The Purpose of a Normative Account of the Content of our Beliefs

Michael Esfeld
University of Cologne

Abstract

This paper recalls the motivation for a normative account of the conceptual content of our beliefs, namely the problem of rule-following. It employs Brandom's social, inferential semantics as a paradigmatic example of such an account of conceptual content. The conceptual content of our beliefs – and the meaning of the sentences that we use – is normative in the sense that it is determined by social, normative practices. Nevertheless, a description of content and meaning is possible. The paper argues that the purpose of a normative account of conceptual content is a rational reconstruction in the sense of a conceptual analysis.

1. Introduction

If one claims that conceptual content is normative, the idea is that the content of our beliefs – as well as the meaning of the sentences that we use – is determined by certain normative, social practices. This paper offers an assessment of this idea. I first recall the main motivation for a normative account of conceptual content, namely the problem of rule-following (section 2). I then give a brief sketch of what such an account can look like (section 3). On this basis, we can examine what it means to say that content is normative (section 4). The second half of the paper considers the purpose of a normative theory of content. There seems to be the following dilemma: Either such a theory is conceived as an explanation of how we can have beliefs with a determinate content and is thus linked with our natural capacities; but then there seems to be no principled argument for normative notions being irreducible. Or one maintains that there is no explanation of content and that a normative theory of content simply tells us what we expect when we treat each other as thinking beings. But then it seems that we have to countenance either an idealism that comes close to eliminativism about conceptual content or to go for an idealism that spreads conceptual content out over the world, namely an objective, absolute idealism (section 5). This paper proposes the following way out of this dilemma: We should regard a normative theory of content as a rational reconstruction of the content of our beliefs on the basis of our natural capacities; it is a conceptual analysis of content. This rational reconstruction shows how beliefs that have a determinate content can be embedded in the natural world, and it contains an argument for a principled irreducibility of normative notions in semantics (section 6).

2. The motivation for a normative theory of content

Recall the problem of rule-following (Wittgenstein (1953), §§ 138-242, and Kripke (1982), Chapter 2). Consider a concept F. Let F be a basic concept in the sense that it is not regarded as a function of other concepts. For instance, the concept [184] "blond" is conceived as being derived from the concepts "hair" and "yellow", whereas these latter concepts are not conceived as being derived from other concepts. Only concepts such as the latter ones will be considered in this paper. If a person masters a concept F, she has the capacity to apply this concept to an indeterminate number of new situations by forming beliefs and uttering sentences of the type "This is F". We can put this matter in this way: By mastering a concept, a person follows a rule that determines what is correct and what is incorrect in employing the concept in question. The rule determines which concept the person masters and, consequently, what the conceptual content of the beliefs in which the concept in question is employed is. However, any finite thinking being applies any rule only finitely many times. Furthermore, any mental representation of a rule (such as a mental idea or the mental act of grasping an abstract object) or any implementation of the rule in dispositions to behaviour is finite, too, in the following sense: Any such thing satisfies infinitely many logically possible rules. Any such thing can therefore not determine which one is the rule that the person follows. The problem of rule-following then is this one: How can a finite thinking being follow a particular rule? The point that Kripke makes on behalf of Wittgenstein is not tied to employing the notion of a rule. We can make that point without mentioning rules at all: The point is that any mental idea, any mental grasp of an abstract object, any disposition to behaviour, etc. is compatible with infinitely many logically possible contents of any of the beliefs of a person and infinitely many logically possible meanings of any of the sentences that a person utters. This challenge concerns only conceptual content. If there is non-conceptual content, it is not touched by this challenge. Consequently, "content" in this paper always means "conceptual content".

Two aspects of the Kripke–Wittgenstein challenge have to be distinguished:

* the *infinity problem*: How can a finite sequence of whatever items instantiate only one rule rather than infinitely many rules? The challenge is: *There are infinitely many possible ways of continuing any finite sequence in any new situation. Each of these ways is in accordance with the rule that the sequence instantiates under some interpretation of what the rule is.*
* the *normativity problem*: What determines which is the correct manner to continue a finite sequence in such a way that a person can follow a rule (so that she has a distinction between following the rule correctly and following it incorrectly at her disposition)? The challenge is: *For any finite sequence and for any new situation of continuing the sequence in question, it is not determined what is the correct way to go on.*

There are two main types of replies to the problem of rule-following. The one type proposes what is known as a straight solution: There are mental or physical facts that determine the content of beliefs and the meaning of sentences in such a way that the challenge which the problem of rule-following poses is countered

(see e.g. Millikan (1990) and Miscevic (1996)). The other type of replies concludes from the problem of rule-following that we cannot conceive the content of our beliefs as some sort of a predetermined fact – be it a physical fact, be it a mental one. A normative theory of conceptual content is the most prominent version of that type of replies. Such a theory considers content only under the aspect of what the conceptual [185] content of our beliefs is. There may be abstract entities. But the problem of rule-following is taken to show that we could not grasp abstract entities in such a way that they account for the content of our beliefs. Hence, the problem of rule-following is employed as an argument for the claim that there is content only insofar as there are persons who have beliefs with a determinate content. If content is normative in a sense to be explained, having beliefs is a normative affair, too, since beliefs are individuated by their content.[1]

Beliefs are attributed to persons. More precisely, what is attributed to persons is instances of beliefs, that is, tokens of beliefs. When I talk about beliefs, I always mean tokens of beliefs. A person has beliefs by being in a state of believing that, for example, snow is white. Beliefs exist only insofar as persons are in states of believing something. I use the term "belief" in such a way that only what a person is prepared to acknowledge counts as a belief of hers. When I speak about the consequences of certain acknowledged beliefs, I talk in terms of what a person is committed to believe. Having beliefs in this sense is tied to being able to have beliefs about one's own beliefs; for having beliefs involves the capacity to assess whether the beliefs that one has cohere with or are incompatible with one another. For instance, if one has a belief of the type "This is F" and a belief of the type "This is G", one also has the capacity to form the metabelief "The belief that this is F and the belief that this is G cohere with one another" (or are incompatible with one another), etc.

If we conclude from the problem of rule-following that the content of our beliefs is not some sort of a predetermined fact, it is something that we make ourselves by forming concepts and beliefs. This amounts to the programme to base semantics – the theory of content and meaning – on pragmatics, the theory of the use of concepts. If we take the problem of rule-following to show that there are no predetermined facts of content and meaning, we claim that there is content only insofar as content admits of a reconstruction in terms of pragmatics. The problem of rule-following provides us with two guidelines as to what a pragmatics that accounts for content has to be like:

a) It has to be a *normative pragmatics*. For a pragmatics that simply describes facts of the use of concepts would not be able to fulfil the task of explaining

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[1] In his contribution to this volume, which was made accessible to me after this paper had been finished, Akeel Bilgrami argues against the sort of normativity that Kripke points out on behalf of Wittgenstein. Bilgrami starts from the fact that persons have beliefs and seeks to satisfy two constraints on a philosophical account of beliefs without having to countenance two sorts of content. The aim of this paper is to explore to what extent a story in terms of social, normative practices can be a reconstruction of what it means that there are persons who have beliefs. The claim of a normative aspect of beliefs is not used as a premise in the argument, but may be a consequence of such a reconstruction.

how mastering concepts includes the capacity to apply concepts to an indefinite number of new situations.

b) It has to be a *social pragmatics*. For a person considered in isolation does not have a criterion to distinguish between correct and incorrect use of a concept at her disposal (see in particular Wittgenstein (1953), § 202). If there were a mental or a physical fact that could provide a person considered in isolation with such a criterion, then there would be a mental or a physical fact that determines content prior to use.

Wittgenstein (1953) and Kripke (1982), Chapter 3, can be read as arguing that social practices are necessary and sufficient in order to (a) determine a content for the beliefs of a person given the infinitely many logically possible contents of any finite [186] sequence and (b) enable a person to have a distinction between correct and incorrect rule-following at her disposal.

What can a social, pragmatic account of content achieve? This account focuses on the normativity problem. Consider the challenge:

1) *For any finite sequence of examples, actions, sentences, etc. and for any new situation of continuing the sequence in question, it is not determined what is the correct way to go on.*

The social account of rule-following intends to block the move to this conclusion. It sets out to show that for any situation with which the people in a community deal in their ordinary practices it is determined what is the correct way to go on. However, going beyond the situations with which the people in a given community deal in their ordinary practices, there is for any finite sequence of actions a margin conceivable beyond which it is indeterminate what is the correct way to go on. There are several ways imaginable how to go on beyond this margin. The rule or the norm that the social practices have established does not select one of these ways (compare Pettit (1996), 349-351). Furthermore, for any one concept, it cannot be excluded that a community will confront such a margin. In such an extraordinary situation, a further determination of the rule or the norm in question has to be carried out.

Hence, the social account rejects the challenge (1) in the following way:

2) *For any finite sequence of examples, actions, sentences, etc., there are indefinitely many new situations of continuing the sequence in question for which it is determined what is the correct way to go on.*

However, it has to concede the following point:

3) *For any finite sequence of examples, actions, sentences, etc., there is a new situation of continuing the sequence in question conceivable for which it is not determined what is the correct way to go on.*

No reconstruction of content in terms of the practices of finite thinking beings can be expected to achieve a determination of rules beyond the scope of these practices. Consequently, the account in terms of social practices intends to solve the *normativity problem* by offering some sort of an account of how persons can follow rules. But it does not solve the *infinity problem*, that is, the problem whether and how a finite sequence as such can determine infinitely many cases. It addresses this problem only insofar as this problem threatens our beliefs to be stripped of content: it sets out to show how a finite sequence of examples or of

actions can determine content for a community of persons within the scope of the situations with which they deal in their ordinary practices.

3. *What can a normative theory of content look like?*

The most elaborate version of a normative, social theory of conceptual content in today's philosophy is Bob Brandom's book *Making It Explicit* (Brandom (1994)). [187] Consider a situation in which a person makes a claim such as the claim that the New Year's Concert of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra is world-famous. Brandom (1994), Chapter 1, distinguishes three types of norms under which a person puts herself by making a claim of the type *p*:

a) *commitment*: Making a claim of the type *p* commits a person to a number of other claims. For instance, if one claims that the New Year's Concert of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra is world-famous, one is committed to the claim that there is a New Year's Concert in Vienna.

b) *entitlement*: Making a claim of the type *p* entitles a person to a number of other claims. The claim that the New Year's Concert of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra is world-famous entitles one to the claim that international media will broadcast this concert. If the latter claim is challenged, making the former claim is giving a reason for the latter claim.

c) *precluded entitlement*: Making a claim of the type *p* precludes an entitlement to a number of other claims. Claiming that the New Year's Concert of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra is world-famous precludes one from being entitled to claim that the Vienna Philharmonic is a provincial orchestra.

According to Brandom, we are beings that have beliefs with a determinate content, because we engage in practices of treating each other as being committed to and entitled to certain claims and actions. We can switch in this position between talking in terms of beliefs and talking in terms of claims that people make, because only the linguistic expression of a belief by making a claim can determine content by determining relations of commitment, entitlement and precluded entitlement. The meaning of sentences and the content of beliefs are fixed both at once by relations of commitment, entitlement and precluded entitlement to the extent that they are fixed at all. Concepts are thus identical with predicates that are employed in making claims.

These norms of commitments, entitlements and precluded entitlements are determined in concrete situations of the application of the concepts in question. We have to distinguish between two factors in which the content of a belief or the meaning of a claim of the type "This is *F*" consists: (a) appropriate circumstances of the application of the concept *F* by forming a belief or making a claim of the type "This is *F*"; (b) to which other beliefs or claims (and actions) one is committed, entitled and precluded from being entitled by having the belief or making the claim that something is *F*.

The route from pragmatics to semantics consists in translating these pragmatic norms into inferential relations among beliefs or claims, thereby getting to an inferential semantics (Brandom (1994), Chapter 2):

a) From *commitment* to *entailment*: There are beliefs that are *entailed* by *p* in the sense that they can be deduced from *p*.

b) From *entitlement* to *support*: There are beliefs that are *supported* by *p* in the sense that *p* supports an induction to them.
c) From *precluded entitlement* to *exclusion*: There are beliefs that are *excluded* by *p* in the sense that endorsing *p* precludes one from endorsing these beliefs.
   [188] This position is a social holism and a holism about beliefs: the content of a belief consists in relations to other beliefs that are determined by social practices.

4. In which sense is content normative?

Content as based on pragmatics is normative in the sense that persons impose norms of commitment, entitlement and precluded entitlement on themselves by mastering concepts and forming beliefs. However, persons cannot impose these norms on themselves in such a way that they are conscious of these commitments, entitlements and precluded entitlements as such – like, for example, one can put oneself under the obligation to donate money to a charity. The normativity of commitments in forming beliefs cannot be understood in analogy to the normativity of obligations that one accepts deliberately. In order to master a concept *F* and to form beliefs of the type "This is *F*", a person has to master the circumstances of the application of the concept *F* together with the commitments and entitlements to beliefs of other types. Mastering these circumstances together with commitments and entitlements does not mean that a person must have beliefs about these circumstances and commitments and entitlements, on pain of an infinite regress: In order to have a belief of the type "This is *F*", it would be necessary to have beliefs about the circumstances in which it is appropriate to apply the concept *F* and about the commitments and entitlements that result from having a belief of the type "This is *F*"; these beliefs would in turn require further higher order beliefs, etc.

   Mastering these circumstances together with commitments and entitlements is a practical knowledge in the first place. It shows up in the way in which a person forms beliefs of a certain kind and moves from these beliefs to beliefs of other kinds and actions. In a second step of reflection, this practical knowledge can at least in part be made explicit by forming beliefs about these circumstances of application as well as these commitments and entitlements. The normative aspect of this practical knowledge is the normative attitude to assess the actions of other persons as correct or incorrect by means of sanctions and to recognize that one's own actions are subject to such an assessment by others. If and only if a person recognizes such an assessment, she is able to follow a rule and to form beliefs with a determinate content.

   Accordingly, if one attributes beliefs to a person, one attributes a certain normative status to this person. If one ascribes a belief of the type *p* to a person, one ascribes to her that she is committed to some beliefs of other types and entitled to some beliefs of other types. This is not an instance of the is–ought fallacy, that is, the attempt to deduce ought-sentences from is-sentences. For the sentence that a person has a belief of the type *p* is explained in terms of the

person committing herself to *p* and thereby committing herself to certain other beliefs. In short, the claim is the following: What distinguishes belief states (and intentional states in [189] general) from other mental states (such as, for instance, being in pain) as well as physical states (such as, for instance, being six feet tall) is a normative feature – being in a belief state is undertaking a commitment.

Consequently, if John ascribes a belief of the type *p* to Carol, he adopts a normative stance towards her. He regards her as having committed herself to certain further beliefs of other types. John does not have to undertake the commitment in question himself, because he does not have to share the belief that he ascribes to Carol; the only thing he has to realize is that Carol undertakes a certain commitment. Thus, *by ascribing beliefs to persons, one describes the commitments that these persons undertake*. The relations of commitment, entitlement and precluded entitlement to other beliefs are the normative facts that constitute the content of a belief. Content is a sort of functional role, but a social functional role that can be described only in normative vocabulary.

Mark Lance and John O'Leary-Hawthrone (1997), by contrast, go further and consider claims about content and meaning as being prescriptive. Thus, there are no descriptions of content and meaning. Lance and O'Leary-Hawthrone have a point in saying that the normative relations which constitute the content of a belief are not explicit. Making them explicit at least in part is not simply a description of implicit practices, but also a prescription in the sense of a suggestion for a binding specification of preexisting practices. Lance and O'Leary-Hawthrone employ the example of children playing football and a specification of rules for playing football (222-223). However, such a specification is modelled on a preexisting practice and tries as far as possible to encapsulate that practice. Conceding this point does not prevent us from going for a descriptive theory of the content of our beliefs and the meaning of the sentences that we use.

Lance's and O'Leary-Hawthrone's main argument for their position of claims about content being prescriptions is that any descriptivist view leads to a social relativism (in particular 208-227). However, if one adopts the normative pragmatics sketched above, one is free to describe the meaning of a claim in terms of the normative attitudes which the members of a community take and then go on to challenge these attitudes as being incorrect, thereby suggesting a correction of the received meaning. This normative pragmatics does not commit us at any point to identify what is taken to be correct with what is in fact correct. Although meaning is normative, a descriptive theory of meaning is possible – in the sense of a description of the normative practices of the persons in question.

5. *A dilemma for a normative theory of content*

What is the purpose of a normative theory of content? The answer which suggests itself is to say that a normative theory of content is intended to be an explanation of content in the sense of an explanation of how persons can have beliefs with a [190] determinate content. In other words, the task of such a theory is to explain how we get from our natural capacities to beliefs that have a determinate conceptual content. I take it for granted in the context of this paper that we can tell a story that leads from a normative, social pragmatics to a theory of content and meaning in the sense of an inferential semantics as mentioned in section 3. The crucial point is whether and how we can tell a story that leads from a description of our natural capacities to a description of the normative practices that determine the content of our beliefs. The following is a rough sketch of what such a story can look like in five steps (compare Haugeland, "The Intentionality All-Stars" and "Truth and Rule-Following" in Haugeland (1998), in particular 147-150, 310-313, and Pettit (1996), 76-108):

1) *Although any finite sequence of examples can be continued in infinitely many different ways, for any finite thinking being there usually is one specific way in which this being is disposed to continue such a sequence.* To give an intuitive idea of what this step and the following ones can be like, imagine a sequence of trees in a physical environment and reactions of persons towards this sequence, in particular reactions of classifying or refusing to classify items with this sequence. This step presupposes that persons, like other living beings, have a cognitive access to their environment. This cognitive access consists in reliable and differentiating response-mechanisms that humans share with other living beings. It is not presupposed that there is anything that has conceptual content.

2) *Persons who have the same biological equipment and who share a physical environment have by and large similar dispositions.*

3) *The dispositions of persons who have the same biological equipment and who share a physical environment include a disposition to coordinate at least parts of one's behaviour with the behaviour of one's fellows.* This is a disposition to change some of one's dispositions and one's behaviour as a result of the behaviour of one's fellows, being directed at coordination. Having and exercising such a disposition is a necessary and sufficient condition for behaviour to be social behaviour.

4) *Owing to the disposition to at least partial coordination humans react to each other's actions by applying sanctions in the sense of reinforcements or discouragements.* They reinforce actions in others which agree with their own actions, and they discourage actions in others which disagree with their own actions. By agreement or disagreement, I mean accord or failure of accord in the way in which a given sequence of examples is continued. Given the presupposed cognitive access to the environment such accord or failure of accord is transparent to the persons involved. Sanctions are exclusively physical reinforcements and discouragements at this stage. Sanctions can get a process of determining conceptual content off the ground, because they

make a distinction between correct and incorrect actions available for a person by introducing an external perspective: they provide a distinction between what a person takes to be correct or incorrect and what is correct or incorrect in the light of others.

5) *Sanctions are a means to come to conditions under which persons agree in their ways of continuing a given sequence of examples*. In the case of agreement, sanctions reinforce [191] the dispositions of persons in the way in which they react to their environment. In the case of disagreement, sanctions in the form of discouragements trigger a process of finding out in practice the obstacles in the persons or in the environment that prevent agreement. That is to say: Persons react to disagreement in such a way that they take disagreement as a sign that something has gone wrong and that they have to do something in order to get things right. They try to find out why they disagree. In some cases – those ones which then lead to beliefs about the way the environment is – they discover conditions under which they overcome their disagreement. These then are the normal conditions for the application of a concept F in claims or beliefs of the type "This is F". These conditions determine for the persons in question which concepts are applied and hence which rules are followed.

The crucial notion in this account is the one of sanctions. Sanctions consist in reinforcements and discouragements of certain sorts of behaviour and can thus be described in naturalistic vocabulary. But they are supposed to trigger a process of normative practices that determine a conceptual content for the beliefs of the persons in question.

Conceiving a normative theory of content as an explanation of content leads to a problem. Recall the main argument for such a theory of content in the sense of a social, normative account: The problem of rule-following is taken to show that there are no physical or mental facts that determine content. Insofar as our beliefs have a determinate content at all, that content is determined by social, normative practices. This implies that no naturalistic description can account for content. The theory of content in terms of social, normative practices is in principle not reducible to a naturalistic description. Thus, a normative theory of content has to establish a principled irreducibility of the description of the social practices in question in normative vocabulary.

However, if such a theory is intended to give on the basis of our natural capacities an explanation of the content of our beliefs and the meaning of the sentences that we use, then there does not seem to be a principled argument for such an irreducibility. Content and meaning may be normative, and they may be determined by social practices. But if the crucial notion is sanctions in the sense of physical reinforcements and discouragements, then there seems to be no principled argument why a reduction of the description of what is achieved by such sanctions to a description in naturalistic terms should not be possible. Nonetheless, of course, it may in practice be very difficult or even prove not feasible to carry out such a reduction. Conceiving a normative account of content in terms of social practices as an explanation of content on the basis of

our natural capacities thus seems to cut off the ground of the whole normative enterprise: The rule-following considerations are received as showing that the theory of content and meaning can in principle not be reduced to a description in naturalistic terms, because there are no physical facts whatsoever that could determine content and meaning. The theory of content and meaning that is based on these considerations, if viewed as an explanation of content and meaning, does not yield such an irreducibility. The theory that results [192] from the rule-following considerations seems hence to imply that there is not the principled irreducibility which is the rationale for this theory.

One may conclude from this problem that it is misguided to consider a normative theory as an explanation of content and meaning. The rule-following considerations show that there is no explanation of content and meaning, because it is not possible to get from non-normative notions to normative ones. We can trace inferential relations back to pragmatic norms such as the mentioned ones, and we can regard these norms as being implemented in sanctions, but the notion of sanctions has to be conceived as a normative one, too. We thus do not get an explanation of the norms that constitute the content of our beliefs and the meaning of the sentences that we use on the basis of our natural capacities. The only thing we get is an elucidation of what it is to be a thinking being by referring to certain social, normative practices (compare McDowell (1984), in particular 350-351, and Rödl (2000)).

However, even if there is no explanation of norms on the basis of our natural capacities, some story has to be told as to how the norms in question fit together with the natural world. There are two types of options here. The one possibility is to say that our practices of attributing beliefs to each other do not have any factual basis whatsoever. It is only our practice, and we are in principle free to extend that practice to whatever we like, even to computers, etc. It makes no sense to look for a distinction between really having beliefs and merely being interpreted as having beliefs by someone. In an early paper, Brandom (1979), 190-193, comes close to such a position. What Dan Dennett (1987) calls the "intentional stance" is perhaps the most prominent version of such a position. The sceptical solution to the problem of rule-following that Kripke (1982), Chapter 3, proposes can also be seen as a version of this position. This position is an idealism that comes close to eliminativism about content and meaning. It says in effect that the call for an explanation of content and meaning is misguided, because there is nothing to explain. There are no normative facts of content and meaning. Thus, there are no truth conditions for statements about content and meaning. Ascribing beliefs is a certain way we talk to each other, and that is all.

The other possibility is this one: Instead of saying that the search for an explanation is misguided because there is nothing to be explained, one can say that it is misguided because of its presuppositions. It presupposes the natural realm as something that is devoid of meaning, the conceptual, or the normative. Against this background, the impossible task arises then of explaining meaning, the conceptual, or the normative on the basis of a description of the natural

world in terms of the physical sciences. Perhaps we should question this presupposition. It may be that the view of the natural realm as something that is devoid of meaning, the conceptual, or the normative is a bias of modern science. This is the strategy that John McDowell (1994) adopts. According to him, the conceptual realm does not have any boundaries: The conceptual realm does not end where persons and their interactions end; instead, it encompasses the whole physical realm – all what our beliefs can be about. The conceptual content of our beliefs, if true, are the very [193] facts that make up the world. McDowell's main argument is that conceiving a boundary between what is conceptual and what is non-conceptual precludes us from acknowledging a rational constraint of the world on our beliefs. Brandom (1994) comes close to McDowell's position when he proposes to identify facts with the meanings of true claims and then goes on to say "The world is everything that is the case, a constellation of facts" (333; see also 622). This position leads to an idealism of the Hegelian sort – an objective, absolute idealism: The world is composed of true believable contents (as to McDowell's Hegelianism, see Sedgwick (1997); as regards Brandom, compare Habermas (1999), 161-169, and (2000), 337-342). There is hence no need for an explanation of meaning, content or the normative on the basis of the natural, because the conceptual realm stretches out to the natural world. Instead of such an explanation, we need a new conception of the natural realm.

A normative theory of conceptual content thus faces a dilemma: Either one takes this theory to be an explanation of content. But then the rule-following considerations on which this theory is based do not seem to be correct; for if the explanation of content, meaning and the normative on the basis of our natural capacities succeeds, then there apparently is no principled irreducibility of normative notions to naturalistic ones. Or one takes this theory to be no explanation of content. But the argument why there can be no explanation then gets one either close to eliminativism about conceptual content and the normative or one has to reject the presupposed view of the natural realm by proposing an objective, absolute idealism that takes norms and the conceptual as not being limited to persons and their interactions.

6. A rational reconstruction of conceptual content

This section is to sketch a way out of the dilemma. If one has no sympathy with an ontology of objective, absolute idealism and wishes to avoid eliminativism about content, meaning and the normative, one has to give some sort of an account of how we as thinking beings fit into the natural world, as described by the natural sciences. An explanation of content can be seen as locking into an evolutionary story that leads from atoms in the void to living beings and from there to thinking beings. However, no such explanation is required in order to accomplish the mentioned demand. The point is not an empirical or psychological explanation of the capacity of thought of human beings, but a conceptual analysis of norms, content and meaning (see Jackson (1998) for a theory of conceptual analysis). A conceptual analysis of norms, content and meaning applies to all finite thinking beings in all possible worlds, whether they

are humans or not, whether they have developed in an evolutionary process or not. A conceptual analysis can be carried out in such a way that it specifies necessary and sufficient conditions for there being norms that determine content and meaning in non-normative vocabulary. Non-normative [194] vocabulary is to say that the meaning of the terms used is normative by committing and entitling its users to certain claims, but that what is described by means of this vocabulary does not itself have meaning and is not itself normative. Specifying such necessary and sufficient conditions in non-normative vocabulary is all that we need in order to show how norms that determine content and meaning fit into the natural world. It is therefore more appropriate to regard such a conceptual analysis as a rational reconstruction of norms, content and meaning than to regard it as an explanation.

Let us come back to the account in five steps that was sketched at the beginning of the last section. I propose to consider this account as a rational reconstruction of meaning (compare Esfeld (2001), Chapter 3.2.1). Speaking of people who react to certain sequences of examples in their environment merely is an illustration to facilitate grasping the account. The main conceptual ingredients that are to result in necessary and sufficient conditions for the content of our beliefs and the meaning of the sentences that we use being determined by normative social practices are these ones: (1) Thinking beings cannot occur in isolation. If there are thinking beings, there are several of them who interact with each other. (2) Thinking beings are embedded in a physical environment; they have a cognitive access to their environment. There is a cognitive access even if it is not conceptual. (3) In order to be able to interact in a way that is necessary and sufficient for having beliefs, those thinking beings who interact with each other have to share some biological nature that includes a disposition to coordination.

The crucial notion then is the one of sanctions. To recall, sanctions in the sense of reinforcing or discouraging certain ways of reacting towards one's environment are conceived as triggering a process of determining normal conditions for the application of what is to be a concept, thereby determining the rule that the persons in question follow. Applying sanctions to each other's reactions to the environment is supposed to be a necessary and sufficient condition for normative social practices that determine the conceptual content of the beliefs of the persons who participate in them. The notion of sanctions has of course to be further specified, since not any sort of such sanctions is a sufficient condition for the normative social practices in question. The point that is relevant now is this one: Sanctions consist in physical reinforcements and discouragements in the first place. It would be circular for the purpose of a rational reconstruction to presuppose normative statuses to which sanctions could apply. Thus, the sanctions in question can entirely be described in naturalistic vocabulary. However, it does not follow from this that that for which these sanctions are a necessary and sufficient condition can be described in naturalistic vocabulary, too.

If sanctions in particular are a necessary and sufficient condition for norms that determine content and meaning, they are a supervenience basis for these norms. Supervenience is an ontological claim. Supervenience is no threat to

norms, because everything that supervenes on something else is as real as that on which it supervenes. Supervenience is distinct from the epistemological claim of theory reduction. The thesis that *A* supervenes on *B* is compatible with, but does not imply [195] the thesis that the description of *A* can be reduced to a description of *B*. It can therefore be misleading to explain the thesis that *A* supervenes on *B* in terms of *B* determining or fixing *A*. For determination may suggest the principal possibility of a reduction, which covariation in the sense of supervenience does not imply. To support this distinction between an ontological and an epistemological matter, one can refer to the distinction that Kripke (1980) draws in *Naming and Necessity*: Necessity, even metaphysical necessity, on the ontological level does not have to go with any sort of an *a priori* on the epistemological level.

Furthermore, at least the basic norms can be regarded as being realized by sanctions in particular. Physical realization on the level of ontology does not imply that on the level of epistemology, it is possible to reduce the description of the norms in question to a description in naturalistic vocabulary either. Hence, there is no valid conclusion from necessary and sufficient natural conditions for norms that determine content and meaning to the principled possibility of a reduction (compare Soames (1998)). Moreover, necessary and sufficient natural conditions for such norms do not amount to a version of what Sellars (1956) denounces as the Myth of the Given (see, by contrast, Rödl (2000), 765-766): That there is a supervenience basis for norms, content and meaning does not imply that this basis has any epistemic – and in particular justifying – role in the game of giving and asking for reasons. The point is how this game as a whole fits into the natural world.

In order to avoid the dilemma that was exposed in the preceding section, we need to do more than simply rejecting the step to the conclusion that there is a principled possibility of a reduction. We have to establish a principled irreducibility of the description of the social practices that determine content and meaning in normative vocabulary to a description in naturalistic vocabulary. Let us come back to the way in which Kripke (1982), Chapter 2, sets out the problem of rule-following. Kripke's sceptical challenge can be repeated on the level of the community. The interactions of a group of individuals are finite like the actions of one individual. For an observer from outside it is therefore indeterminate which are the rules that the beings which she observes follow, if they follow any rules at all. Even if a detached observer were provided with a complete description of the persons which she observes in naturalistic terms – and, moreover, a complete physical description of the world – she would be in the situation of the sceptic that Kripke imagines, namely be aware of no more than finite sequences of actions that satisfy infinitely many rules in such a way that it is not determined for any new situation what is the correct way to go on. Such an observer does not have access to the rule-following of the beings which she describes.

Only an observer who participates in the social practices of persons can have access to the content of their beliefs and thus to the rules that they follow. The

principled argument for the irreducibility of the description of content and meaning in normative vocabulary to a description in naturalistic vocabulary is that knowledge of the former, in distinction to knowledge of the latter, is subject to an access limit: knowledge of content and meaning is accessible only from a participatory [196] perspective. It is true that in order to give a description of content and meaning, an observer has to detach herself from the practices in which she participates by reflecting on them and taking a third-person view on them. But the point is that participating in these practices is a necessary condition for being able to reflect on them in a way that describes the content and meaning in question.

Let us come back to Brandom's *Making It Explicit*. What is made explicit in descriptions of commitments, entitlements and precluded entitlements are implicit norms that are implemented in normative attitudes that persons adopt to each other in the form of sanctions. It is not possible to make the commitments, entitlements and precluded entitlements in which the content of a belief of the type p consists entirely explicit. One cannot draw up a definite list of these commitments, entitlements and precluded entitlements. One can only mention examples and discuss borderline cases (or call for an explicit decision on such cases). Consequently, the inferential context in which the content of our beliefs as determined by social practices consists is open. There is no fixed set of identity conditions for a belief of a certain type, assuming that beliefs are individuated by their content. Recall what has been said in section 2 about the limits of the social solution to the problem of rule-following. Nonetheless, there is no objectionable indeterminacy of content or meaning. For any two concepts F and G – even concepts such as "rabbit" and "temporal stage of a rabbit", to take up Quine's famous example (Quine (1960), Chapter 2) – the inferential context of a belief of the type "This is F" differs from the inferential context of a belief of the type "This is G". From "This is a temporal stage of a rabbit", but not from "This is a rabbit", one can infer "This has temporal parts", whereby one can explain what it is to have temporal parts without mentioning rabbits.

What is implicit in these normative practices that determine the content of our beliefs and the meaning of the sentences that we use is a practical knowledge. The mentioned sanctions are a necessary and sufficient condition for this practical knowledge in the first place. The normative theory of content and meaning is pragmatic, not only because it traces content and meaning back to certain social practices, but also because these practices establish a practical knowledge in the first place. This practical knowledge is a knowledge how to move on from one action to another action. These moves are subject to an assessment by others as being correct or incorrect in the form of sanctions. This practical knowledge is not itself conceptual. It is rather like a skill or a craft that is acquired by practice. If this knowledge were conceptual, the theory under consideration would face the infinite regress that was mentioned at the beginning of section 4. Nonetheless, this practical knowledge, as shaped by the mentioned sanctions, determines what the content of the beliefs of the persons in

question is and thus which are the rules that they follow (as to this notion of a practice, compare section 4 of the paper of Sebastian Rödl in this volume).

The argument for the description of content and meaning in normative vocabulary being irreducible to a description in naturalistic vocabulary hence is this one: Content and meaning are determined by certain social, normative practices. What [197] the meaning is that these practices determine for the persons who participate in them is accessible only on the basis of a participatory perspective. The claim that this is a principled argument for irreducibility is to be understood in the context of the normative theory of content and meaning considered in this paper: If a successful reduction were carried out, this theory of content and meaning would be proven wrong.

Where do we stand now with respect to the dilemma that was set out in the preceding section? We have seen that it is in principle possible to give a rational reconstruction of content and meaning that on the one hand specifies necessary and sufficient conditions for norms of content and meaning in the sense of a supervenience basis and that on the other hand includes a principled argument for the irreducibility of the description of these norms to a description in naturalistic terms. Thus, there is no need to go for any of the mentioned versions of idealism, because the view that the only alternative to any such idealism is a naturalistic explanation is not correct.

To conclude, let us review the argument of this paper. The problem of rule-following is the main reason for the claim that there is content and meaning only insofar as there are persons who are in states of believing something and who use sentences. Such states have a conceptual content only insofar as their content is determined by certain normative, social practices – in particular, practices of taking persons to be committed to and entitled to certain claims and actions. Therefore, content consists in normative relations among beliefs, including actions, and having beliefs is characterized by having a certain normative status. Nonetheless, a conceptual analysis of beliefs and their content can indicate necessary and sufficient conditions for beliefs and their conceptual content that can be described in naturalistic vocabulary. However, the description of content and meaning is in principle not reducible to a naturalistic description, because the normative practices that determine content and meaning are accessible only on the basis of participating in them.

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