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## The Normativity of Meaning: From Constitutive Norms to Prescriptions\*

### Abstract

This paper defends the normativity of meaning thesis by clearing up a misunderstanding about what the thesis amounts to. The misunderstanding is that according to it, failing to use an expression in accordance with the norms which constitute its meaning amounts to changing the expression's meaning. If this was what the thesis claimed, then it would indeed be easy to show that meaning norms do not yield prescriptions and cannot be followed. However, there is another reading: what is constitutive of meaning is not the norm's being followed, but the norm's being applicable. On this reading, the standard arguments against the thesis lose their force. After discussing the alternative reading and its consequences, the paper goes on to sketch a model of how norms of meaning become applicable in the first place. This model supports the view that talk of meaning has its pragmatic home in contexts of linguistic calibration.

### Keywords

Normativity of meaning, constitutive norms, prescriptions, linguistic communication

## 1 Introduction

Among philosophers of language, there is now wide consensus that if we take an expression to have a particular meaning, then we must take there to be corresponding conditions of the expression's correct use (Kripke, 1982; Boghossian, 1989; Glüer, 1999; Hattiangadi, 2006)<sup>1</sup>

The majority of philosophers are happy to speak of these conditions as »normative«. If some uses of a word are correct and others incorrect, given a particular meaning, then this must have some

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1 As some have noted (Millar 2002, Buleandra 2008, Glüer and Wikforss, 2009), the notion of correctness of *use* is wider than that of the correctness of *application*. The former is not restricted to uses of terms in predication and thus in indicative sentences, but also relates to their employment in questions and imperatives, and also to their uptake in mere thinking and in acting. One important point to note in this connection is that the correctness of use relates not only to the *conditions* of application, but also to the *consequences* of application (even if one talks about

bearing on how people ought to speak, and therefore on how they ought to act.<sup>2</sup> Hence, according to the majority view, meaning is a normative matter. For many, this is an important result, because it bars a reduction of semantic vocabulary to non-normative vocabularies and thus stands in the way of naturalism about meaning.

Recently, however, some philosophers have denied that meaning is normative in any interesting sense. While granting »correctness conditions« which expressions carry in virtue of their meanings, they insist that what anyone *ought to do* with an expression must depend on additional, more clearly and more traditionally normative, considerations — such as that one wants to speak correctly, is forced by someone or has general moral reasons to do it (Bilgrami 1993, Boghossian 2003). Mere correctness conditions, it is suggested, just sort different uses of expressions into two classes – the »correct« and the »incorrect« uses – just as fruits could be sorted into the classes »apples« and »pears«. But what one ought to do in the context of such classes is determined by factors beyond language (Hattiangadi 2006; Glüer 1999). This position has come to be known as anti-normativism about meaning.

In some of the latest anti-normativist writings, another formulation of the position has become common: meaning is only associated with constitutive norms, but constitutive norms do not translate into prescriptions (Hattiangadi 2006, 2009). To ignore established correctness conditions of an expression, this formulation suggests, would be to use the expression with a different, non-standard or novel meaning, but there is no sense in which one is thereby doing something one ought not to do.

In this paper, I want to trace out and defend one way of replying to these worries, and thus outline a defensible and interesting version of normativism about meaning. It is to insist that what is

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the »*conditions* of correct use«). For the distinction, see Dummett 1973, Brandom 1994, ch. 3.

2 Jaroslav Peregrin (2012) professes to have trouble even to understand the denial of this thesis. Correctness, he sensibly insists, is after all conceptually linked to what one ought to do.

constitutive of meaning is the *applicability* of particular norms, not their being met (section 2). From this, it follows that a normativist is not forced to admit that failing to use a word in accordance with its correctness conditions constitutes using it with a different meaning, or with none at all. If what matters is the applicability of norms, i.e. the appropriateness of *assessing* the speaker on the basis of the relevant constitutive standards, then there is room for judging that irrespective of her actual conduct, a speaker ought to conform to the norms which constitute the meanings of her expressions. This will bring the debate (back?) to the vexed issue of how normative standards come into force in the first place (section 3). In order to move the debate forward, I will lay out one plausible normativist answer to this question. On the proposed view, normative standards — also known, in fact, as reasons -- are generally attributed and revised in the context of a general score-keeping practice. Within the general score-keeping practice within which all talk of reasons is set (including that of theorists), the only way to deflect a charge of violating a reason is to signal acceptance of *other* reasons — at least until the agent exits the practice altogether and loses all intelligibility. This is true for semantic reasons (and hence semantic norms) as it is true for those reasons which may, at times, override or disable them.

## 2 On violating constitutive norms

### 2.1 The anti-normativist interpretation of normativism

I have said above that it is now widely accepted that meaning is bound up with constitutive norms, and that while normativists are happy to think of these norms as underwriting prescriptions,<sup>3</sup> anti-normativists reject this step. A good place to begin an investigation into the controversy between

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3 According to Peregrin (2012, 76), normativists like Robert Brandom think of the norms not as supplying prescriptions but as supplying constraints. I think that the distinction is exaggerated. Given a discursive practice with a moderately rich logical structure and grammar, constraints entail prescriptions. If it is admissible to infer B from A, then one must reply in the negative when confronted with the question whether the inference from A to B is illicit (unless, of course, one of various disabling reasons obtains).

these parties is to think about just *what* anti-normativists take themselves to be rejecting, and hence just what commitment they attribute to their normativist opponents.

From their literature, it is clear that anti-normativists interpret normativism as implying that any »violation« of a constitutive norm of meaning must be taken as a change or loss of meaning. (I use scare-quotes because, as we will shortly see, anti-normativists raise questions about the coherence of the vocabulary of »violation« in the context of meaning norms.) Kathrin Glüer, for instance, writes: »Correctness conditions distinguish between correct and incorrect use of an expression, say ›green‹, with a particular meaning, say *green*, such that, if this distinction is lost, meaning is lost as well.« (Glüer 1999, 122) Of course, anti-normativists do not attribute to normativists the absurd claim that a single violation of an expression's correctness conditions changes the expression's *conventional* (or even *dictionary*) meaning. What anti-normativists take their opponents to claim is that particular *tokens* of an expression carry their respective meanings only given their use according to the relevant constitutive norms and, hence, change or lose their meanings when these norms are violated.

This reading of normativism has consequences for how anti-normativists think of the prescriptions which normativists are disposed to infer from constitutive norms: according to the reading in question, if the content of such a prescription is to be something other than to avoid changing a term's meaning (which would tie normativism to a quite unwarranted linguistic conservatism), it can only be to avoid violating the norms while keeping meaning constant. Since anti-normativists take this to be impossible — so that the prescription to avoid doing that comes out as inviolable and hence empty — it is open to question, for anti-normativists, whether normativists are actually entitled to their talk of »violations« of constitutive norms. It is hence no surprise that Glüer goes on to write, directly after the quote given above: »And no matter how [the correctness] conditions are understood [i.e. whether as assertibility or truth conditions], identification of correct use with the

use that should be made of ›green‹ if it is to mean *green* collapses this very distinction [between correct and incorrect use] by turning incorrect use into change or loss of meaning. Such identification thus turns out to be self-defeating.« (Glüer, 1999, 122, see also Glüer and Pagin, 1999, 218 and Glüer and Wikforss, 2009, 48f.)

## 2.2 An alternative reading of the normativist thesis

At this point, one could think that there is no need for anti-normativists to supply any further arguments. They have just shown, one could think, that normativism is either committed to an unwarranted linguistic conservatism or turns out to be nothing short of incoherent. One could, however, also pause and take this result as an invitation to check whether the anti-normativist interpretation of the normativist thesis was perhaps too quick. Meditating this question, I want to contend, turns out to be worth our time, for there is a plausible interpretive alternative.

This alternative comes into view once we note that following a norm and being appropriately assessed on the basis of a norm are two different things. In particular, there are norms to which one can count as bound without having subjected oneself to them at all, in fact without even being aware of them, and thus without following them in any recognizable sense. Legal norms are often of this sort. Now, there is of course a difference between legal and linguistic norms in that for the latter to become binding over a speaker, some sort of active participation in the linguistic practice is required on her part. But whatever the exact shape of the needed participation; with the distinction between norms being followed and norms being applicable in place, we can formulate the alternative reading of normativism. According to it, what is constitutive of meaning is only our being appropriately assessed on the basis of a constitutive norm of meaning, *not* necessarily our following it — in particular not our following it in the sense which implies success at carrying out all of its demands.<sup>4</sup>

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4 The distinction between being sensitive to a norm and being subject to a norm is also stressed by Robert Brandom (in conversation).

Once this interpretation is taken seriously, it becomes conceptually possible for an agent to fail to meet the norms regarding the use of some expression without thereby changing the expression's meaning. The model for this possibility is a piece of land which can remain designated as a residential area — and in that sense *be* a residential area — even though its owner has illegally turned it into an office park or a dump. Or, to use an example from current normativist theory,<sup>5</sup> take a figure in chess which can remain designated as a rook — and in that sense *be* a rook — even though some player has just moved it diagonally across the chess board. On the basis of this alternative proposal, normativists have a straightforward response to the anti-normativist puzzlement at their talk of »violations«. To answer Glüer directly, the »identification of correct use with the use that should be made of ›green‹ if it is to mean *green*« does simply *not* »turn incorrect use into change or loss of meaning« — not if there still are reasons to hold the speaker to the standard set by the relevant correctness conditions. (In the next section, we will look at such reasons.) If there are such reasons, then the violation of a constitutive norm can be genuine — rather than merely marking a shift to a different norm on which the linguistic conduct no longer comes out as incorrect.

Of course, favoring this alternative interpretation in the case of meaning does not settle, by itself, how much norm-violation is admissible before an interpreter must shift her interpretive attribution of a particular meaning to the expression as used by the speaker at hand. But it should not be assumed at the outset that the answer is »no violation at all«.

Before thinking about the plausibility of the alternative reading of the normativist thesis, let us look at whether it can be attributed to actual normativists. This question is perhaps of secondary importance (since we are not interested in exegetical but in systematic issues), but a case for an affirmative answer can be made. Take Robert Brandom's *Making It Explicit* (1994). In a central

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5 See, for instance, Peregrin, 2012; Lauer, 2011.

passage of the concluding chapter, it reads: »Massive individual differences in inferential dispositions among interlocutors are compatible with interpreting them all as nonetheless governed by (answerable to) the same set of conceptual properties.« (Brandom, 1994, 636) Since, for our purposes, we can equate conceptual properties with meaning,<sup>6</sup> it is clear that *Making It Explicit* exemplifies the view explicated here. This is no different in Brandom's *Reason in Philosophy* (2009), his most recent presentation of his »normative pragmatics«. Here, it is emphasized that what a speaker is bound by depends on »what she has authorized others to hold her responsible for« (Brandom, 2009, ch.2). Clearly, this thesis is, again, carefully worded so as to allow for the possibility of violation without an ensuing change of normative status, and hence of meaning. Or take Mark Lance and John O'Leary-Hawthorne (1997), who argue that meaning-claims must be understood as having prescriptive force — not just as semantically implying ought-statements, but as themselves sharing their force with imperatives. It is quite evident that such prescriptions are made (or can at any rate be made) when a speaker who is taken to mean (one wants to say: who is taken *already* to mean) something particular by her expressions fails or has failed to adjust her linguistic conduct to *fit* the meaning.

So, is this reading of the normativity thesis plausible? I want to contend that apart from its capacity to ward off the anti-normativist arguments (which we will discuss below, in the next subsection), this depends on whether we can fashion a plausible story about how a norm becomes applicable, and how it can be held to remain applicable even in the face of violations, according to the alternative reading of normativism (we will discuss that in the next main section). By way of an introduction into these discussions, let me contend that answers to these questions will come into our reach once we remind ourselves that the norms under investigation are the norms of a *practice*. Practices are characterised, among other things, by the possibility of a degree of »slack«, i.e. by the

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6 More precisely, the quote is taken from a section in which Brandom discusses the perspectival character of linguistic interpretation and distinguishes between (perspectively variant) inferential significance and (perspectively invariant) content, which is understood as the function from perspective to significance.

possibility that not every norm-violation forces the interpreter to shift her interpretive attribution of a normative status, in this case a meaning. (A fortiori, a norm-violation also does not force the interpreter to shift the interpretation of the practice as a whole). The question just how much slack is possible in a practice is a substantive question to be decided on the basis of the specificities of the practice in question.<sup>7</sup>

### 2.3 Anti-normativist arguments in the light of the alternative reading

Let us now look at how well the reading fares with respect to the other arguments standardly levelled against normativism, that is apart from the charge that normativism is self-defeating.

The most prominent argument relies most directly on the thesis circumvented by our alternative reading and can, hence, most easily be rejected. Here is Glüer's (1999, 126f.) version. It starts with the (entirely appropriate) insistence that whether the correctness conditions are understood as truth conditions or as assertibility conditions, the possibility of making false claims about the world presupposes the possibility of violating such conditions without thereby shifting the meaning of one's term. If, in conditions of bad visibility, someone erroneously says »there is a horse« while pointing to a particularly thin cow, she obviously means *horse* by »horse«, although her utterance is in violation of the relevant correctness conditions. Glüer thinks that normativists are committed to denying this, because on her reading, they take meaning to be dependent on the successful following of the relevant constitutive norms. It is here that the argument goes wrong. To show this, it suffices to point out that the speaker may still appropriately be assessed by the standards which tie »horse«s to horses, and that this (rather than the speaker's actual linguistic conduct) underwrites what she means by »horse«.<sup>8</sup>

7 David Lauer (2011), following Haugeland (1998), has also stressed that from the perspective of a practice's engaged participant, there is a difference between, on the one hand, failing to carry out a mandated maneuver and thereby incurring blame of some sort, and on the other, omitting some maneuver and thereby demonstrating that one is and has been following the norms of a different practice altogether.

8 One could argue that Glüer's employment of this argument puts pressure on her to give a positive account of the sense in which (according to her concession to the normativist camp) meanings entail correctness conditions. As far as I can tell, she does not say much about this at any point.

Anandi Hattiangadi (2006, 229f.) takes a line similar to Glüer's. Her focus is not on the possibility of empirical errors, but on the possibility of insincere speech. Like errors of the kind investigated by Glüer, Hattiangadi insists that the insincerity of speakers ought not to be interpreted as involving loss or change of meaning. In fact, insincere speech relies on the constancy of meaning from sincere to insincere uses of expressions. Obviously, any theory which is committed to a denial of this fact is *prima-facie* faulty. From the perspective developed in this paper, the answer to Hattiangadi is the same as the answer to Glüer: normativism is not committed to such a denial. There simply is no reason to worry that the insincere speaker's meaning changes because of her insincerity, if there is still reason to assess her conduct on the basis of the relevant semantic norms.

The speakers depicted by Glüer and Hattiangadi thus make mistakes, but do not thereby change the meanings of the terms. At this point, however, a different anti-normativist complaint can be lodged. It is that normativists are committed to a problematic interpretation of the nature of the mistakes in question. In particular, they must view them as semantic mistakes — when, anti-normativists insist, they are clearly empirical and moral mistakes, respectively.

I think that the normativist ought to point out that the argument is based on the assumption that speakers' mistakes cannot be empirical (or moral) and semantic at the same time. On inspection, however, there is no good reason to exclude just this possibility. As Peregrin (2012, 79) writes, whatever the causal antecedents that lead one (perversely) to move a rook in the way appropriate to bishops, it's still going to be a violation of the rules of *chess*. Analogously, whatever it is that leads one to say »Lo, a horse« when one is looking at a cow, we *can* speak of a violation of the rules of language – i.e. of a semantic mistake. This is quite independent of whether the mistake can *also* be classified as, or explained in terms of, an empirical or a moral (or whatever other) failing.

At this point, it is, perhaps, natural to ask: And does the *absence* of any empirical or moral failing entail that there is also an absence of a semantic failing? I suppose that it does not come with a prohibitive theoretical cost to admit that there can be mistakes which are *purely* semantic. Donald Davidson's Mrs. Malaprop could be seen as an example of this. It should be noted, however, that normativists who admit a sense in which purely semantic mistakes are possible are not committed to the kind of conventionalism which is the target of Davidson's well-known critique (Davidson, 1984, 1986). The point is that purely semantic mistakes, unlike empirical or moral mistakes, can be responded to with a mere shift in interpretation. Thus, once the divergence between the aberrant speaker's idiosyncratic language and the ordinary way of speaking is duly registered in our interpretation scheme, the aberrant speaker can be regarded as not at all in violation of any norms. According to what Mrs. Malaprop means by »derangement« and »epitaphs«, she is quite right when she says that she can identify »nice derangements of epitaphs« in her vernacular (»oracular«) tongue. Incidentally, a similar account could be given of the temporary idiolect of Matilda (Who Told Such Dreadful Lies) on the rare occasion in which she tells falsehoods in order to instill true beliefs in her audience (see Hattiangadi, 2006, 230). In general, the semantic proprieties attributed to other people need not be conventional. There are also norms which apply only to particular individuals, even to particular individuals at particular times.

I have not yet said anything about how normative standards come into force in the first place. A good way to introduce this topic — which in its main part will be the subject of the next section — is to look at two anti-normativist arguments to the effect that constitutive norms cannot be properly action-guiding (Glüer and Pagin, 1999 and Glüer and Wikforss, 2009). The first argument starts with the claim that reasons only guide when they actually motivate. According to its second premise, while prescriptions in conjunction with appropriate pro-attitudes (directed at the prescriptions themselves) can motivate, this is not the case for constitutive norms. According to

Glüer and Pagin, constitutive norms do not take the form »in context C, do A«, but »doing A in context C counts as performing B«, for instance »using words A in context C counts as claiming that B«. From this structural difference, Glüer and Pagin infer that all that a constitutive norm can do in the context of practical reasoning is provide doxastic bridges from one pro-attitude (»I want to claim that B«) to another (»I want to use words A«). Even if there is a general pro-attitude to observe the constitutive norm, the latter just does not prescribe anything.

A normativist can say at least two things in response to this argument. Firstly, as it stands, the argument is wedded to a Humean conception of practical reason. Anyone with doubts about the Humean picture (and these doubts are wide-spread among normativists), will have doubts about this particular argument as well. Secondly, and more importantly, the alternative reading of normativism developed above is naturally coupled with a view of constitutive norms on which the latter are *not* just rules of the form »using words A in context C counts as claiming that B«. Rather, constitutive norms tie current situations to the past (and the future), so that the following can be an appropriate formulation of a norm's requirement: »yesterday, you said ›A‹, presumably to state that A; and since B is a material consequence of A, you should, when asked today whether B, answer in the affirmative.« Since it is possible to violate this prescription without thereby changing what one meant yesterday, there is a sense in which constitutive norms *can* issue in prescriptions.

This transtemporal understanding of constitutive norms can also be utilized in a response to a second argument. Glüer and Wikforss (2009) argue that normativism involves a vicious circularity. The argument is concerned with mental (rather than semantic) content, but the alternative reading of normativism developed in this paper provides us with a response to it, too. The alleged circularity consists in the fact that on the one hand, we can only be motivated by and hence follow a norm if we understand its demands, while on the other hand, according to Glüer and Wikforss's reading of normativism, our mental representation of the demands depends on our following the norm. Our

straightforward response is that if we relax the constitutivity thesis in the way recommended in this paper, we can see that there is simply nothing mysterious about knowing that a norm is *applicable* to one without (yet) having satisfied the norm. I can know that my saying »A« yesterday commits me to saying that B today without (yet) having said that B. Hence, there is no reason to doubt that my saying »A« yesterday can motivate, or contribute to motivating, me to say that B today.

### 3 How constitutive norms come into force

#### 3.1 Constitutive standards and normative scorekeeping

So, how do constitutive norms come into force? Answering this question is an important part of the normativist story, not only because it suggests itself naturally once we adopt the advertised view of constitutivity. It also provides an occasion to say something about a question which we have so far ducked, but which actually stands in the center of the controversy: what *is* it that, in general, we have to do as a consequence of the meaning of our expressions?<sup>9</sup> Finally, a discussion of how constitutive norms come into force can serve to point out that the anti-normativists' typical picture of what it means to say that a norm is in force, namely that of a legal decree backed by power (see, for instance, Glüer, 1999, 121f., Glüer and Pagin, 1999, 212f.) is not at all inevitable.

The main point I wish to make in this section is that normative standards can be understood as statuses attributed to agents within a generalized score-keeping practice – a practice which is not only one of prescribing and acting on the basis of the prescriptions, but also one of asking for and offering defenses for alleged violations of the prescriptions. Crucially, it also includes the possibility of changing one's expectations of and prescriptions to another agent based on such defenses.<sup>10</sup> The

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9 It is the key question, for instance, in the philosophical exchange between Hattiangadi, Glüer and Wikforss, on the one hand, and Daniel Whiting, on the other. See Hattiangadi (2006, 2009); Whiting (2007, 2009); Glüer and Wikforss (2007, 2009).

10 Note that some player's defense leading another to revisit her initial normative assessment is different from some player's move changing the score.

best way I know of elucidating and supporting these claims is to describe the practice and then invite the reader to see if her own implicit understanding of normative assessment fits the description. It will come out that talk of »norms« is best understood as derivative from talk of »constitutive standards« (or indeed »reasons«) not the other way round.

Here is a model of the practice, restricted to just two agents, A and B, and couple of candidate norms and lines of conduct.<sup>11</sup> Agent A takes agent B to be committed to some particular norm  $N_1$ .

This typically happens because agent B has issued an explicit acknowledgement-signal, say  $S_a$ .

(This will be relaxed at the end of this section, when we discuss a default-challenge structure with respect to certain norms.) To understand what it is to attribute commitment to a norm, think of it as taking out and working with a score sheet. In our case, A takes out a score-sheet entitled » $N_1$ «. On it, there is a table which maps circumstances C to moves M, reflecting the fact that a norm can demand different lines of behavior (moves) in different circumstances. If, say, circumstances  $C_p$  obtain, then agent A expects of agent B to perform move  $M_p$  and will tick off the relevant line only when B has performed this move.<sup>12</sup>

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11 For a detailed discussion of some aspects of this practice, see also my Kiesselbach (2012).

12 Let me enter a few remarks regarding the circumstances and moves listed on each score sheet. For one thing, there are clearly simple norms which do without the conditional structure, i.e. which demand the production of some move(s) *unconditionally*. The format proposed here is the general form within which this possibility finds a place. Secondly, the image of a table (on the score sheet) is actually itself a special case. In principle, the relation between circumstances and moves ought to be understood as a function, and it is certainly possible for circumstances and moves to be locatable on continuous scales. There is no upper limit to the complexity of the function tying circumstances to moves. In fact, there is not even reason to rule out (and some reason to expect) the possibility that there is no fully specifiable way of computing the moves from the circumstances. (Instead, norm-attributors and followers may need to employ bits of un-analyzed *know-how*. Face-recognition, for example, is an ability for which we are only just starting to see moderately successful attempts at reverse-engineering and hence of finding computable functions. In this case, it is possible that the score-sheets of different agents diverge in unexpected ways, requiring them to calibrate carefully. We will come back to this below.) Lastly, we need not impose very strict requirements on what can count as circumstances and moves in an adequate theory of norms, apart from the basic requirements that the relevant agents must be capable of detecting them (in the case of circumstances) and producing them (in the case of moves), with or without the aid of artefacts such as microscopes or fax-machines.

Let us now think about a few ways in which A's attributions can change in light of B's conduct. One thing that can happen, of course, is that A ticks off the lines on her score sheet as B produces her moves. B's moves are in line with the score-sheet  $N_1$  and everything goes according to plan. But things may not go so smoothly. Suppose, again, that agent A has taken out score sheet  $N_1$  upon registering B's acknowledgement-signal  $S_a$ . Suppose further that some circumstance listed on the score-sheet as  $C_1$  has materialized. However, suppose that agent A does *not* see B responding with  $M_1$ , as the score-sheet stipulates. Rather, A observes B performing, say, move  $M_{273}$ . At this point, agent A has different options.

Firstly, she can check her own data, e.g. the reliability of the perceptual apparatus that led her to take out score-sheet  $N_1$  and tick off  $C_1$ . This can lead to a revision of the entry on her score-sheet, or to an exchange of score-sheets.

Secondly, A can retain her expectations of B, but mark B as a faulty operator and lower her expectation of reliability for the future. (If this happens too often, B will be taken off A's list of recognized agents.)

But this does not exhausts A's options. A can also – thirdly – assign commitment to a *different* norm to B, perhaps norm  $N_2$ . We can picture this as A's taking out a new score-sheet,  $N_2$ , which comes with a new schema of circumstances C and moves M. Importantly, if A's former expectation of B was based on an acknowledgment-signal on the part of B, this option will require an act of translation: whenever agent B *now* issues signal  $S_a$ , agent A will take her not as signaling (as

formerly presumed) commitment to  $N_1$ , but as signaling commitment to, say,  $N_{273}$ , or some other  $N$ . We can think of this as an entry in (or a correction of an entry in) a separate translation table.

These are the different ways in which A's attributions can change in response to B's conduct.

However, so far, we have not looked at what happens between B's performance and A's score-keeping reaction. In particular, we have not yet looked at the use of normative vocabulary. But this – normative talk – is of course what agents like us will resort to in case their practice is not running smoothly, and it is part of what we seek to understand better with the help of our model. If such expressive resources are available in A's (and B's) language, then A can make her expectation (her score sheet entry) *explicit*: »Since by  $S_a$ , you acknowledged commitment to a norm which, under circumstances  $C_1$ , require you to carry out move  $M_1$ , and since  $C_1$  in fact obtain, you are now required to carry out move  $M_1$ .« (The elliptical version of this is »Do  $M_1$ !«).

Such moves are appropriately responded to either with the production of the required move  $M_1$  or with a defense. The latter will also involve normative vocabulary and typically make clear which entry on her interpreters' score sheet, or the taking out of which score sheet, B was aiming for. »By  $S_a$  I bound myself to a norm which requires me to...« (Another possible defense, of course, is the insistence that the mutually-agreed appropriate move was in fact carried out.)

On the basis of B's defense, A can question her own data, assign a (cognitive or perceptual) error to B, change the attribution of normative status from  $N_1$  to some other norm, or decide to make another normative inquiry and settle the question later. The »calibration game«, as we might call this practice, can go on until all agents act in accordance with each others' score sheets. Until then,

score-sheets (and translation tables) are updated again and again, accompanied by the use of normative vocabulary.

My claim, now, is that the central locus of normative vocabulary, crucially all talk of »constitutive« or »normative standards«, is within just such a calibration game, and that it is also within such a calibration game – i.e. from the perspective of a participant in it – that we must understand what it means to say that a norm is »in force«. Our saying that a norm is in force or that some player is appropriately assessed on the basis of some standard (»has some reason«, in the vernacular) reflects our current stance within a calibration game – whether we are theorists, or other (more ordinary) participants in the calibration practice. And this, in principle, is all that needs to be said in an account of how constitutive norms come into force.

At this point, it may seem that on the picture of normative assessment just sketched, agents are let off the hook too easily. All that an agent needs to do in order to escape an obligation or an indictment of having made a mistake, is to change her commitments by issuing new acknowledgement-signals. All she has to do (to say it with the jargon of calibration) is to *re-calibrate* with her peers (perhaps with us). Does this not come dangerously close to the anti-normativist position that one cannot *really* violate a linguistic norm, one can just use one's expressions with a non-standard meaning?

The answer is yes and no (a little bit of yes, a lot of no). *Yes* in that the picture drawn here is committed to the (broadly Kantian) principle that in order to be appropriately assessed on the basis of a norm, one must have done *something*, have committed *some* sort of act of subjection — if not directed at the norm, then at the practice as such. But *no* in that the worry rests on ignoring two other features of the picture. Firstly, offering a defense is acknowledging *other* commitments. In this connection, note also that one cannot offer just *any* defense: one's defense has to be in harmony

with one's previous conduct. Secondly, different norms can interact with one another. One can have several commitments at the same time and must see to it that they do not practically conflict. Here lies another sense in which offering defenses is constrained. If a conflict with past behavior or with a different commitment arises, one becomes subject to another round of normative appraisal.

A participant in the calibration game can of course ignore the demands of consistency, made explicit by one's peers' inquiries and prescriptions. But doing that is tantamount to damaging one's intelligibility; and doing it once too often is tantamount to dropping out of the calibration practice altogether, which in turn means giving up one's intelligibility completely.

Before concluding, let us relax one of its aspects, namely the use of acknowledgement-signals. The truth about them is that at least in mature practices, their employment is usually restricted to communicative *problems*. Often, we are happy to allow others to treat us as committed to particular norms by default. For many norms, there is hence a default-and-challenge structure.<sup>13</sup>

By way of conclusion, I want to stress that it is easily seen that linguistic meaning can be plugged into the picture of normative assessment by treating »meaning« as a particular kind of normative status which appears on participant's score sheets. The picture hence shows how we can be bound by semantic norms, what it is that semantic norms require of us, and in what sense we can escape semantic norms. It also shows what price there is to pay for escaping them. What becomes particularly clear is how to admit that the normativity in question is constitutive while at the same time insisting that it is bound up with a genuinely prescriptive ought.

### **3.2 Semantic and non-semantic reasons**

Although we have now shed some light on the character of constitutive norms when they are the norms of a practice, it may be protested that it has still not been said what kind of »ought« is in play

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<sup>13</sup> For another instance of this structure, see Brandom, 1994, 177f.

in the picture. The worry may also be put in a different way: that unless a story about non-semantic and hence more traditional »oughts« — in particular the moral and the prudential »ought« — is told, the picture will remain incomplete and hence unsatisfying for anti-normativists.

It is true that in describing the calibration game, we have not used the traditional theoretical vocabulary pertaining to the different kind of norms that figure in our lives. There is a reason for this. On the view of norms implicit in the picture offered here, the commonalities of the different kinds of norms outweigh the differences between them. Even what are traditionally called »moral« norms can be seen as showing up in the calibration practice in essentially the same way as other norms. While it is true that we are more ready to hold others accountable to »moral« norms *per default*, the possible moves in the calibration practice surrounding moral prescriptions are the same as those surrounding other norms. There is no sense, for instance, in which a defense against a particular moral prescription is ruled out in principle. This is because there is good reason to think of moral demands as, in principle, conditional in the same way as semantic demands are. Their antecedents, i.e. the locus of agents' own acknowledgement and subjection, are the agents' employment of ordinary moral vocabulary. Participation in the complex inferential practice surrounding the use of (what has become known as) *thick ethical terms* (Williams, 1984) can be interpreted as acknowledging that one is oneself bound in complex ways. The exact commitments of moral agents, of course, are not always easy to tease out, and hence it is no surprise that moral demands are frequently surrounded by some controversy. But in principle, using thick moral terms in the ordinary ways brings with it moral commitments in the sense that doing the former but consistently rejecting the latter amounts to giving away one's intelligibility. (Perhaps it remains an option to refrain from using thick ethical terms altogether. However, it seems that this would remove one so far from ordinary human life as to also risk one's intelligibility. Something like this would provide a straightforward explanation of our intuition that moral norms are non-negotiable in

a way semantic norms are not. Having argued for this thesis elsewhere,<sup>14</sup> however, I will not provide a defense in this paper.)

Various norms can conflict with one another. The familiar fact that we sometimes feel torn between various *prima facie* commitments can easily be accommodated in the picture of the calibration practice, too. There is, for instance, often good reason to lie (*pace* Kant), and since — as we have seen above — lying involves violating a semantic norm, this case can be described as (in part) a tension between a semantic and a moral norm. But this should not be a problem if we assume that even in these cases, there are reasons (and hence norms) to favor some norm over another in a particular situation. And there is no reason, as far as I can tell, to reject this assumption.

Could it be that semantic norms are special in that they can be overridden by mere desires?

Hattiangadi (2006, 231f.) has made this claim, and concluded from it that semantic norms should not be understood as issuing in *prima facie* obligations, as we in fact understand them. Hattiangadi counsels us to see them instead as issuing in hypothetical obligations. I am not convinced by this argument. Not only do many instances of talk of »desire« actually mark commitment to conflicting norms. (»Well, I don't *want* to vote for a man who is responsible for extending the use of drones in undeclared wars.«) More importantly, when they do not, then there is no reason at all to suppose that the presence, say, of a desire to lie (or the *absence* of a desire to speak truthfully) can actually make it right to violate a semantic norm (see Daniel Whiting, 2007, 139). Glüer and Wikforss (2007) argue that at this point, normativists and anti-normativists have reached a simple clash of intuitions. Anti-normativists think that desires can void any alleged obligation to speak correctly because they doubt that there are genuine semantic prescriptions in the first place, while normativists deny that on the *basis* of their acceptance of semantic prescriptions. But if the picture of the calibration practice within which talk of »obligations«, »reasons« and so on is set, is actually

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14 See my Kiesselbach (2010).

plausible, then the normativist's side retains the upper hand in this debate. For it shows just what it means to speak of a semantic obligation. The fact that the puzzled look from one's interlocutors on having violated a constitutive norm of meaning cannot simply be answered by a coy »well, I felt like making this sound rather than that« is all that is needed to understand how problematic the interpretation of semantic obligations as merely hypothetical is.

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