

CONTENT NORMATIVITY AND THE INTERDEPENDENCY OF BELIEF AND DESIRE

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Abstract

The normativity of mental content thesis has been very influential in contemporary philosophy of mind and action. Paul Boghossian (2003, 2005) has developed an argument for the normativity of mental content on the basis of two premises- the normativity of the notion of belief and the priority of the notion of belief to the notion of desire. In his article Alexander Miller (2008) has criticised Boghossian's argument for the normativity of mental content. He has argued that the second premise of Boghossian's argument is false to the effect that belief and desire are conceptually interdependent. In this paper, along with proposing a new argument for the normativity of content thesis, I will clarify that the thesis survives Miller's attack.

Key words: *normativity, belief, desire, content, interdependency,*

Introduction:

It is widely held that a concept is normative only if it is constitutive of our understanding of a statement involving it such that the statement entails an *ought*. In his papers (2003, 2005) Paul Boghossian has developed an argument for the thesis that mental content is constitutively normative. The argument is criticized by a number of critics. In this paper I will address a key objection against the normativity of content thesis proposed by Miller (2008).

In section one I will reformulate Boghossian's argument for the thesis in details. In section two I will

clarify Miller's objection against the normativity of content thesis, I will then propose a new argument for the normativity of content thesis to show that Miller's objection fails.

1- Boghossian on the normativity of content:

Boghossian's normativity of content thesis can be clarified via the following four steps:

In the first step, Boghossian claims that belief attributions are constitutively normative since, "it is a condition on understanding them that one understands that one *ought* to believe that P only if P" (Boghossian2005: 212). In other words, he believes that the concept of belief is constitutively normative since grasping an attribution of belief to someone requires grasping that the attribution implies an *ought* that is, that she *ought* to believe that P only if P. This is called the normativity of belief thesis in the literature and is endorsed by many key philosophers (see Engel 2001; Gibbard 2003, 2005; Shah 2003; Shah and Velleman 2005; Wedgwood 2002). The following example will clarify the idea:

- (1) Marco understands that Ebenezer believes that P.

According to the normativity of belief thesis implies:

- (2) Marco understands that Ebenezer ought to believe that P only if P.

In the second step, Boghossian claims that there are no norms governing propositional attitudes other than

belief. He considers the case of desire and states that desire attributions are not normative: “suppose I say of Ebenezer that he *wants* that Howard Dean be the next President. In making this attribution, am I in any way speaking oughts? ... Ebenezer’s desire has conditions of satisfaction – it will be satisfied if and only if Dean is the next president. But, in and of itself, this doesn’t translate either into a correctness fact, or into an *ought* of any kind” (Boghossian2005: 213).Boghossian notes that of course an individual may have a particular desire (for X, say) because she believes it to be a way of securing the satisfaction of another of her desires, and hence it might be said that the desire is correct to the extent that her belief is true. However it does not show that the desire itself is the subject of normative evaluation: rather, this is the underlying belief. What Boghossian insists on is that there are no oughts about desires in virtue of the mere fact that they are contentful states: “it’s not clear to me, then, that there are norms on desire merely qua contentful state” (Boghossian2005: 213).

From the considerations embodied in the first and second steps, Boghossian concludes that what is responsible for the normativity of belief attribution relates to the concept of belief and not the concept of content. Since, if content is constitutively normative all the other contentful attitudes, including desire, should be normative too. Boghossian clarifies this point as follows: “if it’s genuinely constitutive of content that it

be normative, shouldn't it carry this normativity with it wherever it goes?" (Boghossian2005: 212)

In the third step, Boghossian endorses the idea that our understanding of content has to go via understanding the attitudes that have contents as their objects: "I take it that the concept of a proposition, or content, just is the concept of whatever it is that is the object of the attitudes" (Boghossian2005: 214). This consideration, of course, implies that the concept of content may be introduced in connection with attitudinal concepts other than that of belief, say, desire. Boghossian, however, asks, "whether any non-belief based understanding would covertly presuppose an understanding of its role in belief" (2005: 214). This question is considered in the fourth step of the argument as follows.

In the fourth step, Boghossian argues that the concept of belief is indeed prior to the concepts of the other propositional attitudes, including the concept of desire: "grasp of the concept of desire seems to asymmetrically depend on our grasp of the concept of belief in just the way that, I have argued, the normativity of content thesis requires" (Boghossian2005: 215). This consideration implies that we understand the role that content plays in propositional attitudes generally only *through* our understanding of its role in belief: "we would understand content only through belief, and belief only through normative notions" (Boghossian2005: 214). Boghossian argues that since the concept of belief is normative, the concept of mental

content is also normative: “if our grasp of the notion of content were somehow to depend in a privileged and asymmetric way on our grasp of the concept of belief, then our only route to the notion of a contentful state would be through our grasp of a constitutively normative notion ... that would be enough to substantiate the claim that content itself is normative” (Boghossian2005: 213).

Boghossian emphasizes that the asymmetry in our understanding of belief and desire is a necessary condition for the normativity of content: “if, however, it is not true that content depends on belief, that content may be understood through its role in other non-normative attitudes ... then we would not have a thesis of the normativity of content but only the rather different thesis of the normativity of belief” (Boghossian2005: 214).

Below, in order to attain a clearer perspective on the overall argument, I have reformulated the premises and conclusions of Boghossian’s argument. The argument involves the following four premises:

(3) The concept of belief is constitutively normative.

(4) The concept of desire (and also all the attitudinal concepts other than belief) is not normative.

(5) Our understanding of content has to go via understanding the attitudes that have contents as their objects.

(6) The concept of belief is prior to the concept of desire (and also to other propositional attitudes).

Premises (5) and (6), according to Boghossian, imply:

(7) Our understanding of content has to go via understanding of belief.

From (3) and (7) the argument infers the normativity of content:

(8) The concept of mental content is normative.

This is because “[according to (7)] we would understand content only through belief and [according to (3)] belief through normative notions” (Boghossian2005: 214).

2- The normativity of content and the conceptual interdependency of belief and desire:

In his recent article, Alexander Miller (2008) argues that premise (6) of Boghossian’s argument is implausible. Miller claims that there is good evidence which shows that belief and desire are conceptually *interdependent*. That is, “thinking of someone as having beliefs involves thinking of them as at least capable of having desires, and thinking of someone as having desires involves thinking of them as at least capable of having beliefs” (Miller 2008: 237). He argues for the interdependency thesis via the following plausible consideration: both beliefs and desires potentially feature in the generation of *action*. He clarifies this as follows: “grasping the concept of belief... involves grasping that beliefs can lead to action by combining with desires” (Miller 2008: 237) and, “grasping the concept of desire... involves grasping

that desires can lead to action by combining with beliefs" (Miller 2008: 237). For example, according to Miller:

(9) Marco understands that Ebenezer believes that there is beer in the fridge.

Implies:

(10) Marco understands that (if Ebenezer believes that there is beer in the fridge and Ebenezer desires to drink some beer then, *ceteris paribus*, Ebenezer will reach for the fridge).

Likewise

(11) Marco understands that Ebenezer desires to drink some beer.

Implies:

(12) Marco understands that (if Ebenezer desires to drink some beer and Ebenezer believes that there is beer in the fridge, *ceteris paribus*, Ebenezer will reach for the fridge).

These points, according to Miller, are good reasons to endorse the interdependency thesis between belief and desire, far from there being an unidirectional relation of priority between the two.

It should be noted here that Bykvist and Hattiangadi (2007) have tried to show that premise (3) of Boghossian's argument is false. Nonetheless, Miller believes that, even if they failed to undermine the normativity of belief, Boghossian's argument for the normativity of content is still implausible. This is because, as explained in section A, Boghossian's

argument for the normativity of content is based on both main premises (3) and (6), and Miller attempts to demonstrate the falsity of premise (6). As Miller puts it: “even if Bykvist and Hattiangadi are wrong about the normativity of belief- and I do not say that they are- Boghossian’s argument for the normativity of content would still grind to a halt” (Miller 2008: 237).

Miller’s argument for the interdependency thesis, of course has important implications for some of the premises and conclusions of Boghossian’s argument. However, I will argue that it does not undermine the idea that content is normative. In other words, Boghossian could endorse Miller’s reflection that belief and desire are conceptually interdependent, whilst manoeuvring to preserve his argument for the normativity of content.

I will now distinguish between two senses in which a concept may be said to be normative. Then I will end by spelling out an alternative argument for the normativity of content, which is immune to Miller’s attack:

(13) A concept is *directly* normative only if it is constitutive of our understanding of a statement involving it that the statement entails an *ought*.

And,

(14) A concept is *indirectly* normative only if it is not directly normative and we understand it only *through* our understanding of a concept that is directly normative.

The distinction between the two senses in which a concept can be said to be normative, as we will see below, can be useful for understanding the difference between the sense in which desire is normative and the sense in which belief is normative. My alternative argument for the normativity of content has the following four premises:

(15) The concept of belief is directly normative.

This premise is granted on the basis of Boghossian's consideration, embodied in the first step of his argument, according to which understanding of a statement ascribing a belief requires understanding a statement that involves an ought.

(16) The concept of desire is not directly normative.

This premise is based upon Boghossian's independent argument, embodied in the second step of his argument, according to which attribution of desire is not directly normative.

(17) Our understanding of content has to go via understanding contentful attitudes.

This premise comes through the consideration that there is no independent account of content in hand. The concept of content can be introduced only via the concept of contentful attitudes, for contents just are what the attitudes are attitudes towards.

(18) Belief and desire are conceptually interdependent.

This premise reflects the argument of Miller's rehearsed above according to which belief and desire are conceptually interdependent.

Premises (17) and (18) together imply:

(19) We understand content through the concept of belief and the concept of desire.

Now, premises (15), (16) and (18) imply:

(20) The concept of desire is indirectly normative. This is because on one hand, according to Boghossian's argument, desire cannot be directly normative. On the other hand, according to the interdependency, understanding the notion of desire depends on understanding the notion of belief, so it follows that since belief is directly normative, desire must be indirectly normative.

Finally we can conclude that:

(21) The concept of content is indirectly normative.

This is because on one hand, according to (19), we understand content through the concept of belief and the concept of desire. On the other hand, according to (15), the concept of belief is directly normative and, according to (20), the concept of desire is indirectly normative. It follows that the notion of content is grasped through a directly normative notion, hence according to the definition (14) the concept of content must be indirectly normative.

Conclusion:

My argument above, if it is true, then justifies my foregoing claim that even if we give up the conceptual priority of belief over desire in favor of the idea that belief and desire are conceptually interdependent, there is a clear sense in which the concept of content is normative. Thus, Boghossian's argument survives Miller's attack.

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