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Unfollowed Rules and the Normativity of Content

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Foundational theories of mental content seek to identify the conditions under which a mental representation expresses, in the mind of a particular thinker, a particular concept.¹ *Normativists* endorse the following general sort of foundational theory of mental content: A mental representation r expresses concept C for agent S just in case S ought to use r in conformity with some particular pattern of use associated with C . In response to Normativist theories of content, Kathrin Glüer-Pagin and Åsa Wikforss propose a dilemma, alleging that Normativism either entails a vicious regress or falls prey to a charge of idleness. In this paper, I respond to this argument. I argue that Normativism can avoid the commitments that generate the regress and does not propose the sort of explanation required to charge that its explanation has been shown to be problematically idle. The regress-generating commitment to be avoided is, roughly, that tokened, contentful mental states are the product of rule-following. The explanatory task Normativists should disavow is that of explaining how it is that beliefs and other contentful mental states are produced. I argue that Normativism, properly understood as a theory of content, does not provide this kind of psychological explanation, and therefore does not entail that such explanations are to be given in terms of rule-following. If this is correct, Normativism is not the proper target of the dilemma offered by Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss. Understanding why one might construe Normativism in the way Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss must, and how, properly understood, it avoids their dilemma, can help us to appreciate the attractiveness of a genuinely normative theory of content and the importance of paying careful attention to the sort of normativity involved in norm-based theories of content.

¹ For the purposes of this paper, I will assume that it is appropriate to speak of mental representations as if they are vehicles of thought amenable to an account of what it is in virtue of which they express the concepts or contents they do.

1. What is a theory of content?

Foundational theories of mental content, minimally, seek to identify the conditions under which a type of mental representation expresses, in the mind of a particular thinker, a particular concept. This is the mental analogue of a foundational theory of meaning for a natural language. Such theories seek to explain why it is that the expressions of a natural language have the meanings that they have for a given language user (in her idiolect) or community (in its public or shared language). Such explanations constitute a metasemantic, rather than semantic, theory. Foundational theories of content can seek to do more than simply to identify the conditions under which a mental representation has its content. They may also seek to provide, by specifying these conditions, a *constitutive explanation* of the relation between a thinker, her representations, and their contents. More strongly, they may be interested in a reduction of such relations, or, more weakly, in understanding the metaphysical *grounds* of their obtaining. For the purposes of this paper, we will assume only the minimal task of identifying the conditions under which a mental representation expresses a particular content for a particular thinker, also known as the *determiners* of content. We will leave unanswered the question of which more ambitious metaphysical projects a foundational theory of content might serve.

Foundational theories of content do not automatically provide any account of the nature of contents. Perhaps the contents of concepts are sets of individuals, properties, functions, or any of those under a mode of presentation. But a foundational theory of content only explains why in general a content is the content of a particular representation, not what that content itself is. With these clarifications in mind, I will usually omit both “foundational” and “mental” from “foundational theory of mental content”, leaving only “theory of content”, for brevity.²

Two prominent examples of theories of content are *Conceptual Role Theories* and *Covariation Theories*. A Conceptual Role Theory claims that what determines the content of a mental representation is the functional role it plays in one’s thinking.³ Such theories are best suited to accounting for the contents of logical expressions or concepts. For example, it is natural to think that what makes it the case that the logical concept AND has the content that it has is that a thinker is disposed to transition from mental states of the form *A AND B* to states either of the form *A* or *B*, and from the pair of the latter states to the former. This seems like an intuitive explanation for why we believe that the concept in question should be considered the logical concept of conjunction. Covariation Theories, better suited to natural kind concepts, and most natural

² As the reader may notice, I am taking some pains to avoid using the term “concept” in this discussion. Different philosophers and psychologists have such different things in mind when they use “concept” that I prefer to speak of representations and their contents at the level of thought. Some people mean by “concept” representations, others mean contents, and yet others mean something else expressed by representations but not exhausted by their contents. Hopefully my use is clear enough.

³ See Greenberg and Harman (2006) for elaboration, Peacocke (1992) for a classic development a defense, or Brandom (1994, 2000, 2013) for his normative variant.

under the assumption that contents just are properties or individuals, claim that what determines a representation's content is its covariation or law-like association with that content.⁴

2. Normative theories of content

Normativists endorse the following general sort of foundational theory of mental content: A mental representation *r* expresses concept *C* for agent *S* just in case *S* ought to use *r* in conformity with some *canonical pattern of use* for concept *C*. By “canonical pattern of use”, I mean any sort of conceptual role or pattern of use thought to be essential to the concept *C*, for example transitioning from being in a belief state involving *C* to being in a belief state involving some other concept *B*, as in moving from a belief state involving the concept BACHELOR to a belief state involving the concepts UNMARRIED and MALE, or, for example, associating, under normal or ideal circumstances, or through the operation of a law-like regularity, the tokening of the concept CAT with the presence of cats. A Normativist, then, for example, might have it that a thinker's mental representation *r* expresses the concept BACHELOR just in case she *ought to* transition from belief states involving it to belief states involving the concepts UNMARRIED and MALE, or, for example, that a thinker's mental representation *r* expresses the concept CAT just in case its tokens *ought to* be associated, under normal or ideal circumstances, or through the operation of a law-like regularity, the presence of cats. These two examples provide illustrations of the fact that Normativism, depending on what the relevant canonical patterns of use are taken generally to be, can take the form of a normative version of either a Conceptual Role Theory or a Covariation Theory.⁵

While ideas given the label “the normativity of meaning” and “the normativity of content” have enjoyed varying degrees of prominence and attention in recent decades, the Normativist's idea of providing a foundational theory of content with normative ingredients has been relatively unexplored.⁶ Very recently, Kathrin Glüer-Pagin and Åsa Wikforss have offered arguments to the effect that Normativism could not possibly be true. This is part of the larger-scale attack on ideas going under the label “the normativity of meaning” and “the normativity of content” conducted chiefly by Glüer-Pagin, Wikforss, and Anandi Hattiangadi. In my very brief explanation, just above, of the sort of more concrete theory a normativist might give, I mentioned things it might be

⁴ Fodor's Asymmetric Dependency Theory is an exemplar. See especially Fodor (1987, 1990, 1998).

⁵ I treat these two sort of theories as genuine competitors to one another to provide the reader with adequate orientation to my topic. However, I sympathize with the thought that covariation theories are a sort of special case of conceptual role theory. See, for example, Greenberg and Harman (2006) and Greenberg (2005).

⁶ Allan Gibbard (2003, 2013) is perhaps the most prominent recent defender of a sort of normative theory of content. Since he understands his theory as a theory of *statements* or *thoughts* about meaning and content, and understands such statements and thoughts expressivistically, I do not regard his view as a genuine theory of content, in my sense.

the case that we ought to do with our beliefs. In similar fashion and for similar reasons, in many formulations Normativist views advert to some claims about the norms which essentially, in some sense, apply to our beliefs.

If there is a type of mental state the regulation of which is important for determining which concepts we express, it is commonly assumed to be belief.⁷ As such, Glüer-Pagin, Wikforss, and Hattiangadi have all also offered arguments against the idea that there are any such norms essential to beliefs.⁸ To begin with, however, I will leave the issue of the normativity of belief aside, and focus on a recent argument provided by Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss directly against the Normativist idea itself—the idea that the contents of one’s mental representations are determined by facts about what one ought to do with them. This argument was presented initially in their much-cited “Against Content Normativity” (2009a) and bolstered in their Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry entitled “The Normativity of Meaning and Content” (2009b). While their arguments against the normativity of belief have been vigorously criticized (see fn. 8), their main argument against Normativism has, as far as I can tell, received no critical attention.

This argument is called, after an argument of Quine’s against a foundational role for linguistic conventions, the “dilemma of regress and idleness”. According to this argument, either the normativist is committed to claims which, taken together, entail a vicious regress, or the normativist provides an “idle label” for contentful mental representations. In either case, the thought goes, we should not believe the Normativist’s claim. I will explain the argument in detail shortly.

First, to aid the reader in appreciating the way in which I will resist the argument from regress and idleness, I will now briefly explain the kind of problem to which I take Normativism to provide a putative solution. To provide an easy way for the reader to see what I have in mind by this problem and its Normativist solution, I will restrict myself to an extremely simplified and brief discussion of the sort of ideas, likely to be familiar to the reader, on focus in Kripke’s famous book on Wittgenstein.⁹

Kripke, on behalf of the Wittgenstein of his understanding, rules out all dispositionalist views of meaning and, along with them, dispositionalist views of content determination. According to such dispositionalist views, the contents of my mental representations are determined by how I am *disposed* to use them—for example, by the fact that I am disposed to token my *r* mental representation in the presence of cats, it is determined that *r* expresses the concept CAT. According to Kripke, the possibility of error requires that there be room for me to have the ability to use the CAT concept even if I am disposed to token the mental representation expressing it in such a way that my

⁷ Gibbard (2003), Boghossian (2003).

⁸ See especially Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss (2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2015a, 2015b), Hattiangadi (2006, 2007), Bykvist and Hattiangadi (2007), and the responses to their other arguments provided mainly in Whiting (2007, 2009, 2010, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c), and Steglich-Petersen (2010, 2013), for starters.

⁹ Kripke (1982).

disposition is really the disposition to token it in the presence of *cats or infantile mountain lions*, for example, or, alternatively, in the presence of *cats except for those cats which are black and encountered at night*.

Normativism has the potential to explain why we have the concepts we have, even when our dispositions may not be such as to represent a tendency to conform to our concepts' exact canonical patterns of use, but rather some deviant pattern exhibiting our tendency to err. Kripke's own reaction was to claim that meaning is normative, and, then to pursue a sceptical alternative to what he called "semantic realism". If semantic realism maintains that the determiners of content are exhausted by the dispositions of the individual thinker (leaving aside certain other sorts of individualistic proposals rejected by Kripke), then Kripke may have given sufficient reason to reject it. However, Normativism can be an equally realistic alternative to that restrictive sort of semantic realism. It can be the case that a thinker ought to use a mental representation in a certain way even if she is not disposed actually to use it in that exact way. Thanks to this fact, the Normativist has a ready fix for failures of individuals to conform to the canonical patterns of use of their concepts. A theory of content can still be constructed, by making use of a normative condition, which accounts adequately for the concepts we take ourselves actually to have in the face of our ability to deviate in our deployment of a concept from its canonical pattern of use.¹⁰

3. 'Governing' rules

Let's begin to look at the details of Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss's dilemma of regress and idleness. We will then see if a Normativist view characterized as I have just characterized it can be criticized as having the problematic commitments exploited by Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss's argument.

In introducing the normativity of mental content that they will be discussing, Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss cite Kripke's claim that, concerning a meaningful symbol or contentful mental state, "whatever in fact I (am disposed to) do, there is a unique thing that I *should* do."¹¹ They further clarify that,

¹⁰ My reasoning here echoes the detailed and ingenious arguments given by Allan Gibbard in his (2012) in favor of the normativity of content, drawn from his understanding of Kripke's discussion of dispositions and normativity. Of course, the parallel between Gibbard and myself breaks down when I stress that Normativism can provide a *realistic* theory of content, contrary to what Kripke may have supposed, citing *subject-independent* norms. While I cannot dwell on this here, I think that anti-individualism about the mental and the data concerning incomplete understanding of one's own concepts provide the best motivation for a normative theory of content—hence, that the relevant kind of normativity will have to be both realistic and, in certain senses *objective*, by contrast with the normativity relied upon by Gibbard and others in their normative theories of meaning and content. Rather than dwell on this here, I briefly review the core Kripkean points motivating a turn to normativity to frame the discussion. See Greenberg (Unpublished MS, 2013a, 2013b) for his argument from incomplete understanding to a "responsibility-based" normative theory of content.

¹¹ p. 31, citing Kripke (1982), p. 24.

“along with almost everyone else in this discussion, [they] take the relevant normativity to be *prescriptive* in nature. Prescriptions, we take it, involve genuine ‘oughts’; their very point is to *guide* our performances.”¹²

Finally, they introduce the notion of a performance’s being *governed* by a norm: “Naturally, the relevant norms would seem to be those ‘governing’ our performances, norms that we, as their subjects, *ought* to live up to.”¹³ As they use the term ‘govern’, then, it is, for the Normativist and her opponents, a fitting way of describing the relation norms bear, on the Normativist’s view, to an agent’s use of a representational item. A norm governs a type of performance when, so to speak, it *applies* to the performance. This is exactly the sort of notion of normativity that is compatible with robust tendencies to err in one’s performances. The governing norm says what ought to be done, not what is or tends to be done.

In their paper, they discuss two versions of the normativity of mental content. According to what they call “CE Normativism”, “it is essential to content that certain ‘oughts’ can be derived from it”. According to what they call “CD Normativism”, “content is determined by norms in the first place”.¹⁴ CD Normativism is just what we have been calling “Normativism”. It is the normativity of mental content, taken as a foundational theory of content, or, a theory of content determination.

When in their paper they turn to their argument against CD Normativism, Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss remind us of what their opponent believes. As they say, “CD Normativism has it that, as Gibbard once put it, “what I’m thinking is a matter of the rules I am following in my thinking”. There is content *because* there are CD norms that govern thinking.”¹⁵ The shift in terminology in this remark is noteworthy. In the sense of ‘govern’ stipulated just above, their non-quoting characterization—“there is content *because* there are CD norms that govern thinking” is quite congenial to the Normativist. However, in the way one naturally understands it, the quote from Gibbard claims something remarkably different. To say that “what I’m thinking is a matter of the rules I am following in my thinking” is not just the same thing as saying that what I’m thinking is a matter of the rules *governing* my thinking. The latter statement, in the sense appropriately given to ‘govern’, claims that what I’m thinking is a matter of what I *ought to do* with the elements of my thought.¹⁶

What I ought to do with the elements of my thought comes quite dramatically apart from the rules I happen to follow in my thinking. If my habits of thought err, the rules I follow in my thinking will not be the same as the rules I ought to follow in my thinking. The rules I happen to follow in my

¹² p. 32.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ p. 31.

¹⁵ p. 52, in part quoting Gibbard (2003), p. 86.

¹⁶ The reader will surely have noticed the gap between the subject matter of a theory of content and the matter under discussion now, namely what one is *currently thinking*. We will return to this gap, reflective of a major misunderstanding, in sections 6 and 7.

thinking lend additional character to my dispositions of thought (supposing a certain level of success at self-regulation). Perhaps, as Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss contend, as we shall see more closely just below, such character is *cognitive* or *attitudinal*, in that the additional ingredient in rule-following is that my behavior is done in accordance with some general desire to conform my behavior to a certain pattern. This is not the difference from mere dispositions exhibited by the conditions mentioned by the Normativist in her theory of content.

The Normativist does not contend that some character must be augmented to our dispositions in order for them to suitably explain content. Rather, the Normativist contends that something quite independent, in principle, of our dispositions must take the account's focus in place of dispositions. Whereas rule-following requires dispositions-*plus*, so to speak, Normativism requires something of contentful mental representations that does not itself even necessitate such dispositions to conform to the relevant rule. The relation of content to rules or instructions for the agent is, according to the Normativist, *normative*, not *attitudinal*, and emphatically not *dispositional*. Normativism is designed exactly to explain the distance between the rules characterizing our contents and our dispositions of use.

4. The dilemma: regress

With all this in mind, we can proceed to the dilemma of regress and idleness. As should be clear, it will be of primary concern whether or not the argument fairly construes the commitments of Normativism. As we will see, it is exactly the shift in construal that neutralizes the threat alleged by Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss to face the Normativist. First, let's take a look at their own words directly. The reader should bear in mind the senses of 'govern' in play, and be thinking of whether or not Normativism really has the commitments required if it is to fall prey to the dilemma. Since their argument is presented rather informally, I will start by quoting the relevant passages in full:

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

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

ordinary understanding of what it is to be motivated, these intuitions make it impossible for belief to be rule-governed.

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

- (P1) I want to believe what is in accordance with R.
- (P2) To believe that p is in accordance with R.
- (C) I want to believe that p.

The trouble is that such an inference necessarily involves *another belief*, in this case the belief *that to believe that p is in accordance with R*. No matter what your preferred model is, whether it is the standard belief-desire model or some modification of it, there simply is no practical reasoning without a ‘doxastic slot’ of this kind. According to CD normativism, the belief taking that slot itself has to be motivated by a rule, that is, has to be explainable by yet another practical inference. Which in turn would have a doxastic slot of the kind in question. Thus, belief formation motivated by rules turn out to be impossible; a vicious regress ensues.”¹⁷

After this passage, Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss point out that the argument isn’t directed against Normativism directly, but only against it as a view which endorses “the idea that rule-governed performances can be explained in terms of the subject’s attitudes in combination with the idea that belief formation is in general rule-governed.” They then spend a few pages discussing how one might understand differently the way in which behavior can be explained by a rule. But what should be most striking about this is that they are quite right that their argument is directed against a very specific package of claims, but it is only the claim that belief is in general *the product of rule-following*, and not the claim that belief is in general *rule-governed*, that provides the argument with traction. As they defined the notion of *rule-governed*, it has to do with the norms in place for an agent’s performances, not with the rules *operatively regulating* an agent’s performances. In a way, this is

¹⁷ pp. 55-6.

enough to show why the argument goes wrong. For clarity, though, let's examine a more structured and clear formulation of the argument.

The following is a rough formulation of the regress side of the argument:

- 1) Suppose I have belief B.
- 2) For belief B to have its content, it must be explained by a rule.
(CD Normativism)
- 3) For rule-explanation, rather than mere rule-conformity, belief B must have been done on the basis of an acceptance of the rule.
(Ordinary Conception of Rule-Following)
- 4) For this to be the case, I will have to have desired to believe in general what is in accordance with some rule R, and have had the further belief that the belief B is in accordance with R.
(Structure of Practical Reasoning)
- 5) But this further belief will need, then, to be explained by a rule (2), and so be done on the basis of its acceptance (3).
- 6) This requires (4) that I have a further belief that this belief is in accordance with the rule.
- 7) And so on...

It is the rejection of (3) which Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss contend places the Normativist onto the idleness side of the dilemma.

As they see it, if the Normativist does not provide an explanation of when rules are followed, rather than mere acting in conformity with a rule, then her explanation of content is incomplete. It is worth noting even here that such a distinction is made even by the crude dispositionalist, who would claim that it is one thing for one's actions to fit a rule and quite another to be disposed to act so as to conform to it. According to Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss, the Normativist must offer some such distinction, or else her view does not satisfy a required explanatory task.

I myself doubt that the only promising way of understanding rule-following is to understand it as essentially involving the agent's taking an attitude toward the rule and reasoning from it to particular performances. Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss themselves mention some of the inspiration for pursuing alternative ways of understanding rule-following. They cite Wittgenstein's reflection on regresses of rules like theirs that "What this shews is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an *interpretation*, but which is exhibited in what we call 'obeying the rule' and 'going against it' in actual cases."¹⁸ Leaving this issue aside so as not to distract from our main interest, there has just been no reason given by Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss to believe that Normativism is committed to (2) at all.

One could understand an initial temptation to believe that (2) expresses the central commitment of CD Normativism. As Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss sometime put it, its distinctive sort of explanation of contentful states is in

¹⁸ pp. 35-36, quoting Wittgenstein, PI 201-202.

terms of rules. But Normativism offers an explanation of which contents types of mental representations, including beliefs, express. A theory of content like Normativism does not explain which particular beliefs a thinker has. The construal of Normativism as entailing (2) can be made precise in a couple of ways. For example,

- A) Essential to content are the rules governing one's thinking.
- B) To govern thinking is to explain what is thought.
- C) To explain what is thought is to explain why one tokens a particular mental representation.
- D) Therefore, Essential to content are the norms explaining why one tokens particular mental states.

(A) is undoubtedly the central claim of Normativism. (B) is the error implicit in Glüer-Pain and Wikforss' argument. In their own sense of 'govern', (B) isn't true. And of course, Normativism does say that governing rules, in the normative sense, explain content. But it does not say that governing rules explain what is thought, in the sense captured in (C).

Why should Normativism take any stance at all as to how a contentful belief state was produced? It offers an account of why a belief has the content that it has, but not an account of how the belief itself came about. Is there some reason why the Normativist must also offer such an account?

5. The dilemma: idleness

Perhaps some guidance can be found in the idleness side of Glüer-Pain and Wikforss's dilemma. Their complete discussion of the idleness side is, be warned, exceedingly complicated. The initial idea they have is that the Normativist will reject premise (3) of their argument in order avoid the regress. They take this to go hand-in-hand with understanding the agent as only *implicitly* following the relevant rule. Again, to aid in understanding fully the route they see the Normativist as taking, I will quote in full their argument that the Normativist who rejects (3) commits herself to a lethal sort of theoretical idleness:

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

Maybe so, but, and that is the point of this exercise, mere vague gesturing towards ‘some sort of fact about behavior’ certainly does not get the CD normativist off the hook. That is precisely Quine’s point; he freely admits that a notion of implicit convention *prima facie* fits our actual linguistic practice much better. What we must not forget, however, is that these conventions not only happen to never have been formulated, they are conventions that are *necessarily implicit*. They *cannot* even be formulated prior to adoption. “[B]ut when a convention is incapable of being communicated until after its adoption”, Quine says, “its role is not so clear. In dropping the attributes of deliberateness and explicitness from the notion of linguistic convention we risk depriving the latter of any explanatory force and reducing it to an idle label”. This risk is dramatically higher for the CD normativist. After all, CD normativism has to back off yet another step; it not only reckons with necessarily implicit rules, but with rules you *cannot even intend* to follow.”¹⁹

This last is a remarkably strong claim. On this horn of the proposed dilemma, recall, the Normativist is at the very least rejecting claim (3). I would recommend rejecting claim (2) outright. The explanatory burden is thus avoided entirely. In any case, without claim (3), there is no reason left to think that we cannot intend to follow the CD normativist’s rules for use. The idleness side of the dilemma cannot gain critical support from its alternative. The Normativist is free to simply accept the relevant sort of idleness. Surely, Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss are right to claim that it would be bizarre for the Normativist’s theory to make crucial use of rules that could not be followed. But there is no reason, on the idleness side of the dilemma, to think that they could not be followed. All we’ve seen from the regress argument is that it cannot be maintained that such rules are *necessarily* followed intentionally every time a belief is produced and also that every belief must be explained by the this same sort of production by rule, on pain of regress. The objection to Normativism on the idleness side of the dilemma therefore cannot amount to the charge that her norms are rules that could not be followed intentionally. Without claim (3), there is just no argument that the Normativist’s rules could not be followed intentionally.

As I’ve indicated, however, the Normativist seems to be able to reject (2) outright. She can deny without cost that if a belief has content, it must itself be explained by a rule. Normativism is a claim about what makes it the case that a given belief has its content (or it is a claim that could be extended to such questions as the theory of content takes shape in application to psychological states like belief). It is not a claim about what explains a thinker’s beliefs, in the sense of explaining what brought her beliefs about. (2) is not entailed by virtue of the sort of question Normativism attempts to answer. Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss may, alternatively, take (2) to derive from the particular way in which

¹⁹ pp. 59-60.

Normativism explains content, by virtue of the rules governing the agent's representational mental life. Again, however, (2), as a claim about an agent's thinking being *explanatorily regulated* by a rule, does not follow from the Normativist's claim about governing rules, as Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss have defined their sense of 'governing'. If by 'governing', we now mean to indicate rule-governance in the sense that thought is explanatorily regulated by certain rules—that I *make use of* certain rules in coming to have certain thoughts—then it is simply no essential part of Normativism to make this claim. The Normativist offers a theory of content, not a theory of the production or causal regulation or inferential procedures necessarily involved in the psychological process of thinking.

6. Does Normativism require psychological explanation by rules?

One reason Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss may take the Normativist to be committed to (2), other than an equivocation or misunderstanding of the sense of 'govern', is that they characterize CD Normativism as making crucial use of a certain sort of argument. Their paper has the following overall shape: they identify a major argument for CE Normativism, relying on the normativity of belief, and criticize the argument and the resulting position itself; in the process of doing so, they criticize the idea that the rules of rationality are constitutive of belief, partly because, on their view, beliefs stand in internal relations characterized by such rules—according to them, this means that these rules will have to both describe the actual tendencies of thinkers and instruct them how to think. Concluding that a rule cannot coherently perform both of these tasks, they move on to criticizing CD Normativism. In setting up the discussion in this way, one must take care not to unfairly characterize the commitments of the view under discussion.

In this case, that may be what has happened. Their argument against CD Normativism is, after all, an argument against precisely the descriptive idea of rules involved in the *regulation* of belief. As they announce in a footnote, nothing in their argument depends on "the assumption that these rules involve 'oughts', i.e., are prescriptive in character."²⁰ According to CD Normativism, though, this is *the relevant sort of rule* for the determination of content, and no claim is made about any other. This is why their argument falls flat. It is directed against a view that content is determined by rules an agent *uses in her thinking*, rules to which, as they say, the agent *accepts a commitment*. However, the Normativist contends that it is her *being committed*, by virtue of the norms applying to her, that determines the contents of her thoughts, independently of whether or not such commitment is accepted or used in her thinking.

In the same footnote, Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss claim that "CD rules are supposed to *guide* our reasoning", and this is why it does not matter to them if the rules are prescriptive in nature. But, as they and we have defined Normativism, it is essential to the theory that the relevant rules are genuine prescriptions, and matters not at all what their deliberative role in anyone's

²⁰ p. 53, fn. 48.

psychology might be. The Normativist's rules are not held to *guide* the agent in the production of all of her contentful mental states, as would be required for the dilemma against it to have any bite.

We saw that Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss characterized CD Normativism just as we characterized Normativism, as centered around genuine norms or 'oughts' or prescriptions. For the purposes of their dilemma of regress and idleness, the commitments of Normativism are taken to be much stronger, without apparent argument. Once the argument is finished, however, their initial understanding of the view seems to return, as they wonder about "the *validity* or *force* of CD rules. In virtue of what do they govern reasoning? In particular, are they, in some sense, *of our own making*?"²¹ The question of *validity* is a question about the application of the rule, or the bearing of the norm, or the truth of the ought-statement. A rule's validity is not a matter of whether I make use of it. So, it seems that when they pursue this very interesting question about Normativism, Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss return to the more accurate and, now, more convenient characterization, and return to the agreed-upon sense of 'govern'.

We are tantalizingly close to an important issue in meta-ethics: what is the relation between the facts about what I ought to do and facts about what I take the answer to be? This is roughly the question of the attitude-dependence of normative facts. The question of validity might well, if normative facts are strongly attitude-dependent, or if the bearing of a rule depends entirely on whether or not I make use of it, turn out to be the question of the role of the rule in my own psychology.

Tellingly, I think, Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss continue the discussion of implicit rules with a discussion of Robert Brandom's ideas about how to understand normativity together with his normative account of intentionality. On his view, something's actually being normatively binding for an agent is intimately tied up with her *taking it* to be binding. Further, his picture makes crucial use of the notion of a practice, closely related to the way we might conceive of rule-following. However, his view about how to understand normativity is not remotely a view about how to understand the rules we implicitly follow, contrary to the way Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss seem to introduce it. It is the attempt of a theorist of content committed to a strong kind of attitude-dependence about normativity to understand the normativity of the intentional.

In any case, their discussion of Brandom lends support to the idea that Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss might harbor some controversial metaethical assumptions that motivate their construing Normativism as committed to strong claims about an agent's attitudes and psychological processes.²²

²¹ p. 54, fn. 50.

²² Alternatively, they may just assume that their opponents must, for some reason, have these additional commitments. Relying on Gibbard and Brandom in developing CD Normativism is, for exactly this reason, sub-optimal—though it must be noted that Gibbard takes great pains to clarify that the theory of content he develops is actually a "mere metatheory," rather than a constitutive explanation of the nature of content or

The relationship between issues in metaethics and the normativity of meaning and content is an extremely interesting topic. But we do not have to sort out the attitude-dependence of normative facts in order to adjudicate the argument offered by Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss. Even if it is true that for a norm to apply to me I must take a certain stance of acceptance towards what it prescribes, this does not entail that any act done in accordance with the norm be performed as the result of my taking such a stance. Yet that, and more, is required to generate a regress. To generate the identified regress, it has to be required that, for at least some action, (i) it must have been performed as the result of my taking a stance towards a norm, and (ii) that the belief that the action is prescribed by the norm must also have been performed as the result of my taking a stance towards a norm.

Naturally, these two steps are accomplished at once when Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss foist onto the Normativist the claim that the production of *every* contentful mental state is to be explained as the product of rule-following. The threatened regress is a regress of explanation, and it requires a strong assumption like this to get running. As I have stressed, though, this strong assumption is not a commitment of the Normativist.

It might be thought that what I recommend is that the Normativist simply embrace the idleness side of the dilemma. The Normativist must of course deny the very strong explanatory role for rules that generates the regress. The thrust of the purportedly problematic accusation on that side of the dilemma is that the Normativist thereby reduces rule-following to an idle label. In disavowing the explanatory role generating the regress, however, the Normativist rejects premise (2), not premise (3), which makes explicit a certain understanding of rule-following. The Normativist does not have to “go implicit” to avoid the regress. She has only to remind us that her view does not have the explanatory commitment embodied in (2), taken in the way that it must be taken in order to generate a regress. Her view proposes a metaphysical explanation of the relations between our mental representations and their contents, not a psychological explanation of the production of any beliefs.

Perhaps more accurately understood, then, I have argued that the Normativist does not fall prey to the dilemma at all. Since her view does not offer the relevant kind of explanation, she could accept or deny premise (3)’s attitudinal understanding of rule-following without either entailing a regress or opening herself to a charge of explanatory idleness. Since she does not propose a universal psychological explanation of belief-states, there is nothing in the Normativist’s account to be idle in the way alleged. It simply does not offer the sort of explanation that could face such a charge.

content-bearing relations, given his prior metaethics. Thus, Gibbard’s full story is not in fact a development of CD Normativism, despite how his view has been taken and the way in which his early work on this topic shaped the discussion, for example in Boghossian (2003). Boghossian is not waylaid by any formulation of the normative claim in terms of rules, as he classifies these claims, correctly, as merely part of Gibbard’s preferred way of arguing for the normativity of content.

7. Guidance and Knowledge of Meaning

In the previous section, I argued that the Normativist is not committed to the claims that generate the regress, and is not proposing the sort of explanation of belief states that would open her account to a charge of idleness. In this section, I discuss the way in which Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss could be misconstruing another aspect of the Normativist view in claiming that Normativists say that content-determining norms are “supposed to guide our belief formation”. One might object to the distance I allege between the theory of content and psychological explanation that a theory of content must explicate our knowledge of content, just as a theory of meaning ought to explicate our knowledge of meaning. If that is so, it seems hard to deny that Normativism does entail something about the cognitive state of a thinker when she is in the process of producing a belief. Following my discussion of guidance, I will show that Normativism does not entail any such thing, once we are clear on what knowledge of content is.

According to Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss, Normativism claims that certain norms are “supposed to guide our belief formation”. Something’s guiding our belief formation, on their understanding, amounts to our using it in the reasoning we do in forming beliefs. The statement that according to Normativism, norms are supposed to guide our belief formation exhibits some of the same problems as their previous use of the word ‘govern’. On one natural reading, they mean that Normativism claims that certain norms *do guide* our belief formation. If Normativism claims that, the dilemma can get some traction.

But on that way of reading the claim, Normativism has no such commitment, again. If Normativists would say that certain norms are supposed to guide belief formation, it is only in the sense in which any fact about what we ought to do, or what reasons we have, ought to guide our behavior. That is, we ought to act in conformity with the norm. Even, perhaps, we ought to act on the reasons that the norm specifies, or for the reason that the norm prescribes a particular action. This is just what results from the fact that Normativism is committed to the bearing of certain norms on our contentful mental representations.

A bit more perspicuously, here are two formulations of the claim that Normativism has it that certain norms are supposed to guide belief formation, roughly illustrating the contrast I’ve just made between two sorts of interpretations²³:

²³ Really, both of these formulations only specify possible *implications* of Normativism, as it is in the first place a theory of content and says nothing directly one way or another about belief formation or individuation.

NON-NORMATIVE GUIDANCE REQUIREMENT:

According to Normativism, certain norms guide belief formation.

NORMATIVE GUIDANCE REQUIREMENT:

According to Normativism, certain norms *ought to* guide belief formation.

The Non-Normative Guidance Requirement is the sort of “requirement” involved in any constitutive account of a phenomenon which identifies necessary conditions for it. For example, a constitutive account of water in terms of H₂O contains this sort of requirement that any sample of water contains H₂O. However, the requirement in the Non-Normative Guidance Requirement does not capture the necessary condition alleged by Normativism. The Normative Guidance Requirement does capture it. Normativism requires, in the above sense, that for any contentful mental representation, certain norms *ought to* guide its deployment. The Non-Normative Guidance requirement simply strips out the normative element of Normativism. Doing so, as we have seen, does not make the requirements on an agent’s psychology weaker, but rather makes them remarkably stronger—strong enough to generate a regress. Normativism does not just take something about the way our belief formation works and turn it into a theory of content. It takes something *normative*, something about the way our belief formation *ought to* work, and turn it into a theory of content. While such views are by far the exception so far as traditional metaphysical theories of this kind are concerned, one simply cannot ignore the normativity of the theoretical base of such a theory and expect to retain what is plausible and distinctive about it.

To put it as bluntly as possible, the idea has been that Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss have implicitly exploited an ambiguity about the sense in which Normativism claims that certain norms are “supposed to guide” our thinking. What Normativism does claim is that there are certain norms in force whenever there is content. What it does not claim is that we are actually guided by such norms whenever we engage in contentful thought.

So much for Normativism’s claim, as Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss put it, that certain norms are supposed to guide belief formation. Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss’ argument might also contain a confusion about what the Normativist, or any other theorist of content, must take *knowledge of meaning* or *knowledge of content* to be.

Does Normativism offer an account of knowledge of meaning, or knowledge of content? The answer to this question is in one sense yes, and in another sense no. We could mean two things by knowledge of content. First, we could mean something as minimal as concept possession, or about the minimal competence involved in possessing a concept. In that sense, Normativism does offer an account of knowledge of content. But it does not say anything of necessity about either what goes on when we exercise that competence, nor about whether or not any substantive knowledge is involved in concept possession at all, or what such knowledge would even be. As such, Normativism is wholly compatible with not only, most relevantly, an extremely

minimal idea of what is involved in tokening mental representations, but also with our not knowing anything at all about the contents we express or the concepts we possess.

The latter should be obvious independently, since the Normativist provides a theory of content, not in the sense of a theory of the *nature of contents*, but in the sense of a specification of the conditions under which a representation *expresses a particular content*.

If we mean something more substantive by knowledge of content, then the Normativist simply does not offer an account of what we know when we understand a particular content. Nor does she make any claim about our knowledge of the conditions under which our concepts express particular contents. Those conditions are the truly normative element of the theory. And while the theory tells us that we must be in those conditions, it does not require our knowing that we are in such conditions.

To make things precise and clear, once again, here is a sketch of the reasoning I have just been addressing:

- E) Normativism offers a theory of content citing norms or rules.
- F) Therefore, if Normativism is true, then we know these norms or rules when we possess the concept; this knowledge forms the basis of our competence.
- G) Therefore, in exercising our conceptual competence, we produce beliefs on the basis of our understanding of a rule.

As I've argued, (F) should not be concluded from (E). Such an inference relies on a false presupposition about the relationship between concept possession and knowledge of possession-enabling conditions or knowledge of the concept itself. The lack of such a strong connection is one thing motivating Normativism in the first place. As such, to presuppose in this way that we must have such robust understanding of the rules associated with a concept in order to possess it begs the question against the anti-individualistic Normativist.

In this section, I have shown that Normativism is not committed to the claim that contentful mental representations are guided by a norm; at most, it claims that contentful mental representations *ought to be* guided by a norm. Directly, it only claims that there *is* a genuine norm which sets a standard for the mental representation's use. I have also shown that Normativism is not committed to a thinker's having knowledge of her content-determining norms. As such, it also is not compelled to claim that such knowledge is operative in all uses of a mental representation.

All of this was yet more clarification of the nature and aims of Normativism. Normativism is a theory of content. The conditions on content it identifies are normative, in that they involve what ought to be done with a representation. It does not purport to offer a psychological explanation of belief formation; it is not even required to identify conditions of which competent thinkers are aware. Thinkers may be wholly ignorant of the norms governing the contents of their mental states (that's so even on the illicit sense of 'govern' used by Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss in constructing their dilemma).

Normativism, therefore, does not generate any regress of explanation or regress of motivations. It does not even offer the relevant sort of explanation. As such, it cannot be criticized on the grounds that its offered explanation is idle. Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss rightly criticize a certain sort of view about how beliefs must be formed; but that is the *must* of necessity, not the *must* of obligation. Concerning such a normative *must*, they miss the mark.

8. Debts and Assurances

In motivating a normative theory of content as I have, and in evading the dilemma of regress and idleness, I have incurred various debts and commitments on behalf of Normativism. Some of the more minor ones were just canvassed in my summarizing the way in which Normativism evades the dilemma of regress and idleness. In this final section, I will discuss what more must be done by the Normativist to avoid collapse into the sort of theory that would fall prey to Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss' dilemma, and to secure a place as a serious contender in the theory of content.

First, in avoiding the commitment to rule-governance, in the sense in which a regress threatens, the Normativist relies on the claim that rules or norms can apply to a thinker without her actually using them in the regulation of her thinking. This is hardly a controversial claim. However, it does seem that it might be false if such norms were attitude-dependent. At least, the rules applying to the thinker's thought would have to be related in the required way to her attitudes. But even if such rules must be related in whatever way is required by attitude-dependence to the thinker's attitudes, this still would not mean that they would need to be put to use in her performances. And without that as a consequence, even attitude-dependence of a very strong sort would not obviously generate the sort of regress identified by Glüer-Pagin and Wikforss. More, however, must be said to make this clear.²⁴

²⁴ Glüer and Wikforss revised their Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry, "The Normativity of Meaning and Content," in 2018, partly in a way that indicates some awareness that their argument may ultimately rely on resolving these issues in certain ways. Unfortunately, the way they shore up their argument in light of this fact reveals that they still do not fully accept that the question of how contents are determined is separate from the question of how beliefs are psychologically regulated, nor that their argument depends on illicitly wedding the two: "Even if guidance normativism [a version of CD Normativism that requires rule-following] would ultimately not be able to sustain a substantive difference between following a content determining rule and mere accordance with it, one might still hold on to the claim that there are contentful intentional states only if the rules of rationality are in force for them. Such force might require acceptance, but not (general) guidance, or it might be completely independent of the attitudes of thinkers. Insofar as acceptance itself is intentional, however, CD Normativism might prove viable only if the force of the relevant rules or norms is construed as completely independent of the attitudes of thinkers. Some relevant ideas as to how such rule following might be understood were already discussed above..." The key mistake here, in the sentence beginning with "Insofar as...", is, as I've argued, the failure to appreciate the incredibly strong assumptions needed to get their regress running for the normativist—assumptions which go well beyond the assumption that

Second, there is some sense in which Normativists must indeed hold that certain norms or rules are “supposed to guide” a thinker’s thinking. We can’t understand this to mean that Normativists claim that certain norms *do* (*always*) *guide* a thinker in what she thinks (since guidance involves the sort of appreciation that threatens a regress). But in providing a theory of content, it does claim that there is a necessary connection between a mental representation having a particular content for a thinker and the obtaining of certain normative facts about her use of that representation. Such facts might specify how she *ought to* use it. But they might, more specifically, specify how she *may* use it, how she *has reason* to use it, or even *what reasons* she has for its use. How a normative theory of content ought to fill itself out further, beyond the generic characterization on which I’ve defended it here, is a complicated question, depending in part on the subtle differences between these different sorts of normative facts. Most importantly, what a metaphysical theory making use of normative ingredients, like Normativism, must say about how someone *should be reasoning* (i.e., “is supposed to be *guided by a norm*”) is left entirely unsettled, as far as we’ve seen. Perhaps someone could, despite my initial objections, substantiate a normative version of the regress argument against Normativism, depending on how this issue is resolved for Normativism. How do normative facts offered in the Normativist’s explanation of content-relations relate to proper reasoning about what to do or think?²⁵

acceptance is intentional, another claim which is independent of normativism as well as suspect. As I’ve been pointing out, a rule’s (more aptly, a *norm*’s) being *in force* does not in fact constitute its being accepted. Thus, Glüer and Wikforss still do not confront the possibility that genuine normative facts or properties might determine content independently of any view about rule-following or rule-acceptance, which is surprising given that they now seem to make room for a normative theory of content whose norms are independent of the attitudes of thinkers to at least some degree. As I indicate in this section and defend at length in other work, a normative theory of content determination is not at all committed to claiming that norms are *completely* independent of the attitudes of thinkers, nor is it committed to the claim that norms are entirely dependent on the attitudes of thinkers. Nothing Glüer and Wikforss have argued has shown that the normativist must adopt one or the other of these extreme views about the relation between normativity and acceptance which they, rightly, find unsatisfying.

²⁵ Glüer and Wikforss also argue against the normativity of belief as a way of arguing against CE Normativity. Their rich arguments do not seem to rely on taking the commitments of their interlocutors too strongly. Two things about that discussion are worth noting here. First, CD Normativism as I’m defending it does not automatically claim or rely for its motivation on a thesis about any truth-norm being constitutive of the attitude of belief. Second, in the end, even some of these arguments may come down to a more general skepticism about rule-following. Their “no-guidance argument” holds that the truth-norm cannot guide belief formation, given that one will have already come to a belief that *p* or not on the way to assessing whether one ought to believe that *p*. Thus, they claim, the peculiar content of this norm renders it unable to guide belief formation. However, after being pressed by Steglich-Petersen (2010, 2013) by ways in which adopting such norms rather than alternatives like *believe p iff it would be pleasant to do so* does seem to influence behavior, they (2015a) seem to demand that Steglich-Petersen adequately explain rule-following to avoid being question-begging.

Third, independently of the question of how much attitude-dependence would push Normativism back toward a regress, we must face the fact that the motivation I presented for Normativism does seem to require that there are genuine norms on our thinking that we do not yet recognize. Such norms are supposed to forge the proper connection between an individual and concepts about which she is ignorant or mistaken. But these norms, since they must be in force prior to content if Normativism is correct, cry out for explanation. How could there be norms for use of our symbols independent of both content, and what norms we endorse or adopt for their use?²⁶

Fourth, it is undeniable that there are non-normative preconditions on possession of particular concepts. To take a simple example, it is overwhelmingly intuitive that in order to possess the concept FOUR I must believe that four is a number (or perhaps that I must have disposition to employ the concept as if I had this belief, or that I have a corresponding metalinguistic or metaconceptual belief about my representation). Does the Normativist about content determination have to deny that these are genuine preconditions on concept possession? After all, it would seem that her general theory of content contains primarily normative ingredients, and is designed precisely to avoid any general commitment to such cognitive or dispositional requirements on concept possession. However, given that non-normative facts can undeniably make a difference to the normative facts, it is in principle quite possible that many of the standard non-normative conditions cited in explaining content can, even if Normativism is correct, help to explain content. To explain this from the Normativist's point of view, we might, for example, invoke a sort of ought-implies-can principle in order to maintain that certain non-normative preconditions are in place because they are crucial for securing the thinker's relevant cognitive abilities. How this could fit into the general sort of normative theory of content sketched and defended above is not obvious. To the extent that the Normativist theory invokes specific cognitive purposes, it will run up against the charge that it is not a genuinely normative theory of content, because it does not cite norms which are categorical and interest-independent.²⁷ While I think this charge is misplaced, it deserves sustained response. Further, the above strategy raises another of similar importance: the relevance to the normativity of content of the ought-implies-can principle. This principle has

So, even there, they seem to regard the debate as ultimately being about rule-following, rather than the peculiarities of any normative principles or claims.

²⁶ This is likely the key reason why the focus on subject-derived norms of the kinds invoked by Brandom (1994, 2000, 2013) and Gibbard (2003, 2013) seems warranted aside from purely ad hominem reasons. However, given the metaethical views both import to the theory of content, one ought not to rule out antecedent to argument that there is a less subject-dependent way of grounding genuine content-determining norms.

²⁷ I have in mind the constraints placed on normative theories of meaning and content, or normative entailments of the facts of meaning and content, by Hattiangadi (2007). Hattiangadi designs these constraints to explain why it is that, according to Kripke's argument, it seems that the normativity of meaning and content is a threat to naturalism. I've made no claim that the normativity of content is or must be a threat to naturalism, thus I am free, even on Hattiangadi's framework, to invoke a wider variety of norms.

been invoked in several recent arguments against the normativity of content²⁸, so getting clear on its dialectical significance is a necessary step in defending the normativity of content independently of the precondition issue.

Fifth, Normativism has been carefully distinguished from views about the nature of content, and from views about the nature of intentional states like beliefs themselves. But what is the relationship between these views? Are they all compatible? Do any entail any of the others? These questions are less easy to answer than they might initially appear to be, especially given that these three sorts of views envision a very different explanatory import for the relevant norms, even if they might be brought into agreement about what the norms actually are. These views also seem to press their adherents to consider their understanding of semantic and conceptual knowledge. If norms have a crucial place in constituting semantic and conceptual facts, and potentially meanings or contents themselves, we may have to tell a very unusual story about what we know when we have knowledge of our own language, and of what sort of knowledge can come from an understanding of our concepts.

Each of these avenues for further work is important and interesting whether or not one believes that the true theory of content is a normative one. The recent debate over the normativity of meaning and content has turned remarkably insular, shaped by a very few influential participants and mutual agreement over the motivations for and the commitments of a view taking meaning and content normative. This is not surprising given the positions actually taken by leading normativists. My aim is to emphasize motivations that have not yet been taken seriously enough, commitments about the explanatory role of norms which might be cast aside, and the underappreciated complexity of the normative subject matter of the debate. Normativism ought to be a serious contender in its own right in the theory of meaning and content, beyond the framework set out by Kripke's discussion of Wittgenstein, which had its own peculiar aims and point of view. The literature on the topic calls for a dose of care about the normative side of things and a new way of understanding what Normativism can do and why one might believe it.

²⁸ Especially in evaluating truth norms for belief. See Boghossian (2003), Bykvist and Hattiangadi (2007), and Glüer and Wikforss (2009a) for arguments invoking something like the ought-implies-can principle to rule out forms of the truth norm for belief.

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