; it may well be that additional considerations mean that it is not the case that all-things-considered she ought to  $\Phi$ , where those considerations do not themselves make it the case that the subject ought prima facie not to  $\Phi$ , or that she ought prima facie to  $\Psi$  instead (say, in cases where  $\Phi$ ing would be very costly to the subject) (see Darwall 1987: esp. 78ff). Equally contentious is the anti-Normativist's negative claim above regarding what *cannot* override a prima facie 'ought'—namely, desire. Supposing that a subject ought prima facie to  $\Phi$ , it is at least arguable that, in a suitable context, the fact that she has a desire not

to  $\Phi$ , or to  $\Psi$  instead, means that it is not the case that she ought to  $\Phi$  (say, in cases where her dignity or integrity are at stake) (see Darwall 2003).

Of course, I have offered nothing in support of the remarks in the previous paragraph but for present purposes I do not need to take a stand with respect to the issues they concern. The important point is only that, even if the anti-Normativist's intuitions reported above are reliable with respect to what can and cannot override 'alleged semantic obligations', this may not be enough to show that those 'obligations' are not 'genuine'.

That said, the anti-Normativist does not really need to make the positive claim and presumably only needs to make a watered-down version of the negative claim. Her case requires no more than that, whatever else might override a genuine prima facie 'ought', it cannot be overridden by the *mere* fact of desire alone (as opposed to the fact of desire plus considerations of integrity, etc). Since, the anti-Normativist's case continues, intuitions suggest that *mere* desire alone *can* override or otherwise defeat an 'alleged semantic obligation', (P') must be false, even where the 'ought' it contains is read as prima facie.

In support of the view that what an expression means implies that one ought prima facie to employ it in a certain way—and against the suggestion that this implication is at best conditional upon the presence or absence of *mere* desires on the part of the subject—I previously wrote:<sup>26</sup>

That I ought not to go outside if it is raining is contingent upon my desire to stay dry. If that desire changes, I will not have done anything incorrect or failed to do as I should by going outside in the rain. Were I to do so, it would be unwarranted and make little sense to insist that, desire notwithstanding, my act was wrong.

In contrast, given what 'rich' means, that I ought not to apply the term to a person if she is not 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 applying it as it *should* not be applied, but rather *incorrectly*. Here it seems one is properly entitled, it makes full sense to judge that, desire notwithstanding, I am using the expression *wrongly*. (2007: 139)

Hattiangadi accepts the letter of this passage but rejects its spirit, reasserting the now-familiar suggestion that terms like ‘incorrectly’ need not express normative notions. To ‘assume’ that they do as they occur in the above is ‘question-begging’ (2009: 60). Glüer and Wikforss (2008: §2) and Miller (Forthcoming b: §4) concur.

But this reply takes for granted that the anti-Normativist succeeded in undermining the claim that ‘correct’ and its kin express normative notions. I argued above that they have not, in which case the charge of question-begging cannot get a grip.

Although one could leave matters there, it is worth pointing out that the same line of thought as that expressed in the above passage can be easily reformulated using terms that the anti-Normativist recognises as genuinely prescriptive:

Given what ‘rich’ means, that I ought not to apply the term to a person if she is not 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 I *may* apply it, but rather as I *may* not. Here it seems one is properly entitled, it makes full sense to judge that, desire notwithstanding, I am using the expression as I *ought* not (or have reason not to).

To this, the anti-Normativist would presumably object that the passage simply ‘assumes’ rather than shows that meaning is categorically normative. Reformulating the remarks has only, she might complain, served to make the question-begging more flagrant.

With regards to both the original passage and its successor, however, the charge of question-begging is unfair. What the remarks highlight is that, when a term is misapplied, it is *not* obviously senseless or manifestly unwarranted (absent overriding considerations) to criticise the speaker for applying the expression as she should not have done, or as she had reason not to, and thereby to evaluate her linguistic behaviour negatively.

In contrast, in the uncontroversial case of the relinquished instrumental norm, it *is* obviously senseless and manifestly unwarranted to criticise the subject for doing what she should not have done, or had reason not to do, and thereby to evaluate her rain-related behaviour negatively. So, appearances *strongly suggest* that semantic norms are not contingent upon a subject's desires, and so that what an expression means has implications for what one ought *prima facie* to do. As far as I can see, the anti-Normativists have yet to address this issue.

Needless to say, it could turn out that appearances in this instance are deceptive, that our habits of criticism are misguided, that it would be wrong to criticise a person misapplying an expression (simply because she desires to) for doing what she should, may or has reason to not do. The present point is only that this needs to be shown. There are observations that speak in favour of the claim that semantic norms hold independent of a subject's desires and the anti-Normativist has so far adduced none to the contrary. Until she does so, Normativism stands.

The suggestion that the ought-statement captured by (P') should be understood as *prima facie* was offered as the most plausible construal of Normativism. So far, by way of objection, the anti-Normativists have only reported that 'according to their intuitions' (Glüer and Wikforss 2008: 4) that suggestion is false. Needless to say, this does not really amount to an argument against Normativism—a principled reason for

thinking that it is false has not been offered. It seems, then, that either—given the appearances mentioned above—the balance is tipped in favour of Normativism or—if one is not impressed by or does not feel inclined to respect such appearances—the Normativists and their opponents have reached stalemate. Either way, the anti-Normativist has not given reason to reject claims such as that what an expression means implies that one ought *prima facie* to refrain from employing it in certain ways, and so Normativists are under no pressure yet to disown their thesis.

Of course, there might be principled objections to Normativism waiting in the wings. I shall address one in the next section. But before turning to it, it is worth stressing that there is in fact further reason to think that the balance is tipped in favour of Normativism. While, as already noted, the anti-Normativists have not yet given a principled reason for rejecting Normativism, the Normativists *do* have to hand a principled reason for advancing it. Specifically, the Normativist can point to the fact that (C) is a platitude, as all agree, and since (C) implies (P'), as argued above, (P') is also a platitude. Thus, even if one agrees with the anti-Normativist that 'intuition-mongering' (Glüer and Wikforss 2008: 5; cf. Glüer and Wikforss 2009b: §2.1.1) is unlikely to contribute to resolving the issue of whether semantic norms can be overridden by desires alone, the status of (C) establishes a presumption in favour of Normativism.

## **7 The bearable lightness of meaning**

As stressed above, the anti-Normativist owes a principled objection to the disputed thesis, understood as committed to (P'). She might try to develop one on the grounds that it is extremely, and to that degree implausibly, demanding. No doubt the average language-user often wittingly misapplies an expression for no other reason than that

she desires to do so and, in any case, is certainly frequently careless in her use of expressions. Normativism would seem to imply, then, that the average language-user is more-or-less regularly guilty of doing what she ought not to or has (most) reason not to do, and thereby more-or-less regularly liable to criticism. This, the objection concludes, is too strong. (Perhaps it is some such worry that ultimately lies behind Hattiangadi's charge, quoted above, of counterintuitiveness.)

This objection is, I think, unsuccessful, but explaining why provides an opportunity to further clarify Normativism, to dislodge a tempting misconception of it, and thereby to place it in a more favourable light. Supposing it is true, which has hardly been shown, that the typical language-user sufficiently frequently (and for no good reason) misapplies an expression and thus, according to the thesis under scrutiny, does what she ought not to do. Normativism does indeed imply that, to that extent, she is open to criticism. But, importantly, the criticism called for, and so the gravity of the offence, need not be particularly severe. As Simon Robertson remarks, in a quite different context in which he is not concerned with the (alleged) normativity of meaning,

To say you ought to do something need not imply that the action you ought to perform is particularly important or pressing. Although oughts of the sort we are concerned with here are conclusive [...] they are a function of reasons for and against actions, and those reasons do not always favour actions of particular importance.

(2008: 267)

This is a salutary reminder that reasons, and so the corresponding oughts, need not carry much weight, which is absolutely *not* to say that they do not carry any weight at all. Thus, to lean on Robertson again, 'failure to do what you have most reason to do need not be strongly criticisable' (2008: 268). Likewise, to return to the case at hand, doing what you have reason not to do—misapplying an expression perhaps—need not

be strongly criticisable (which is not to say that it would not be criticisable at all). In which case, the demandingness objection fails. While language-users may indeed be regularly open to criticism, such criticism need not be severe enough to generate worries of demandingness. Semantic irresponsibility is hardly on a par with moral irresponsibility, and nothing in Normativism suggests otherwise.

Although not cogent, the demandingness point was worth attending to. There is, I think, a tendency among both Normativists and their opponents to present or view Normativism as a stronger thesis than it really is or needs to be (which in turn invites unfavourable contrasts with theses about, say, moral reasons or oughts). Recalling, first, that Normativism claims that what an expression means has implications only for what *prima facie* a person may or should do and, second, that this may not be a particularly pressing or important matter, serves to weaken the thesis without making it unimportant and, in doing so, makes it all the more palatable.

## **8 Conclusion**

In this paper, I sought to defend the claim that a certain platitude—namely, that meaningful expressions possess conditions of correct use—supports the thesis that meaning is normative. Next, I turned to evaluate the very idea that what an expression means has prescriptive or proscriptive import with respect to how one employs it and suggested that, so long as the relevant prescription or proscription is understood as *prima facie* and as suitably light, the idea is defensible. So, both one of the considerations in support of Normativism, and the thesis itself are secure. We should not, then, feel fraught about the thought that meaning is fraught with ought.<sup>27</sup>

The anti-Normativists are nonetheless to be congratulated for encouraging lackadaisical Normativists to clarify the thesis they advance. For too long,



Normativism has been vaguely gestured at while little attempt has been made to sharpen our understanding of it. In response to anti-Normativist criticisms, we are moving towards an adequate formulation of Normativism and the principles underlying it. Those criticisms, however, are serving ultimately to strengthen, rather than undermine, the important claim that meaning is normative.

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### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Whether or not Kripke, or Kripke’s Wittgenstein, endorses Normativism is a tricky issue. For discussion, see Kusch 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Both Kripke and Wright attribute Normativism to Wittgenstein (see Waismann and Wittgenstein 2003: 343). The thesis is also often associated with Sellars (see 2007: pt. 1), from whom the phrase ‘fraught with ought’, used in the title, is taken. Both interpretive claims are controversial, but I do not intend to enter into exegetical debates here. Normativism is of independent interest, whatever its heritage.

<sup>3</sup> For responses to certain objections to Normativism that I do not address here, see Glock 2005; Millar 2004: ch. 6.

<sup>4</sup> In doing so, I shall take the opportunity to respond to various replies to an earlier attempt I made to defend Normativism (though I shall also be critical of some of my erstwhile arguments). For the earlier attempt, see Whiting 2007. For the replies, see Glüer and Wikforss 2008; Glüer and Wikforss 2009b: §2.1.1; Hattiangadi 2009; Miller Forthcoming b.

<sup>5</sup> For a rather different kind of criticism, which I cannot adequately respond to here but hope to address elsewhere, see Speaks 2009.

<sup>6</sup> I would add epistemic considerations to the list, although not all Normativists would follow me in this. For discussion, see Whiting 2009.

<sup>7</sup> I am not here taking a stand on the controversial issue of whether or not the fact that such-and-such is a means to an end that a person has makes it the case that she ought—i.e. has a normative reason—to take that means. The point is rather that, if Normativism is to be an interesting and distinctive thesis, the norms it postulates are not to be assimilable to instrumental ‘norms’, however one is to conceive of the nature, source and status of the latter.

<sup>8</sup> According to the above formulation of Normativism, the relevant judgement that, in light of its meaning, a subject should or may (not) use an expression in certain ways is independent from the desires (broadly construed) that she happens to have. Whether Normativism, so described, is incompatible with an ‘internalist’ or ‘Humean’ view, according to which a subject’s having a suitable desire is at least a necessary condition of a normative judgement’s being true of her, and, if it is incompatible, whether one might be able to reformulate Normativism in a way that accords with the ‘internalist’ or ‘Humean’ position while nonetheless capturing the inchoate thought

behind the slogan ‘meaning is normative’ are very thorny issues that I cannot enter into here. Suffice it to say, the formulation I offer here is faithful to the terms of the present debate surrounding that slogan.

<sup>9</sup> This differs from the formulation in (Whiting 2007), namely:

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

This is inadequate since ‘there is no *agent* mentioned in (C)’ (Hattiangadi 2009: 55).

Previously (2007: 134-5), I expressed reservations concerning whether the platitude is best captured in terms of correct *application* (for reasons why, see Millar 2004: ch. 6). Those reservations have not gone away but, since they do not bear on what follows, I shall set them aside again.

<sup>10</sup> At one time, Boghossian (1989) was one of the foremost advocates of Normativism.

<sup>11</sup> One might resist this by distinguishing (semantically) correct use and correct (true) application (cf. n9). However, I suspect the anti-Normativist would simply reformulate the point so as to apply to talk of correct use, understood accordingly, and so I shall not pursue this strategy.

Alternatively, if one holds that truth is itself a normative notion, as several philosophers do, then the claim that ‘correctly’ as it occurs in (C) is just a placeholder for ‘truly’ lends no support whatsoever to anti-Normativism. I shall not pursue this line either, since I am not sympathetic to the pertinent view about truth. For a recent discussion of this issue, see Lynch 2004.

<sup>12</sup> Wedgwood is responding to claims concerning the alleged normativity of belief, not of meaning.

<sup>13</sup> Needless to say, the exact example used is unimportant to the point being made. (1) may be replaced with any uncontroversial example of a sentence in which ‘correct’ expresses a normative notion.

<sup>14</sup> Rosen ultimately does not view ‘correct’ as a paradigmatically normative term, and is agnostic about Normativism in general.

<sup>15</sup> Any more than she needs to deny a point on which Glüer and Wikforss insist, namely, ‘Sorting applications of  $w$  by [...] truth and falsity is possible without any norms being in force’ (2008: 3; cf. Glüer and Wikforss 2009a: 37). Obviously, the Normativist can accept this with equanimity.

<sup>16</sup> Should it turn out that ‘safe’ expresses a normative notion, it would be straightforward enough to come up with an alternative example with which to make Hattiangadi’s point.

<sup>17</sup> I have slightly adapted Miller’s example but the change makes no difference to the point being made.

<sup>18</sup> In virtue of what it is true is another matter (see n27).

<sup>19</sup> Just as one would if ‘correctly rides’ in (S3) were replaced with ‘should ride’.

<sup>20</sup> This differs from Hattiangadi’s version (2009: 58), which is suggestive of *speaker* meaning (*‘S means F by w’*) rather than *linguistic* meaning. It also differs from the formulation I offer in (Whiting 2007: 136), namely:

$$(P) \quad w \text{ means } F \rightarrow \forall x (w \text{ ought to be applied to } x \leftrightarrow x \text{ is } f)$$

As Hattiangadi notes, this version suffers from a scope ambiguity and, moreover, its consequent is not prescriptive—‘ought to be’ is not agent-implicating (2009: 61).

<sup>21</sup> In the quoted passage I equate what one ought to do with what one is obliged to do, as do several anti-Normativists (see Glüer and Wikforss 2008: 4ff; Hattiangadi 2009: 58-9). I now think this is a mistake. As Broome nicely put it (2004: 38), ‘obliged’ is more ‘heavyweight’ than ‘ought’. Indeed, I think that allowing Normativism to be formulated in terms of ‘obligation’s rather than ‘ought’s plays into the hands of the anti-Normativists by making the thesis seem stronger (and proportionally less

plausible) than it really is. Accordingly, I shall steer clear of using the term ‘obligation’ myself in connection with Normativism.

<sup>22</sup> The remarks in next two paragraphs follow draw upon (Whiting Forthcoming).

<sup>23</sup> Glüer and Wikforss direct this complaint against (P\*), but presumably they would take it to apply equally to (P’).

<sup>24</sup> This explains why it can make sense to say, ‘You ought to use the term incorrectly’ (cp. Hattiangadi 2009: 60; Rosen 2001: 620-1).

<sup>25</sup> For reasons why I stick to ‘ought’-talk rather than ‘obligation’-talk in this context, see n21. Darwall’s discussion is primarily framed in terms of obligations, but it would be straightforward enough to reformulation it in the terms I prefer.

<sup>26</sup> I have adapted these remarks to accommodate (P\*)’s rejection. Hattiangadi also has reservations about ‘should not be’, since it is not agent-implicating (2009: 62). I shall take this on board in the reformulation of the passage below.

<sup>27</sup> One might at this point challenge the Normativist to *explain* how what an expression means could, alone, have implications for how a subject should, may or has reason to employ it. This important issue has received surprisingly little attention; indeed, it is almost entirely ignored (although see Millar 2004). Normativism would, surely, be bolstered if a plausible explanation for what it claims to be the case were on offer, and the thesis might be hard to swallow in the absence of such an account.

While I agree that accounting for the normativity of meaning is a pressing task, doing so is beyond the scope of this paper.