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WHEREIN LIES THE NORMATIVE DIMENSION IN MEANING AND MENTAL CONTENT?

Pascal Engel

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That meaning and mental content have a normative dimension is a quite common claim in contemporary philosophy of mind and language. It is often held that this dimension is a necessary condition of thought and meaning: a meaning could not be a meaning if it could not be correctly or incorrectly applied to an expression, a thought could not be a thought if it could not be rational or justified, and in this sense if it did not obey “normative conditions”. It is held further that these normative conditions prevent any sort of reduction of semantic and mental content to naturalistic or causal properties. Some philosophers seem to find these claims obvious. Others find them baffling. What could it mean to say that meanings and thoughts have normative properties? What are exactly these properties? And why should the fact, if it is a fact, that such properties can be ascribed to these things imply that one cannot have a naturalistic account of them? The issue turns upon whether the alleged normative features of semantic and thought contents are essential to these contents. This is not, however, the question which I intend to address here, at least directly.¹ My aim is more modest: what, in the first place, are the so-called “norms” of meaning and of thought? I shall argue that they do not belong to meanings and thoughts directly, or categorically, but are conditional upon our ascriptions of meanings and thoughts. This much is

recognized by so-called “interpretationist” accounts of meaning and content which emphasize this normative dimension. But this conditional normativity rests in turn upon another kind of ascription, ascription of meaning and thoughts to oneself, or self-ascriptions.

I. CATEGORICAL VS RELATIONAL NORMATIVITY

To say that the question whether meaning or mental content is normative is unclear is an understatement. We may formulate it in the following way: do judgments about what a linguistic expression means or about what mental content an individual entertains entail normative judgments? A normative judgment is a judgment about what an individual *ought to* or *should* do or think, about what it is *rational* to do or to believe, or about what it is *correct or incorrect*, *right* or *wrong*, or *good* or *bad* to do or to think. The occurrence of such terms in judgments signals the existence of certain features which are not descriptive or factual, but evaluative or prescriptive. We call such features *norms*. Usually, these norms are divided into two broad classes: practical, about what to do, and epistemic, about what to believe. This raises some traditional questions. What is the relation between norms and facts? Do they form an autonomous ontological domain, or do they supervene upon the world of natural facts? In other terms, are normative judgments or assertions genuine judgments or assertions about a particular realm (the realm of the “normative”), or are they pseudo-judgments, mere expressions of our feelings or of our psychological attitudes? And what are the relationships between the different classes of norms? Are they exclusive? Are they exhaustive?

If we raise these familiar questions about linguistic meaning and thought contents, the claim that they have a normative dimension seems to amount to asking whether judgments to the effect that an individual means something by an

expression, or thinks a particular thought implies normative judgments of the form :

- (1) If X means that P, then X ought to (should, has a reason to, etc)
mean that ...
- (2) If X thinks that P, then X ought to (should, have reason to, etc.)
think that ...

With respect to meanings, judgments of the form (1) are often framed as judgments to the effect that words and expressions in a natural language are attached to particular rules of usage, or as judgments to the effect that there are particular holistic connexions between meanings. For instance it is said that if it is rule of English that “cat” means *cat*, then one ought to comply with this rule, or that one ought to recognize that cats are animals. Similarly with thoughts. For instance, it seems that if one believes that cats are furred, one ought to believe that some animals are furred. But such claims, as it is often noticed, are not obvious. First, it is not clear that these implications hold. If there is a rule of English about “cat”, why should I comply with it? And if I believe that cats are furred, but do not believe that some animals are furred, why *should* I believe the contrary? Perhaps I should just reconsider my initial belief. Even if we agree that an “is” statement about what I mean or believe entails an “ought” statement about what I should mean or believe, it is not clear *what* statement is thus implied. Second, claims like (1) and (2) seem to say that the normativity of meaning or thought somewhat resides in them *categorically*, as a real property of meanings and thoughts, which prevents any factual account of the entities in question. But rules of meaning, as other kinds of rules, although they are often expressed by statements which contain normative terms, do not necessarily imply that these statements express normative judgments, which fall short of being descriptive or factual. For instance

the rule “In Britain one should drive on the left” contains a normative term, but it does record a fact about British drivers. Similarly something is a thermometer if it is accurate or inaccurate, but this does not imply that we cannot account for it in factual or descriptive terms.

We need not, however, charge the theorists who maintain that meaning and thought are normative for being committed to such dubious assumptions. They do not mean that the rules of a natural language or the existence of thoughts and concepts do not record factual regularities. Neither do they mean that the rules registrate a special variety of facts, normative facts. What they mean, rather, is that the *interpretation* of these rules or of these thoughts obeys certain correctness conditions, and that these conditions do not record *further facts* about their application. For instance when Crispin Wright says:

“Meaning is normative. To know the meaning of an expression is to know, perhaps unreflectively, how to appraise uses of it; it is to know a set of constraints to which correct use conform”²

he is actually saying that the normativity of meaning is attached to the “constraints” to which correct use should be in conformity with. To know the constraints is to know how to interpret the particular rules. But whereas the rules and uses of words and concepts are responsive to facts, the interpretation of these rules and concepts is not a purely factual matter. What underlies this idea is Wittgenstein’s argument about rule-following. There are semantic conventions of a language, as that “plus” means *plus*, and there are psychological regularities and dispositions of thinkers, as that the concept of “addition” applies to the activity of *adding*, and these are facts, but there are no further rules, no further conventions, and indeed no facts about the *correct application* of rules or concepts, to which judgments about what it is correct to say or or to think should correspond. This is why “following a

rule” is not itself a rule or an interpretation: there are no rules for rule-following, no interpretation of interpretations. In this sense, rules are not norms, although instructions about how to follow rules carry norms (a rule is a fact, although *following a rule* is not a fact). These norms or correctness conditions, according to this line of thought, do exist and are objective— Wittgenstein is not proposing a sceptical view about them — but that they exist and are objective is not a fact in the world, a fact about the speakers dispositions, or a species of “superfact” about norms as platonic entities.³A central tenet of this view is that these specific norms for meanings and concepts can only be assessed communally, by speakers and thinkers who must be able to conform to public normative standards.

If we take this sort of view seriously, these interpretative or intellectual norms are distinctive. They are not practical nor epistemic *per se*, in the sense that they would bear directly on what one ought to do or to believe, or on what one has reasons to do or to believe. This is why implications (1) and (2) above do not hold. If I mean *cat* by “cat”, or if I believe that *cats are furred* I incur no commitment as to what I should mean or think. The mere rule about the linguistic use of “cat” or the mere psychological fact that I think something about cats carry no normative force of their own. But to interpret the rule *as* a rule, and the thought *as* a thought, I must respect certain correctness conditions, which are prior to questions about what I ought to do or to think. There are, however, two different conceptions of the nature of these interpretative norms⁴. One says that these norms are *specific*, in the sense that they are attached to each *particular* expression in a language, or to each concept in a thinker’s psychology, or perhaps to each kind of expression or each kind of concept. Thus there are specific norms for words like “cat”, “plus”, “arthritis” or “sofa”, or for the concept of *addition*. This does not imply that these norms correspond to necessary and sufficient conditions of applications of the words or concepts. It comes close to Wittgenstein’s view, at least one one familiar interpretation, that there are

“criteria”, possibly defeasible ones, for the use of words and concepts. Such specific norms do entail, on this view, which one might call *particularist*, normative judgments to the effect that if one’s community or society uses a certain word to mean a certain thing, then one must use that word with that meaning. But such normative judgments do not have any compulsory impact. We have the choice to interpret someone who uses the word “arthritis” as meaning a disease of the joints or as meaning a disease of the muscles. The fact that an individual uses a word with a different meaning than the standard one does not prevent us to interpret him.

This contrasts with an other view, according to which the interpretative norms are not specific to particular kinds of words or concepts, but are *general*, and pertain to highly abstract, context-free, standards of thought. Thus on Davidson’s view of interpretation, there are certain global rationality requirements for a correct interpretation of speech and thought — such as the requirement that an individual’s beliefs be by and large true and coherent. A similar claim is pervasive in Dennett’s writings about the “intentional stance”.⁵ Such general normative principles are situated at a higher level than the level of specific kinds of meanings or concepts, since they register norms for the use of any sort of meaning or concept, and indeed of the very “conditions of thought” in general. Unlike the specific norms, they are compulsory, in the sense that a speaker or a thinker would not be a speaker or a thinker if he were not interpretable through the use of such rationality requirements. Such a *generalist* view, as we may call it, is well expressed in McDowell’s comments upon Davidson’s claim that there is “a constitutive ideal of rationality” which shapes of thought about propositional attitudes :

“To recognize the ideal status of the constitutive concept is to appreciate that the concepts of propositional attitudes have their proper home in explanations of a special sort: explanations in which things are made intelligible by

being revealed to be, or to approximate to being, *as they rationally ought to be* [my emphasis, P.E.]. This is to be contrasted with a style of explanation in which one makes things intelligible by representing their coming into being as a particular instance of how things generally tend to happen.”⁶

Although this “rational ought” operates at a much higher level than the particular “oughts” which go with the “specific constraints” on meanings and concepts that Wright envisages, Davidson’s and Mc Dowell’s general line of thought about the nature of the interpretative norms is quite similar to the Wittgensteinian one in this respect: these norms do not register a further fact from the fact that speakers mean or believe certain things. For Davidson, interpretation is indeed an empirical matter: it aims to provide an empirical theory of what speaker mean or think, and it does not have to presuppose the existence of specific rules or conventions which would have a normative force of their own.⁷ But it must obey certain general constraints which are independent from the specific constraints of words and concepts, in which cannot be *facts* about individuals. Interpretations record facts. But normative principles about interpretation, such as the principle of charity, are not themselves facts. The reason why they are not facts is that they cannot be made precise in the way facts could be made precise. If they could be made precise, the standards of rationality could be *codified*, in such a way that the patterns of *oughts* derivable from an ascription of thought could always be specified. For instance one could say that someone who believes that cats are furred ought to believe that animals are furred. But according to Davidson no such specification is to be had. In other terms: there are norms of rationality, with respect to which one can assess contents, but there are no *norms of norms* of rationality, no “super-norms” against which rationality itself could be assessed.⁸

We can now see what is wrong with (1) and (2). What is wrong here is similar to what is wrong in conditionals of the form “ If such and such is the case,

you ought to do such and such”. Nothing follows from such conditionals with an “ought” in their consequent but not in their antecedent, i.e we cannot detach. But something follows, and one can detach when such conditionals have an ought in their antecedent. In other terms, it is correct to infer that you ought to do Y from “If you ought to do X then you ought to do Y”. In the case of the interpretative norms the corresponding conditionals would be:

(3) If X ought to mean (or think) that p , then X ought to mean or think that ...

(4) If there are *correctness* interpretative conditions for ascribing the meaning or the thought that p (or: if it is *rational* to think that p), then X ought to mean or to think that ...

where a “rational ought” occurs in the antecedent.⁹ If such conditionals are valid, then the normative features of meanings and mental content are not *direct* and *intrinsic* to them , but indirect and relational, and doubly so: they are relative both to the ascriptions and interpretations of meanings and contents, and to the particular norms or correctness conditions for these ascriptions and interpretations. This removes partly the worry expressed above, that norms for meaning and content could figure categorically in meaning and thoughts. They figure in them only *hypothetically*. That I believe that p is a fact, but that I *have reasons* to believe that p is not itself a fact.

One, however, may welcome the conclusion that normativity is not a genuine, but a derivative, feature of contents, or that it is relative to an ascriber or an interpreter of thoughts and meanings, without granting what this claim purports to imply: that meanings and thoughts themselves are not real, but are also derivative features. As many writers have remarked, the claim that meanings and thoughts are “normative” seems to go hand in hand with the claim that meaning

and thoughts are a product of the *interpretation* of meaning and thoughts. This view, which is associated with the names of Davidson and Dennett is often called *interpretationist*.¹⁰ According to interpretationism, meaning and thought are *essentially interpretable*. As Davidson puts it: “What could not be arrived at by these methods [of interpretation] is not thought, talk or action.”¹¹ Indeed the fact that interpretationism seems to yield the thesis that meaning and thought are intrinsically normative is often held to be a reason for rejecting the interpretationist view.¹² I want, on the contrary, allow that meaning and thought have a normative— although a derived one— dimension, without granting the interpretationist view.

II. BRANDOM ON THE NORMATIVITY OF THOUGHT AND LANGUAGE

To see what is wrong in the association of the claim that meaning and thoughts are essentially normative with the claim that meaning and thought are essentially interpretable, let us consider a recent proposal along these lines made by Robert Brandom in his book *Making it Explicit*.¹³ Brandom presents his work as an attempt to explain why meaning and thought are normative. He combines most explicitly the themes which we have distinguished above.

First, his account adopts the interpretative strategy: there are norms of speech and thought because we *ascribe* them to people. Hence the norms are not “out there” as independent entities from our interpretative practices and attitudes towards people. They are not platonic entities which would be antecedent to our *recognizing* them *as* such. They are created by us. Brandom calls this strategy “phenomenalist” (291-297). Norms are in the eye of the beholders. This does not mean that they do not exist, or that they are merely

fictions, instrumental in our making sense of others. They supervene (292) upon real genuine *practices* which are in order in a community, and which are essentially *linguistic* and *discursive* .

This latter feature of his account is related to what I have called the particularist view: together with the meaning of each expression in a language there is a certain kind of rule, which sets the proper conditions of application of its use. Brandom calls these the “discursive statuses”. For there to be a discursive status of an expression it is not enough that there be regularity of use of this expression within a community. There has to be also a recognition, or an acknowledgment of a *commitment* , or of an *entitlement* that this discursive status exists, on the part of the individuals who use the expressions and understand them. For there to be a regularity of uses, individuals have to *keep score* of these statuses or to keep track of their own commitments and of other’s commitments and entitlements to these commitments. Commitments and entitlements are what Brandom calls *deontic statuses* (166), and they are in turn understood in terms of *deontic attitudes* (*ibid.*) that one takes upon the statuses.

Third, Brandom claims that discursive statuses do not come one by one, but as interrelated with others through various typical inferential links. Here he advocates a form of conceptual or inferential role semantics (95-116). He holds, further that there is no way to sort out the formal inferences that are based on logical concepts, such as conjunction and disjunction, from the material inferences based on non logical concepts, such as “cat” or “animal” (125-137). To know the meaning of an expression, and to be able to use a concept is to be able to grasp these inferential relations.

From these claims various consequences follow, which, according to him, allow us to give a full-blooded sense to the claim that content has a normative character .

An implication of the generalist theme above is that to conceive of a subject as interpretable at all, and to ascribe to her meanings and thought contents, is to conceive this subject as a rational being. But the purely interpretationist view takes this rationality to flow from the “normative” principles of interpretation, which are instrumental in making sense of an individual. It denies (at least in Dennett’s version) that there has to be any real states of the individual which instantiate the normative principles. Brandom rejects this (55-62): the intentionality and the rationality of a creature is not a merely derived or *as if* intentionality and rationality, but a genuine, original one. But this does not mean that it can be made sense of apart from anyone taking the states of the individuals as contentful (60). According to Brandom, the intentionality and rationality of content is both derivative and objective: it derives from “the *implicit* practical taking of states, performances and expressions as intentionally contentful” (61), that is from the recognition of the implicit rules which are already present in the practices and instituted by it.

So where does the rationality of the contents lie? It lies in the explicit recognition, by the individuals, of the discursive statuses already present in their speech practices. They have implicit commitments, and the exercise of thought is their “making explicit” these commitments. This is what, following Sellars, Brandom calls the “expressive rationality” of the thinkers (105-106).

Two other important consequences follow. The first is that the nature of intentional contents springs from the *linguistic* contents of expressions which have acquired a “discursive status” within a language. Hence the intentionality of thought seems to be explained by the intentionality of meanings given by public practices, not the other way round (229-233). But in other places (151-152) Brandom claims that his approach is like Davidson’s

in not giving a prior status to either the intentionality of thought or the intentionality of speech.

The second consequence is that meanings (and hence thought contents) are instituted by the linguistic practices. It is these practices which account for their “normative” character: they give rise to certain sorts of regularities of uses, and to sanctions for those who do not follow these uses. One might be tempted, here, to reduce these norms and rules to regularities of use, and to dispositions of individual or of communities, as the first theme above seems to imply. But Brandom denies that this can be done. He uses the familiar Wittgensteinian regress argument (23-30). So norms and rules cannot be reduced to causal fact, and are thus ineliminable. There is no way of expressing normative facts in terms of more basic facts. The very distinction between normative and non normative or causal vocabulary has itself to be drawn in normative terms. It is, as Brandom says “norms all the way down” (625).

Brandom’s theory of the normativity of content suffers from the same difficulties as those that I have raised from the various themes listed in the first section of this article.¹⁴

First, it claims that the intentionality of *thought* derives from the intentionality of *linguistic* or discursive practices of speech. This is in line with a general feature of the interpretationist theme, as characterized above: not only meanings and thoughts would not be what they are unless they were interpreted, but no thought content can be had unless it is linguistically expressible and unless it has a social background. Let us, however, accept only the conditional claim that *if* meaning and thought involve a normative component, *then* this element is interpreter-relative. This will entail a rejection of the view that the norms in question could be genuine, non observer-relative, properties of meanings and thoughts. In other terms, if there “are” norms *in* meanings and thought, these

norms are not “out there”, as natural or causal features. So a normativity claim will imply some view to the effect that the norms are a product of certain attitudes and practices of individuals, and not genuine properties of the contents they entertain, but properties which are projected from an interpreter’s point of view.

The next question to ask, then is: what exactly is the source of this interpretative normativity? Brandom gives us an answer: the norms are instituted by the linguistic practices, then recognized through “deontic attitudes” towards those practices, whereby speakers feel entitled to them, and then ascribed to other people. But in what sense is the ordinary interpretation of someone else’s speech the taking of a normative attitude towards him or her? Suppose that you say to me: “Flagstaff is north of Tucson”, and that I interpret you as saying, or as expressing, sincerely and plainly, that Flagstaff is north of Tucson. According to Brandom, I take you as *committed* to this belief through the discursive practice of assertion, and as committed to give these words a meaning instituted by a regular practice. But does my understanding of your sentence involve any sort of such commitment on your part that I need to ascribe to you, and to acknowledge myself if I say the same thing? This sounds odd, for I simply *hear* you saying this. To account for the contrast between the ordinary phenomenology of understanding speech and the complex commitments that he claims to be involved, Brandom says that these commitments do not feature *explicitly* in my understanding, but *implicitly*. Brandom makes a further claim: he says that even an external observer or interpreter of conversational exchanges has to take a normative attitude to what people say. Here again, let us suppose that it is the case. If Brandom equates understanding with the recognition of a normative attitude and the capacity, on the part of an interpreter to take also this attitude, the attitude which the interpreter identifies in others and the ones that he takes himself, must be the *same* attitude. But is it the same? We may agree, *prima facie*, that two speakers who converse share certain norms and attitudes towards these norms, in Brandom’s sense. But does it follow that an

external observer of the conversation has to *share* the attitudes that she attributes? Certainly the observer must be able to share, in some sense, the *contents* which he ascribes. But it is a different, and a stronger claim, to say that the interpreter must himself take a normative attitude, and share the normative attitude that he ascribes. Suppose, for instance that I understand that you are strongly committed to creationism. I may understand that you are, through the understanding of some statements of yours, such as “Darwin was wrong”, “God created the species”, and so on. But do I need to share your normative attitude of strong conviction to understand what you mean? It seems that I do not. On the contrary I can be quite cold and detached about it. The same can be said about the generalist view of interpretation: if I must think of you as rational, does it follow that you also think of *yourself* as rational in the same sense? Brandom says that in attributing thoughts, “we are placing ourselves and each other in the space of reasons, by giving and asking for reasons for our attitudes and performances.” (5). But are we in the *same* space of reasons? And is the space of reasons of an external observer again the same space as ours?

Maybe Brandom has in mind something much weaker than the idea that an interpreter must *endorse*, or *be committed* to the deontic attitudes of speakers. Sometimes he just seems to imply that the interpreter must recognize that someone who said that *p* is making an assertion, and that assertion is the *normal* expression of belief. But then talk of norms reduces to talk of rules, in the more descriptive sense of *regularity* and *normality*, and not in any prescriptive or evaluative sense. So why should we need a stronger sense of “norm”? I don’t see that we need such a stronger sense, in the sense in which a norm is understood as an imperative, or as entailing an *ought* statement. So the theorist of the normativity of meaning is committing here the fallacy denounced above, of deriving a categorical “ought” from a derived one.

The normative character of a content, therefore, is not a direct property of the content itself, but a property which derives from the attitudes that one has taken towards the content, about the way it is proper to assess it, to assert it, or to think of it rationally. It is a feature of a reflexive attitude that we take *towards* our own propositional attitudes and their content, but it is not lodged in these attitudes and contents. Brandom is right to say that the norms of the mental come from the normative or deontic attitudes that we take towards our own thoughts. But it does not follow that contents are themselves “normative”. In most cases, we simply *have* the thoughts, without thereby having normative stances towards them. The normativity becomes a property of the thoughts and of their implications only at a later stage, when we reflect upon them. But it remains to be seen how this can happen.

III. NORMATIVITY AND SELF-ASCRPTIONS

I can only give here the outline of an account of the source of our normative attitudes. I have just suggested that it has to do with our capacity to be reflective about our own thoughts: we are able to know what thoughts we have, that is to self-ascribe them to ourselves. Self-knowledge of one own contents of thought depends upon having second-order beliefs about the contents of our beliefs, of the form “I believe that I believe that *p*”, but it does not simply consist in our having such second-order beliefs, for these second-order beliefs have also to be *knowledge*. As many writers have noticed, there is a sort of immunity of self-ascriptions of thoughts, to the effect that we are always correct in ascribing them to ourselves, even on the externalist hypothesis their content is determined by our social, or our physical environment.¹⁵ In other terms, we are always entitled to

ascribe beliefs contents to ourselves, even when the contents themselves are erroneous. But what is the source of this entitlement?

In recent papers, Burge¹⁶ has claimed that self-knowledge of our own attitudes, as expressed in such statements as: “I judge, herewith, that there are physical entities” are “contextually self-verifying”, i.e are always true in all contexts. He locates the entitlement that we have to such statements in two sources: 1) the role of relevant judgments in critical reasoning, and 2) the constitutive relation between the judgments and their subject matter¹⁷. 1) is the essential source, for Burge, but it is closely tied to (2). It means, according to him that

“To be capable of critical reasoning, and to be the subject of certain rational norms necessarily associated with such reasoning, some states must be knowledgeably reviewable. The specific character of this knowledgeable reviewability requires that it be associated with an epistemic commitment that is distinctive.” (ibid. 98)

In other terms, for Burge, there is a “constitutive” link between being a rational inquirer, who commits himself to certain norms of critical reasoning, and his epistemically responsible for his beliefs and inferences, and the possibility of being able to review one’s thoughts knowledgeably. As he says:

“The first person point of view bears a distinctive relation to the relevance of rational norms to rational activity. For a review of a propositional mental event or state to yield an immediate rational ground to defend or alter the attitude, the point of view of the review and of the attitude reviewed must be the same and must be first personal.” (ibid. 115)

Such a view is quite compatible with the conclusion that we have reached above: in order for there to be a normative element in a thought content entertained by a subject, the subject must be able to take a stance towards his own thoughts, that is to assess them as rational. What Burge adds is that this goes necessarily with the capacity of a subject to know about what she thinks, in a secure way. His claim is that the role of self-ascriptions in critical reasoning the *source* of a thinker's entitlement to make them, so that it is a *precondition* of this entitlement to self-knowledge that the subject can conceive of herself as a rational inquirer, subject to epistemic norms.

This view, however, comes quite close to Brandom's view, if we add with Brandom that in order to be a rational inquirer, capable of normative attitudes towards his own thoughts one must be embedded in a social context of public assessment of one's claims. Whatever line one takes on this matter, Burge's conception is problematic, because he excludes the possibility that the source of our entitlement to self knowledge might be a psychological capacity that we could have *independently* of its role in critical reasoning. On Burge's view, one needs to have attitudes about one's own attitudes in order to be able of critical reasoning.

But we can doubt that the normative element in mental content arises only at this level. There may be more primitive capacities of reasoning, which involve assessment or support, without the subject having the concept of a propositional attitude or being able to "review" them. Suppose, for instance that someone comes back home and sees that his spouse's car is not in the driveway, who believes on the basis of this information that his wife is not home yet, but then suspends this belief on the basis of his remembering that she may have taken the car to the garage for repair, and as a result of that believes that she is at home. As Peacocke notes about such an example, "nothing in this little fragment of reasoning seems to involve the self ascription of belief."¹⁸ Such a reasoning needs the existence of thoughts about thoughts, but it does not need any particular sort

of self-knowledge of them. If this is correct, then the normative assessment of our beliefs may come at a much more primitive stage, in pieces of reasoning which are not “critical” in Burge’s sense. Critical reasoning itself may be dependent upon such reasoning abilities. In this sense, as Peacocke says:

“There is a basic system of normative relations in which a content stands, a system of relations which a thinker will respect in his thinking, and basic in the sense that the thinker can respect these relations without yet employing concepts of propositional attitudes. These are the normative relations which specify what justifies acceptance of a content, what justifies its rejection, what partially confirm it; and so forth.”¹⁹

The existence of a normative element in mental content does not need, therefore, to be only a feature of our self-ascriptions of thought: this element can be, so to say, prepared by more primitive psychological capacities than the taking of normative epistemic attitudes towards our thoughts. It remains true that most of the “normativity” that is present is due to our reflexive attitudes as critical reasoners, without being a feature of contents themselves. But this is not incompatible with the idea that the more primitive capacities of assessment of thought contents have a causal character in the formation of such normative epistemic attitudes. If this is so, there is no reason to think that we cannot explain, in some psychological sense, the kinds of attitudes that give rise to the normative element in mental contents, and thus that, contrary to what Brandom and others say, it is not “norms all the way down”.

I have tried to sort out the various senses in which we could talk of the normativity of meaning and thought. I have argued that when this normativity is said to be a feature of our interpretations, it is not obvious that

there is anything prescriptive about the thoughts themselves. I have tried to show that when there is an authentic normative dimension in thought contents, it is not a direct and categorical feature of these contents, but a feature which springs from our attitudes as would-be rational inquirers and which is conditional upon the existence of such attitudes. I have also suggested that these attitudes are based upon our capacity of self knowledge of our own thoughts, but I have allowed that this kind of self-knowledge is not necessary for the existence of normative liaisons in contents.²⁰

6400 words

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NOTES

¹ My aim is thus distinct from other accounts of the normativity of meaning, such as E.H. Gampel's. See his "The Normativity of Meaning", *Philosophical Studies*, 86: 221-242, 1997

² C.Wright, *Realism meaning and Truth*, Oxford: Blackwell (first edition 1987) p.24)

³ These points are forcefully put by John Skorupski in an unpublished paper issues ("Facts and norms", 1993) which he has kindly allowed me to read.

⁴ The distinction here adduced between a particularist and generalist view of norms of meaning and thought is borrowed to A. Bilgrami, *Belief and Meaning*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, pp.100-110

⁵ See for instance D.Dennett, *The Intentional Stance*, Cambridge Mass, The MIT Press 1987

⁶ J. Mc Dowell, "Functionalism and Anomalous Monism", in E. Le Pore & B. Mc Laughlin (eds) *Actions and Events: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1986, p.389)

⁷ See in particular D. Davidson "Communication and Convention" in Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, pp.265-280.

⁸ See in particular W. Child, *Causality, Interpretation and the Mind*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, p.58-61

⁹ I adapt here some remarks made by A. Gibbard, "Thought, Norms and Discursive Practice: Commentary on Robert Brandom: *Making it Explicit*", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, LVI, 3, 699-717.

¹⁰ For an excellent statement of this view, see Child 1994, *op cit.* ch.1

¹¹ D. Davidson "A New Basis for Decision Theory", *Theory and Decision* 18, 97-98, p.92

¹² See in particular J. Fodor and E. Le Pore *Holism, a Shopper's Guide*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, ch.5.

¹³ R. Brandom *Making it Explicit*, Harvard University Press, 1994

¹⁴ I have been much helped, in this discussion, by A. Gibbard, *op cit* .

¹⁵ See in particular Davidson (1985), Burge (1988)

¹⁶ "Our entitlement to Self knowledge", *Proceedings of The Aristotelian Society* , XCVI, 91-116, 1996

¹⁷ Burge, *ibid.* p.98

¹⁸ C. Peacocke, "Entitlement, Self-knowledge and Conceptual Redeployment", *Proceedings of The Aristotelian Society* , XCVI, 117-158

¹⁹ Peacocke 1996, *ibid.* p.136

²⁰ A version of this paper was read at the conference "Language, rationality and cognition", at the University of Arizona et Tucson in February 1997. I thank my commentator Joseph Tolliver for his insightful comments, Keith Lehrer, Alvin Goldman and Christopher Maloney for theirs remarks on this occasion. I thank also Peter Railton , Steven Davis, and Ariela Lazar for their very helpful comments and criticisms.