

Is Meaning Normative?

Andrea Guardo

According to Paul Boghossian, while a case can be made that the concept of *mental content* is normative, the claim that that of *linguistic meaning* is normative has no plausibility whatever¹. Here I am not going to say anything of interest about content. What I will try to do is explain why, unlike Boghossian, I am strongly inclined to say that meaning *is* normative².

Let us start with Boghossian's argument (well, a more concise and more explicit counterpart of it):

First premise: «An expression E expresses a normative notion only if it is *constitutive* of our *understanding* of E that its application implies an *ought* or a *may*»³, and the fact that it is constitutive of our understanding of E that its application implies an ought or a may constitutes evidence for the conclusion that E expresses a normative notion.

Second premise: it is a conceptual truth that belief «[...] should aim at the truth [...]»⁴, that one *ought* to try to believe only what is true (maybe belief should not

¹ Paul A. Boghossian, *Is Meaning Normative?*, in Christian Nimtz, Ansgar Beckermann, *Philosophie und/als Wissenschaft – Hauptvorträge und Kolloquiumsbeiträge zu GAP.5*, Paderborn, Mentis, 2005 and Paul A. Boghossian, *The Normativity of Content*, in *Philosophical Issues*, vol. XIII, 2003, pp. 31-45.

² As far as I can see, the recent interest in the question that constitutes the title of the present paper is a by-product of Kripke's much-debated argument from normativity against dispositional analyses of meaning (for which see Saul A. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language – An Elementary Exposition* (1981), Oxford, Blackwell, 1982). Now, it is worth noting that what Kripke means by “normativity of meaning” is not exactly what Boghossian means; the two senses are closely connected but nonetheless distinct. Therefore, I want to stress that what follows should not be seen as an attempt to argue for the premise of Kripke's argument (I undertook such a task in my *The Argument from Normativity against Dispositional Analyses of Meaning*, in Volker A. Munz, Klaus Puhl, Joseph Wang, *Language and World – Papers of the XXXII International Wittgenstein Symposium*, Kirchberg am Wechsel, Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society, 2009).

³ *Is Meaning Normative?*, *cit.*, § 2, p. 208.

⁴ *Is Meaning Normative?*, *cit.*, § 2, p. 212, but see also John MacFarlane, *Making Sense of Relative Truth*, § II, p. 333, in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. CV, 2005, pp. 321-339.

aim *only* at the truth, maybe «[...] the point of belief is knowledge»⁵, but that belief should aim *at least* at the truth seems plausible).

First lemma: it is constitutive of our understanding of “belief” that its application implies an ought⁶.

Third premise: a case can be made that «[...] we understand the role that contents play in propositional attitudes generally only *through* our understanding of their role in belief»⁷.

Second lemma: even if there are propositional attitudes (like desire) for which it is not the case that it is constitutive of our understanding of the corresponding expressions that their application “directly” imply an ought, still one can try to maintain that it is constitutive of our understanding of “content” that its application *somehow* implies an ought⁸.

Fourth premise: assertion is «[...] the verbal counterpart of judgment and judgment [...] the occurrent form of belief»⁹, but «[...] it is not a norm on assertion that it should aim at the truth, in the way in which it is a norm on belief that it do so»¹⁰ (if you mean addition by “+” and *have a desire to tell the truth*, then, if you are asked what the sum of 57 and 68 is, you ought to say: «125»; but what if you feel like lying or misleading your audience? All we have is a mere *hypothetical* ought¹¹).

Third lemma: it is not constitutive of our understanding of “assertion” that its application implies an ought¹².

Fifth premise: if there is a speech act S such that we understand the role that meanings play in speech acts generally only *through* our understanding of their role in S, S is assertion (as far as I can see, in Boghossian’s formulation, this premise is not made explicit).

Fourth lemma: it is not constitutive of our understanding of “meaning” that its application implies an ought¹³.

Conclusion: while a case can be made that the concept of *mental content* is normative, the claim that that of *linguistic meaning* is normative has no plausibility whatever.

Well, I have chosen to discuss Boghossian’s works for their merits and not for their deficiencies. However, there are a number of things that I find

⁵ Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits*, New York-Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, Introduction, § 1, p. 1.

⁶ See, e. g., *Is Meaning Normative?*, *cit.*, § 2, p. 212.

⁷ *Is Meaning Normative?*, *cit.*, § 2, p. 213.

⁸ *Is Meaning Normative?*, *cit.*, § 2, pp. 212-217.

⁹ *Knowledge and Its Limits*, *cit.*, Introduction, § 4, p. 10.

¹⁰ *Is Meaning Normative?*, *cit.*, § 2, p. 212.

¹¹ *Is Meaning Normative?*, *cit.*, § 2, p. 207.

¹² *Is Meaning Normative?*, *cit.*, § 2, pp. 207-208.

¹³ *Is Meaning Normative?*, *cit.*, § 2, pp. 207-208.

questionable in this argument. The main one is the derivation of the third lemma from the fourth premise: Boghossian assumes that it can be constitutive of our understanding of “assertion” that its application implies an ought only if it is a conceptual truth that assertion should aim at the truth; and this is incorrect.

Consider John MacFarlane’s groundbreaking work on assessment sensitivity. One of MacFarlane’s main aims is that of *making sense* of assessment sensitivity, of showing that this notion is *not incoherent*. But why should one think that it is incoherent? MacFarlane writes:

The charge of incoherence arises because a standard story about the significance of “true at a context of use C_U ” cannot be extended to “true at a context of use C_U and context of assessment C_A ”. According to this story, truth is the internal aim of assertion¹⁴.

Now, according to MacFarlane, there is no prospect of generalizing this story not because the notion of assessment sensitivity is incoherent, but because truth can hardly be singled out as *the* aim of assertion: it is not even obvious that it is *an* aim of assertion¹⁵. This sounds like an endorsement of our fourth premise, but it is not: according to MacFarlane, saying that truth is an aim of assertion is saying that «[...] a false assertion is always incorrect qua assertion [...]»¹⁶, and to cast doubt on such a thesis it is sufficient to stress that «An *insincere* assertion that happens to be true seems a more flagrant violation of the norms for assertion than a *sincere* [...] one that happens to be false»¹⁷; according to Boghossian, saying that truth is an aim of assertion is saying that one ought to try to assert only what is true, and to disprove such a thesis it is sufficient to note that an *insincere* assertion is not necessarily a violation of the norms for assertion. Anyway, what matters most is that MacFarlane holds, on the one hand, that to make sense of assessment sensitivity we also have to sketch a brand new story about the significance of “true” and, on the other hand, that while the standard story focuses on the *aims* of assertion, our new story should focus on the *conse-*

¹⁴ John MacFarlane, *The Assessment Sensitivity of Knowledge Attributions*, § 5.2, p. 226, in *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*, vol. I, 2005, pp. 197-233.

¹⁵ *Making Sense of Relative Truth*, *cit.*, § II, pp. 332-333.

¹⁶ *The Assessment Sensitivity of Knowledge Attributions*, *cit.*, § 5.2, p. 226.

¹⁷ *Making Sense of Relative Truth*, *cit.*, § II, p. 333 (my italics).

quences of making an assertion¹⁸. In particular, MacFarlane underlines that «An assertion [...] is a *commitment to the truth* of the proposition asserted»¹⁹.

But saying that I have committed myself to the truth of the proposition asserted is saying that I *ought* to withdraw my assertion when the proposition asserted is shown to be untrue, that I *ought* to be held responsible when someone else acts on my assertion, and maybe also that I *ought* to justify my assertion when it is appropriately challenged²⁰ (I hope it is clear that these are *in no sense* hypothetical oughts: in the intended reading, “ought” has always outer scope). And this shows that it can be constitutive of our understanding of “assertion” that its application implies an ought *even* if it is *not* a conceptual truth that assertion should aim at the truth.

Now, this is not exactly an argument for the normativity of meaning, but it almost is; and Robert Brandom (who is clearly one of the sources of inspiration for this part of MacFarlane’s work) explicitly argued that meaning is normative on the basis of remarks analogous to those just outlined²¹. However, I must confess that I am not entirely satisfied with this line of reasoning. In particular, I do not like the idea (which somehow unites MacFarlane and Brandom with Boghossian) that «The core case of *saying* something is [...] *asserting* something»²². I will now sketch an argument for the normativity of meaning that makes use of both the notion of commitment and aim but that does not assume either that it is a conceptual truth that *assertion* should aim at the *truth* or that there is a speech act S such that we understand the role that meanings play in speech acts generally only through our understanding of their role in S.

My point of departure is that that of meaning is a “theoretical” concept whose aim is to explain communicative phenomena. From this, it follows that we can learn something of the very nature of meaning by reflecting on the structure of an explanation of a case of successful communication in terms of meaning.

¹⁸ *Making Sense of Relative Truth*, *cit.*, § II, p. 333.

¹⁹ *Making Sense of Relative Truth*, *cit.*, § II, p. 333.

²⁰ *Making Sense of Relative Truth*, *cit.*, § II, p. 334.

²¹ For a recent formulation see Robert B. Brandom, *Between Saying and Doing: towards an Analytic Pragmatism*, New York-Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008, 2, § 3, pp. 41-43 and 4, § 4, pp. 111-114.

²² *Between Saying and Doing*, *cit.*, 2, § 3, pp. 41-42.

Well, yesterday, at the Frederic Chopin Airport, I bought a sandwich; I pointed at the ham sandwiches and said to the waitress: «May I have one of those, please?», and she gave me a ham sandwich. My utterance reached its goal thanks to its meaning. More precisely (I use the traditional terminology, even if I agree with Stefano Predelli when he maintains that it can be misleading²³): in performing the utterance in question, I followed a rule; this rule is the character of the sentence I uttered; this character, together with the context of the utterance, yielded a content; the waitress knew which rule I followed and she was aware of the relevant features of the context (for the sake of simplicity, you can conceive of my demonstration as one of these features) and therefore she grasped that content, *she understood what I meant*.

But how did she know which rule I followed? Well, she knew that conventionally linked to that type of utterance there is a certain rule; she knew that I wanted to communicate and, hence, that I was trying to do what a speaker ought to do in order to communicate; finally, she knew that *in order to communicate speakers ought to follow the rules conventionally associated with the types of which their utterances are occurrences*²⁴.

And so, we found an ought. Insofar as I aim to communicate, I am committed to try to use words in a certain way (this is why Humpty Dumpty's "theory of meaning" sounds absurd²⁵). Is this "a mere hypothetical ought"? Of course, but not in Boghossian's sense. When Boghossian says that the fact that if you mean addition by "+" and have a desire to tell the truth, then you ought to say: «125» when asked for "68 + 57" does not suffice to establish the normativity of assertion because this is a mere hypothetical ought, his point is that an insincere assertion is nevertheless an assertion²⁶. But is a speech act that does not aim to communicate nevertheless a speech act? I think not.

This is my argument for the normativity of meaning. Here is a more schematic formulation of it:

²³ See, e. g., Stefano Predelli, *Contexts – Meaning, Truth, and the Use of Language*, New York-Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.

²⁴ Of course, this is pretty rough.

²⁵ See Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871), chapter VI, p. 213, in Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice – The Definitive Edition*, New York-London, Norton & Company, 2000.

²⁶ *Is Meaning Normative?*, *cit.*, § 2, p. 207.

First premise: the fact that it is constitutive of our understanding of an expression E that its application implies an ought constitutes evidence for the conclusion that E expresses a normative notion.

Second premise: it is a conceptual truth that in order to perform a speech act one ought to try to use words in a certain way.

First lemma: it is constitutive of our understanding of “speech act” that its application implies an ought.

Third premise: our understanding of the concept of meaning presupposes an understanding of the concept of speech act.

Second lemma: it is constitutive of our understanding of “meaning” that its application implies an ought.

Conclusion: a strong case can be made that the concept of meaning is normative²⁷.

A final remark. In a short essay on “the metaphysics of words”, David Kaplan writes:

[...] I think of my conception as being naturalistic, *as owing more to the theory of evolution than to algebra*²⁸.

Now, my final remark is that *in this sense* the argument I sketched is a naturalistic argument. Of course, you can question such a use of “naturalistic”. But then you owe me a definition (or something like a definition) of “naturalism”²⁹.

²⁷ Therefore, Boghossian’s derivation of the third lemma from the fourth premise is unwarranted simply because although the fact that I mean addition by “+” implies that I ought to say: «125» when asked for the sum of 57 and 68 *only if I have a desire to tell the truth*, there is a *direct* route from my meaning addition by “+” to the fact that I ought to try to use certain words in a certain way. During the discussion, Andrew Jorgensen pointed out that one can show that the derivation in question is unwarranted simply by noting that in order to lie, one ought to use words in a certain way: Boghossian found a case where (in a certain sense) it is not true that we should constrain the usage of words by their correctness conditions and wrongly concluded that in such a case there is no way we are supposed to use words (see Andrew Jorgensen, *The Normativity of Meaning*, manuscript, § 2, p. 7). I found Jorgensen’s argument appealing from the very beginning, and now I also know why: it is just a slightly different version of my argument; after all, in order to lie, one ought to use words in a certain way simply because lying is communicating information believed to be false.

²⁸ David Kaplan, *Words*, I, § 1.6, note 9, p. 100, in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. LXIV, 1990, pp. 93-119 (my italics).

²⁹ During the discussion, Jaroslav Peregrin noted that naturalists often define the notion of a naturalistic concept by saying that a concept is naturalistic if and only if it is one of the concepts of the natural sciences. Now, this is, no doubt, what naturalists usually say; but

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this does not mean that such a definition is satisfactory (to be fair to Peregrin, he did not seem to be willing to maintain that it is). My main (but not sole) problem with this definition is that it somehow presupposes a monolithic conception of scientific research that, in my opinion, is nothing more than mythology and propaganda.

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