

The normativity of content and ‘the Frege point’

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In “Assertion,” Peter Geach wrote:

“A thought may have just the same content whether you assent to its truth or not; a proposition may occur in discourse now asserted, now unasserted, and yet be recognizably the same proposition. . . . I shall call this point about assertion *the Frege point*. . .

The magnitude and variety of philosophical errors that result from not seeing the Frege point justifies a missionary zeal in the matter.”¹

Sometimes, Geach puts the point in terms of the distinction between predication and assertion: one can predicate an expression of something without asserting that it is true of that thing.² The reason why this is possible is that facts about what is predicated of what are facts about the meaning of the sentence in question; assertion, on the other hand, is one speech act among many which one can perform with a sentence. More generally, the Frege point is that there is a distinction between the meaning of a sentence and the speech acts that a sentence can be used to perform; one cannot infer that properties of the latter are properties of the former.

Geach put the Frege point to use in arguing against, among other views, performative analyses of ethical sentences. The sort of performative analysis with which Geach was concerned gave the meaning of a predicate like ‘is good’ by saying that this predicate is used not to describe some object or event as having a certain property, but to perform the act of commending the object or event. Geach argued that such views run afoul of the Frege point by ignoring the fact that “the same term might occur without any change of sense in an unasserted occurrence of the proposition.”³ In such unasserted uses, Geach claimed, the speaker is not commending the object of which ‘good’ is predicated, even though ‘good’ is being used with its usual meaning. The performative analysis, Geach thinks, is therefore guilty of inadvertently changing the subject. It was supposed to be a view about the meanings of ethical terms; but it is really a theory about some speech acts assertoric uses of those terms can be used to carry out. One moves from the latter to the former only by ignoring the Frege point: the distinction between the meaning of a sentence and what assertoric uses of the sentence typically do — or, more generally, between meaning and speech act.

Whatever one thinks of Geach’s argument against the performative analysis and its descendants, the Frege point is surely correct and important: the meaning of a

¹Geach (1965), 449, 464.

²See especially Geach (1960).

³Geach (1965), 461.

sentence is one thing, and what the sentence is used to do on a given occasion or class of occasions is something else. There is an extension of the Frege point to the case of propositional attitudes which is equally obvious and equally fundamental: just as in the case of speech acts we should be careful to distinguish properties of speech acts — of asserting, questioning, commanding, etc. — from properties of the meanings of the sentences which are employed in those speech acts, so in the case of propositional attitudes we should be careful to distinguish properties of the attitudes — believing, judging, considering — from properties of the propositions which are the objects of those attitudes.

So put, it is hard to imagine anyone disagreeing. But I think that failure to pay adequate attention to this distinction has played an important role in fueling recent claims to the effect that there is something normative about content (both linguistic and mental). Attention to the Frege point shows that, in at least one of the senses which has been attached to this phrase, there is nothing normative about content. But attention to this point does not show that the phenomena theorists have pointed at via the phrases ‘the normativity of meaning’ and ‘the normativity of content’ are not genuine — it just shows that they aren’t facts about content, or meaning.

We should be clear at the outset about two ways in which content may be said to be normative. Sometimes the normativity of content is invoked as a fact about meaning or content which needs some explanation. Kripke’s discussion of normativity in *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* is the *locus classicus* here. When he says that the “relation of meaning and intention to future action is *normative*, not *descriptive*”⁴, Kripke clearly takes himself to be stating a fact which any adequate theory of the foundations of meaning must explain; after all, he rejects dispositional theories of meaning partly because they fail to explain it. Similarly (for our purposes), Brandom suggests that one of the motivations for explaining content in terms of an “essentially *social* practice” is the need to explain one of “Kant’s fundamental insights, into the *normative* character of the significance of what is conceptually contentful.”⁵ Again, the normativity of meaning is treated as explanandum — as an aspect of meaning about which we should agree in advance of theorizing, and which places an explanatory constraint on any adequate theory of linguistic meaning (or mental content). Despite differences between them — for one, Kripke is talking only about linguistic meaning, while Brandom is talking about content in general — both invoke normativity as an aspect of content of some sort which must be explained by an adequate theory of that sort of content.

There is, however, a quite different sense in which content is sometimes claimed to be normative: sometimes the normativity of content is invoked not as explanandum but as explanans. When, for example, linguistic meaning is claimed to be normative in this sense, it is not being claimed that there is something normative about meaning which any acceptable theory of meaning must explain, but rather that the correct explanation of the relevant facts about meaning — whether these are normative or not — is to be given in terms of normative facts.

Often, these two uses of ‘the normativity of content’ go hand in hand, as when it is claimed that the normativity of meaning can only be explained by a theory which locates the foundations of meaning partly in normative facts. But it is important to

⁴Kripke (1982), 37.

⁵Brandom (2000), 163.

see that they are distinct. No one would confuse, for example, the claim that (1) what it is for something to be red is for it to be disposed to look a certain way with the claim that (2) a theory of color should explain the fact that red things look a certain way. In the case of (1), dispositions to look a certain way are invoked as explanans relative to the color facts — they are the facts in virtue of which the color facts are said to obtain. In (2), by contrast, dispositions to look a certain way are part of the explanandum: they are part of what a theory of the facts in virtue of which the color facts obtain must explain.

In this paper, I will be concerned only with the use of ‘the normativity of content’ as explanandum: the sense in which the normativity of content is supposed to be a fact about content which needs explanation. So nothing that I say will rule out that idea that facts about meaning are constituted by, or explained in terms of, normative facts; but I will argue that defenders of such views can’t support their claims by saying that they are needed to *explain the normativity of meaning* — for then the normativity of meaning is back in its role as a fact about meaning which needs explanation.⁶ And in this sense, I will argue, there’s no such thing as the normativity of meaning.

What is it about content which is normative, and is supposed to need explanation? Brandom gives a clear statement of the idea when he writes:

“anything recognizable as an intentional state . . . must underwrite normative assessments as to whether things are as they *ought* to be, according to that state — whether the state is *correct* or *successful* according to the standards determined by its content.”⁷

This emphasis on correctness is mirrored by Kripke’s discussion, in which the central fact is that assertions of sentences are acts which are either correct or incorrect, depending on the standards generated by the content of the relevant sentence. The idea that content has a normative aspect which needs explanation is the idea that the existence of contentful mental states and utterances entails the existence of corresponding normative standards of correctness.⁸ For example, in the case of belief, my having the belief that *p* plausibly entails that, if it is not the case that *p*, my believing that *p* is incorrect, and hence that I am in a state that I (prima facie) ought not to be in. Similarly, in the linguistic case, my asserting a sentence which (in the context) means that *p* entails that my asserting the sentence is incorrect, and hence that I have done something which I (again, prima facie) ought not to have done.⁹

⁶Proponents of the view that meaning should be explained in normative terms who do not explicitly endorse the view that meaning is normative in the ‘explanandum’ sense include Greenberg (2005) and Wedgwood (2007, 2008).

⁷ Brandom (2001), 589. Also, in *Making It Explicit*: “What sets off the intentional is its liability to assessments of correctness.” (9)

⁸Whiting (2007) is an example of a defender of the normativity of meaning who explicitly puts things this way, and this sort of view of the normativity of content is in the background of most discussions of the issue. Gibbard (1994), for instance, summarizes the view that meaning is normative using the slogan that ‘means implies ought.’

⁹This does not entail that if it is the case that *p*, I ought to believe that *p*. The reasons why a plausible view of what the normativity of meaning involves should not entail this are nicely catalogued in Bykvist and Hattiangadi (2007); see also Boghossian (2003). Bykvist and Hattiangadi object to this formulation that it does not entail that subjects have obligations in certain circumstances to form certain beliefs. While this is correct, it remains true that, on the above formulation, facts

One popular response to this way of putting the claim that there is something normative about content is to deny that there is anything normative about the relevant standards of correctness. After all, isn't a belief with a certain content, or assertion of a sentence with a certain meaning, correct in the relevant sense if and only if it is *true*? And there is nothing intrinsically normative about truth.¹⁰

But, despite its initial plausibility, this debunking explanation of the normativity of content is, as Gideon Rosen has pointed out, a bit quick.¹¹ From the fact that the x 's are F iff they are G , it does not follow that the property of being F is the property of being G . Indeed, such a property identity is false if there is another class of things, the y 's, which can be F without being G . And even if beliefs are correct iff they are true, there do seem to be examples of things which can be correct (in the relevant sense) but not true. To use Rosen's examples: dancing the Mambo, spelling a word, making a move in chess. Plausibly, each of these things can be done correctly or incorrectly, but they are not the sorts of things which can be true or false. So it seems that correctness is not truth, even if the relevant mental states and utterances are correct iff their contents are true.

Moreover, we can state the thesis of the normativity of content in a way that makes no essential use of the notion of correctness; as suggested above, we can think of the proponent of normativity as claiming that an ascription of a belief, for example, entails that there are conditions under which the relevant subject ought not to be in one of the states that he is in.

(This might then seem to suggest that the central question is: is entailing a claim about what an agent ought not to do sufficient for a fact to be a genuinely normative fact? As we'll see below, we can set this sort of 'demarcation question' to the side: if it is true that the relevant entailments between ascriptions of intentional states and 'oughts' hold, that is sufficient for there to be a sort of normative constraint on accounts of the nature of the relevant intentional states, whether or not we can come up with a criterion sufficient to sort normative from non-normative facts.)

But do the relevant entailments hold? Is it true that necessarily, if I believe that p then I am in some state that, if p is not the case, I (prima facie) ought not to be in? In the linguistic case, is it true that if I assertively utter some sentence which means p then I have done something which, if p is not the case, I (prima facie) ought not to have done? I don't think that the answer to these questions is altogether clear. On the one hand, it is hard to avoid the intuition that when one believes that p when p is not the case, there is some sense in which one ought not to have formed that belief — even if this 'ought' is overridden by, for example, epistemic norms (in the case where you have good reason to think that the belief is true) or norms of instrumental rationality. In these cases it is not true that, all things considered, one ought not to have formed that belief; but it is hard to shake the impression that, even in these cases, there remains some sense in which the subject ought not to have formed the belief.¹² On the other hand, it is hard to know how much to trust this intuition, and

about what I believe along with facts about what is the case can entail that I am doing something I ought not to do. More on this point and the question of what it means to show that a given sort of fact is normative, below.

¹⁰For a clear discussion of the idea that the relevant 'norms' are truth conditions, see Ch. 8 of Horwich (1998); see also Fodor (1990).

¹¹See Rosen (2001), §8.

¹²This is the point of the 'prima facie' qualifications above.

difficult to know whether the intuition is merely tracking hypothetical norms about what the subject ought to believe or say *if* the subject in question desires to believe or speak the truth.¹³

In what follows, I'll adopt the strategy of giving proponents of the normativity of content what they want, and asking what follows from the supposition that facts about the beliefs of agents, and facts about what they assert, entail the existence of facts about what, in certain circumstances, those agents ought not to do. As we'll see, these entailments don't show quite what proponents of the normativity of content think they do.

In particular, they do not show that there is something normative about *content*. Even if we grant the claims that mental states and utterances of sentences are governed by normative standards, there is an alternative to thinking that there is something intrinsically normative about the contents of these mental states and the meanings of the sentences uttered. Take first the case of mental states, and the fact that there are normative standards which dictate when it is correct or incorrect to, for example, have a belief with a given content. In principle, it appears that the normativity could be generated either by the content or by the propositional attitude of belief. So the mere existence of entailments of the sort mentioned above only gets us to a disjunction: either there is something normative about content, or there is something normative about the relevant propositional attitudes.

To resolve this standoff, it is useful to return to Geach's case against the performative analysis. In that case, we have a thesis about the term 'good': that its use is to commend the objects of which it is predicated. And we have two views about the status of this thesis: the proponent of the performative analysis says that it gives the meaning of 'good', while Geach says that it describes a speech act that the term can be used to perform. This mirrors our two positions about the normative standards which govern certain mental states: the proponent of the normativity of content says that the normative standards governing belief and judgement arise because the contents of the mental states are normative, while the opposing view says that the normative standards arise from the natures of the relevant propositional attitude relations.

In the case of the analysis of 'good', we have already seen how Geach resolves the standoff: by means of the thesis that "the same term might occur without any change of sense in an unasserted occurrence of the proposition." If it is true that 'good' can occur with the same meaning in sentences in which it is not 'asserted of' something, then this gives us a test for the performative analysis's claim that the meaning of 'good' is its function to commend the objects of which it is predicated. We ask: does every use of 'good' with its normal meaning involve commending the object of which it is predicated? Using as examples occurrences of 'good' in the antecedents of conditionals, Geach concluded that the performative analysis fails this test, and therefore does not yield a plausible view of the meanings of ethical terms.

Whatever we think of Geach's verdict, his test is clearly a fair one: if a term

¹³Hattiangadi (2006), among others, develops the objection that the entailed claims about what an agent ought to do are only hypothetical norms, which are contingent on the agent's desiring to speak the truth; for a reply, see Whiting (2007), §5. This may be a point on which the normativity of belief and the normativity of linguistic meaning come apart, since while it is clear that one can make assertions without caring whether one asserts the truth, it is less clear that one can form beliefs without caring at all about whether one believes the truth.

can occur with the same meaning in a wide variety of sentences, then any claim about the meaning of the term must be able to make sense of its occurrence in each of those sentences. This suggests an analogous test for our two competing claims about the source of the normative standards which govern contentful mental states and utterances. Just as words can occur with the same meaning in a wide variety of sentences, so contents can be the objects of a wide variety of propositional attitudes. The test, then, is this: if there is something normative about content (as opposed to attitudes toward that content), then *any* contentful mental state should be governed by normative standards.

It is worth noting that, so far, a theorist of the normativity of content like Brandom might well agree; in the quote cited above, he claims that “anything recognizable as an intentional state” must be governed by normative standards. Since every propositional attitude state is presumably an intentional state, Brandom’s claim would, if true, lend strong support to the view that there is something normative about content.

The problem is that the claim is not true. There is certainly some plausibility in the thought that in certain situations it can be correct or incorrect to make a certain judgement, or have a certain belief. But consider a different propositional attitude, *daydreaming*. Suppose that I am daydreaming, as I often do in South Bend, that it is a sunny, warm day, and that there is no snow on the ground. Are there some situations in which this is the correct daydream to have, and other situations in which there is some other daydream which is the correct one to have? This seems implausible. But if this is implausible, then it is also implausible that there is something normative about content. Just as Geach’s examples of occurrences of ethical terms in the antecedents of conditionals show that the performative analysis of meaning is insufficiently general to account for all uses of ethical terms, so the example of daydreaming shows that the claim that content is normative is insufficiently general to account for the different propositional attitudes that one can bear to any given content.¹⁴

Now, it may be true that acts of daydreaming are governed by *some* normative standards. For example, perhaps it is true that one should not daydream during talks given by visiting speakers. But standards of this sort are pretty clearly not generated by the content of the daydream: one ought not to daydream during talks by visiting speakers, no matter what the content of the daydream. So this kind of fact about the normativity of daydreaming can hardly be used to underwrite an argument for the normativity of content.

How might the theorist of the normativity of content respond? One idea is to deny that daydreaming is a relation to the same kind of content as judging and believing. If this were so, then the lack of normative standards governing daydreaming that thus-and-so would be no challenge to the claim that there is something normative about the sorts of contents which are the objects of judgement and belief.

Here again, the parallel with Geach’s case against the performative analysis is instructive. Geach imagines the proponent of the performative analysis replying to his argument by saying, in effect, that ethical terms have different meanings in the antecedents of conditionals than in the simple sentences which the performative analysis was designed to explain.¹⁵ This is the analogue of the move on the part

¹⁴Boghossian (2003) makes a similar point involving the propositional attitude of desire, though he draws a different conclusion from what follows.

¹⁵“Of course, the anti-descriptive theorist will reply that his theory was not meant to cover such

of the proponent of the normativity of content to the view that daydreaming is a relation to a kind of content which is different than the usual sorts of contents which figure in judgement and belief. Geach's reply to this is well-known:

“This possibility of varying use, however, cannot be appealed to in cases where an ostensibly assertoric utterance “*p*” and “If *p*, then *q*” can be teamed up as premises for a *modus ponens*. Here, the two occurrences of “*p*”, by itself and in the “if” clause, must have the same sense if the *modus ponens* is not to be vitiated by equivocation . . .”¹⁶

The essence of Geach's point here is this: if one claims that the content of some term varies between two sorts of sentences, then one owes an explanation of cases in which the two sentences appear to stand in some close relation — for example, cases in which the two can serve as premises in an instance of *modus ponens*.

To apply Geach's strategy to the case at hand, we would want an example of a case in which a judgement on the one hand, and a daydream on the other, stand in some close sort of relation which would be inexplicable on the hypothesis that the two are relations to different sorts of contents. I don't think that we have to look very hard to find such a case. If I say that as a boy I used to daydream that I would one day write a paper about the normativity of content, and that I now believe that I have written a paper about the normativity of content, we do not wonder what the relation could possibly be between the content of the daydream and the belief. The relation appears to be the simplest one: identity. We might, after all, describe the case as one in which I believe that my daydream came true or, in clunkier terms, as one in which what I used to daydream was the case, I now believe to be the case. Such cases of transitions between daydreams and beliefs make the claim that the two are relations to different kinds of contents appear *ad hoc* at best.

This impression is strengthened if we notice that daydreaming, while perhaps an especially striking case, is far from unique. Consider entertaining the thought that *p*, wondering whether it is possible that *p*, assuming for the sake of argument that *p*. These are all propositional attitudes, and none of them are governed by normative standards of correctness of the sort which govern judgement and belief. Should we say that each of these, like daydreaming, is a relation to a special sort of content? It certainly does not seem that way. Surely I am able to entertain a content in thought, and then decide to endorse *it* — that very content. But if I am able to do this, then entertaining thoughts and believing propositions must, contra the present defense of the normativity of content, be attitudes to the same sorts of contents.

The above argument against the normativity of content can with little effort be turned into an argument against the normativity of linguistic meaning.¹⁷ Just as in the case of mental content the argument turned on finding a propositional attitude which did not seem to be governed by standards of correctness of the sort which govern judgement and belief, so in the case of linguistic meaning it turns on finding

cases — that the same form of words, after all, may have different uses on different occasions.”
(‘Assertion,’ 463)

¹⁶Geach (1965), 463

¹⁷Plausibly, the meanings of linguistic expressions are the same sorts of things as the contents of mental states; if this is true, then the fact that mental content is not normative entails that linguistic meaning isn't either. The following is meant to show that this conclusion can be reached independently.

a kind of utterance which does not seem to be governed by standards of correctness of the sort which govern serious assertoric uses of sentences. It is not hard to find plausible candidates: using sentences in plays, in jokes, while thinking out loud. And the claim that sentences do not have their usual meaning when used in these ways would have about as much plausibility as the claim that daydreams or suppositions are relations to a special sort of content.

It is worth considering a final reply on the part of the proponent of the normativity of content. One might object to the foregoing that the normative standards which govern, for example, belief, vary with the proposition believed. The conditions under which it is correct to believe that grass is green are different than the conditions under which it is correct to believe that grass is red. Doesn't the fact that the normative standards are sensitive to contents in this way imply that there is *something* normative about content?

I think not. For an analogy, take any intentional act-type which is sometimes wrong, and sometimes permissible. Suppose that stealing is an example of such an act. Perhaps it is permissible to steal food if one's family is starving and one has no other recourse; perhaps it is permissible to steal a car if it is the only way to catch a criminal and prevent some kind of immense catastrophe. In any case, if stealing is ever permissible, then it is plausible that the conditions under which it is permissible vary with the object of the theft. But we are not inclined on that basis to say that possible objects of theft, like bread and cars, are therefore normative. Neither should we be inclined to say that the objects of propositional attitudes or the meanings of sentences are normative — even if being in a propositional attitude state, or using a meaningful sentence, sometimes is.

To make this point is not to eliminate the relevant normativity, but rather — given that we grant the entailments discussed above — to locate it properly. After all, Geach didn't show that speakers *don't* use 'good' to commend things; he merely pointed out that not every meaningful use of the word is an instance of this sort of act. Just so, the foregoing argument does nothing to count against the suggestion made earlier that my believing that p entails that, if it is not the case that p , I am in a state that I ought not to be in, just as my asserting a sentence which means that p (in the relevant context) entails that, if it is not the case that p , I am performing a speech act that I ought not to. The point is rather that this entailment should not be explained in terms of the nature of content or meaning, but rather in terms of the nature of belief and the act of assertion (and other attitudes that generate the same sort of entailment).

What significance does this point about the location of this sort of normativity have? There are two points to make here, one negative and one positive. The relatively obvious negative point is that the fact that the normativity in question is attached to certain propositional attitudes and speech acts, rather than to content as such, undermines a principal motivation for views about the foundations of mental content and linguistic meaning which locate those foundations in normative facts about subjects; such views may have other virtues, but there is no thing, the normativity of meaning, for them to explain.

The second point concerns the sort of obstacle the normativity of belief and assertion pose to the project of naturalizing intentionality. By far the most popular approach to explaining what it is for a subject to believe that p does so in terms of

the subject being in some internal state which has the properties of *being a belief state* and of *having the content that p* . These two properties are then taken to be targets for reduction. Most theorists working on the research program of naturalizing intentionality have taken as their aim the explanation of the second of these properties; the foregoing suggests that normativity should not be thought of as putting any special constraints on the theory of content, in this sense. But the foregoing also seems to suggest that normativity does place a special constraint on the relatively under-explored task of constructing a theory of belief states.

What constraint is this? If the view of normativity and the broadly functionalist way of understanding mental states sketched above is correct, the following argument is valid:¹⁸

A is in some internal state with the following two properties: (i)	
it is a belief state and (ii) it has the content that p .	
It is not the case that p .	
A is in some state that A ought not to be in.	

If this is valid, and if, as we have been suggesting, there is nothing normative about property (ii), this places the following constraint on any attempted reduction of the property of being a belief state to some property F of internal states of agents: it must be impossible for a subject to be in an internal state which instantiates F without that agent's being at least potentially subject to some obligation of the sort expressed by the conclusion of the above argument.¹⁹

The amount of work which has been devoted to the theory of content as compared to the theory of belief states suggests that most regard the explanation of content as the more difficult and fundamental part of naturalizing the propositional attitudes. But if normativity presents an obstacle to any reductive program in the philosophy of mind, it is the latter.²⁰

¹⁸It is valid in the usual sense that the conclusion is entailed by — i.e., is a necessary consequence of — the premises. Boghossian (2003) worries that explanations of the normativity of intentionality in terms of entailment relations between intentional ascriptions and 'oughts' will, because of examples like

p	
It is permissible to believe that p .	

lead to the unwelcome conclusion that all facts are normative. But the worry about whether to classify a certain sort of fact as normative or not is beside the point, if our concern is with the project of understanding the nature of intentionality. The relevant point is that theories of the foundations of belief must be consistent with the existence of entailment relations between ascriptions of beliefs to a subject and claims about what that subject ought to do. This involves no commitment to the idea that any claim which entails a normative claim is itself normative, or its converse, because it involves no commitment to there being a demarcation between normative and non-normative claims.

¹⁹This way of putting the point in terms of the need to respect certain entailment relations sidesteps the problem of determining in advance whether normative correctness constitute, or merely govern, beliefs. See the concluding pages of Rosen (2001) for discussion. It also avoids the ambiguity in the claims about one class of facts 'determining' another which infects Kripke's presentation of the issues; see Soames (1999) for a discussion of this point.

²⁰Thanks for helpful discussion of previous versions of this paper to Mark Schroeder, Scott Soames, Andrew Reisner, and an audience at the University of Notre Dame. Thanks also to Mark Greenberg for introducing me to the topic, and for many helpful discussions of normativity and content.

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