

Rules of Belief and the Normativity of Intentional Content

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ABSTRACT

Mental content normativists hold that the mind's conceptual contents are essentially normative. Many hold the view because they think facts of the form 'subject S possesses concept C ' imply that S is enjoined (i.e., bound or genuinely obligated) by rules concerning the application of C in theoretical judgments. Some opponents independently raise an intuitive objection: even if there are such rules, S 's possession of the concept is not the *source* of the enjoinder. Hence these rules do not support mental content normativism. Call this the 'Source Objection'.

This paper refutes the Source Objection, outlining a key strand of the relationship between judgments and their contents in the process. Theoretical judgment and mental conceptual content are *equally* the source of enjoinder; norms for judging with contents do not derive from one at the expense of the other.

INTRODUCTION

Some think it plausible that the conceptual intentional contents of the mind are essentially, prescriptively normative.¹ On this view, the fact that subject S possesses an intentional content (i.e., can think with it) implies by its very essence that there are certain things S ought or ought not do with the content—that S is enjoined by rules for its use. As prescriptively normative, the rules implied are prescriptions, viz., rules dictating acts or actions. A fact is *essentially* prescriptively normative if it implies enjoyment by these rules just in virtue of what the fact is, and not, *inter alia*, partially in virtue of the enjoined party's intention to abide by the rule, or the practical or moral goodness of doing so. ('Content' means mental conceptual content and 'normative' means prescriptively normative hereafter.² Contents will be denoted with small uppercase script; for example, the word 'dog' has the content DOG.) So the anti-/normativist debate concerns the following claim:

Essential Normativity of Mental Content (ENMC): Facts of the form, ' S possesses concept C ' imply by essence that S is enjoined by rules for applying C .

('Fact f implies by essence p ' equals the conjunction of: a) if f obtains, then p ; and, b) (a) is true because of the essential properties of f or its constituents. The fact that Angela Merkel exists implies by essence that a person exists.)

Many ENMC defenders support the claim by appealing to putative rules for belief-formation, i.e., theoretical judgment. Content facts imply rules for what the content's possessor ought/not judge

¹ Examples include Boghossian (2003, 2005), Brandom (1994), Bridges (2011), Ginsborg (2012), Hlobil (2015), Morris (1992), and Verdejo (2014). Gibbard's position qualifies, given his expressivist standards for essential prescriptive normativity (2003; 2012). Others basically agree, but would not consider the content-related 'oughts' to be prescriptive (Jarvis 2012; Zangwill 2005; 2009).

² Many authors in this literature use 'content' and 'concept' interchangeably (e.g., Boghossian 2003, 2008; Gibbard 2012). The thesis that content is essentially normative is probably more plausible for conceptual content than any other type.

or believe, whatever her intentions or interests. Perhaps, for example, the fact that *S* possesses RED implies that *S* ought not judge that an object is red when it is not. *S* would be making a false judgment, and she ought not use concepts to judge falsely, whatever she intends or gains by doing so. ('Judgment' is theoretical judgment hereafter. By assumption, rules for belief and belief-formation are rules for theoretical judgment.)

A few critics of ENMC raise an intuitive objection. Even if there are rules that enjoin *S* in judging with *C*, it does not follow that *S*'s possession of *C* is the *source* of her enjoinder. The enjoinder could well follow from something else, such as the nature of belief (Glüer and Wikforss 2009; Speaks 2009; McHugh and Whiting 2014, 700). After all, it looks like it is wrong to make false judgments with RED because it is wrong to make false judgments, whatever concepts they contain. Thus, ENMC does not follow from *S*'s enjoinder by rules for using contents in judgment. The objection is not yet recognized as a common anti-ENMC strategy. This paper recognizes it (§1). Call it the 'Source Objection'.

This paper refutes the Source Objection by developing an underappreciated strand in the relationship between judgment and content. The objection ignores the possibility that *both* judgment and content are the source of enjoinder by the rules for using contents in judgment. This possibility, I argue, is actually the case. Assume with the Source Objection that there are rules for judging with contents (§1). Contents are constituted, in part, by their role as the contents of judgment (§§2.1-2.2). From this constitution and a few other plausible assumptions, it follows that '*S* possesses *C*' implies, by essence, *S* is enjoinder by these rules. Content and judgment are equally the source of enjoinder (§§2.3). No commitments to controversial theories of mental content are required along the way (§3). Content normativism is safe from the Source Objection.

1 – THE SOURCE OBJECTION

Kathrin Glüer and Ása Wikforss provide a nice statement of the Source Objection (2009, 39-40), which they muster against Paul Boghossian’s defense of ENMC (2003, 39-45; 2008, 101-105).

Assuming there are rules for belief, and that these concern the use of contents in belief-formation, *content* is not thereby essentially normative.³ Glüer and Wikforss start their presentation by considering a commonly-proposed rule of assertion: *S* ought to assert that *p* only if *S* knows that *p*. This rule is frequently considered ‘constitutive’ of assertion—that it is part of what it is for a speech act to be an assertion that this rule is in force for it (Williamson 2000, 249-269). The rule specifies the conditions of correct assertion, *whatever p* one asserts. The assertion’s content does not matter. For Boghossian, ENMC holds in virtue of a similar constitutive rule of belief: believe that *p* only if *p* (2003, 37).⁴ If *S* possesses propositional content *p*, she ought to believe that *p* only if *p*. The rule either specifies or follows from what the propositional content *p* is; *p* ought to be believed only if *p*. Glüer and Wikforss object that Boghossian’s rule could well derive from the *attitude* of belief, not the *content*. Boghossian’s argument is simply insufficient if derives essential content normativity straightaway from the subject’s enjoinder by belief-rules. ‘[E]ven if it is granted that assertion (belief) is essentially normative, it does not follow that *meaning* (content) is normative’ (2009, p. 39; emphasis in original). If the Source Objection holds, the existence of rules for using contents in belief fails to support ENMC by itself.

³ Glüer and Wikforss reject that there are genuine prescriptive rules of belief (2013). But this part of their anti-normativist effort is independent of the Source Objection.

⁴ The rule is objective, not subjective (Boghossian 2003, 100-101). Additional defenses of this rule (or broadly similar ones) include Engel (2013), Jarvis (2012), Millar (2004, 42-158), Shah (2003), Shah and Velleman (2005), Wedgwood (2002; 2007, 153-73), and Whiting (2010; 2013).

2 – SALVATION THROUGH CONSTITUTION

The Source Objection points to a gap that requires bridging. But it can be bridged. To wit: content facts are essentially normative since content is constituted, in part, by its role in judgment. This makes content and judgment equally the source of enjoinder by rules for judging with concepts. *Pace* the Source Objection, it *does* follow by essence from the fact that *S* possesses *C* that *S* is enjoined by any rules there are for judging with *C*.

2.1 – Constitution

The first step to answering the Source Objection is to get clear on the occasionally dangerously ambiguous notion, ‘constitution’.

‘*x* constitutes *y*’ can be understood two ways. One is conceptual, which Boghossian explains thusly.

When philosophers use the idea of some fact *B* being *constitutive* of some other fact *A*, they typically mean, I think, not that *A* analytically implies *B*, but rather a stricter condition along the following lines: that it’s a condition on *understanding* what it is for *A* to obtain that one understands what it is for *B* to obtain. In other words [...]: grasping the *concept* of an *A*-fact requires grasp of the concept of a *B*-fact. (2003, p. 37)

The other is metaphysical (Fine 1995; Wedgwood 2007, pp. 136-144). In this sense, *B*-facts are constitutive of *A*-facts if *B*-facts are a component of *A*-facts that explain why certain properties

of A -facts are those possessed by A -facts of necessity whenever and wherever they obtain. Put differently, B -facts are part of the identity or essence of A -facts.⁵

The contrast between the two senses becomes clearer with the help of an old Rationalist expression: ‘conceive through’. In the conceptual sense, B is constitutive of A if A must be conceived through B if conceived at all. Full understanding of the concept of fact-type A grants full understanding of the general features of B -facts in respect of A , though certainly not all the contingent properties of particular A -facts.

Few philosophers now hold that full understanding of a concept is always possible through *a priori* means. Take WATER and H₂O. Given that WATER equals H₂O, H₂O individuates water. We can only fully conceive of water facts through H₂O. But the water/H₂O identity is discoverable only *a posteriori*. Full understanding of A -facts might only result from empirical work that reveals their connection with B -facts. Yet, we can still see how far the *a priori* goes in articulating relations between judgment and content. In showing that it goes far enough to answer the Source Objection, I will use ‘constitutive’ in the metaphysical sense.

2.2 – Constitutive Patency, Content, and Judgment

The following is an *a priori* argument that judgment and content are *inter-constitutive* in the metaphysical sense.

An *activity* is a type of event with a network-like structure in which the various component nodes have constitutive relations to one another. Activities have participants (actors). These participants perform the various acts constitutive of the activity. In many activities, rules are one

⁵ Wedgwood and Fine provide more detail, carefully separating properties/propositions/facts as they concern constitution. Their circumspection is not needed here.

determinant of the various statuses of the acts and participants. Paradigm instances of activities include games and ceremonies, but it is also plausible that judgment qualifies.

Independent plausibility of this last claim aside, the Source Objection all but grants that judgment has the structure of an activity when it concedes for the sake of argument that there are rules concerning judgment. Much like the norms of assertion, the rules of belief are very likely constitutive ones (see §1). That judgment is subject to those rules is constitutive of what it is to judge.⁶ If judgment has constitutive rules, then those rules must be in force for judgment to happen; that is a consequence of having constitutive rules. So it is part of judgment's essence that these rules enjoin judges. The judgments are what is assessed vis-à-vis the rules. Whether the judgments accord with the rules is a function, at least in part, of the components of the judgment. So the judgment has some *nodes*—judgers, acts of judgment, and components of judgment—essentially, or it does not have constitutive rules in the first place. Therefore, for the purposes of the Source Objection, judgment pretty much has to have the structure of an activity.

Many activities have constitutive *patients* to go along with constitutive rules and acts. The status of an act in the activity is part of the essence of the act: likewise the status of a patient of the act for the patient's essence. Things of type *F* are constitutive patients if it is constitutive, at least in part, of the things *qua F* to be treated or operated on by some of the acts of a given activity, and constitutive of acts that treat or operate on them, in turn, that they do so. Acts are distinct from their patients, but an act is lacking one of its essential features if it does not involve the patient. An example: pawns are the constitutive patients of many chess acts (moves). The physical constitution of the pawn is not

⁶ I will not pause over the rationale here (but see, e.g., Boghossian 2003; 2008; Green 2014, 147-96). Although there are dissenters within belief- and content normativism, this is the majority normativist view on the relationship between rules and judgment. For an attempt to defend content normativism while judgment altogether, see Verdejo (2014).

dependent upon these relations. Nevertheless, it is constitutive of the pawn, however partially, that it is a patient of chess moves.

Constitutive Patiency: x is a constitutive patient of constitutive act φ in activity Φ if: (a) it is part of the essence of x that it is operated on by the instances of φ ; (b) it is part of the essence of φ that the instances of φ operate on x ; and (c) it is part of the essence of Φ that x is operated on by the instances of φ .⁷

In the activity of judgment, the constitutive acts are judgments. That much is trivial. This, less so: content is a constitutive patient.

Constitutive Patiency of Content in the Activity of Judgment: propositional content is a constitutive patient of the acts of judgment in the activity of judgment in that: (a) it is part of the essence of propositional content that it is operated on by acts of judgment; (b) it is part of the essence of acts of judgment that they operate on contents; and (c) it is part of the essence of the activity of judgment that propositional content is operated on by the acts of judgment.⁸

⁷ Acts and activities have multiple constitutive patients, for all this framework says. Judgment may have constitutive patients other than contents. Much of the following, however, suggests that contents are the most plausible candidates. (See also §§2.2.1 below.)

⁸ The descriptions of the activity of judgment suppose that content is a literal component of a propositional attitude or act. The attitude or act ‘takes up’ something that is already there to be taken up. This may appear to ignore a major recent, novel alternative offered by Peter Hanks (2015). On Hanks’ theory, propositional contents are not components of attitudes separable from the attitudinal component (‘belief that’, ‘wishing that’, ‘mere entertainment that’, etc.). All propositions are predicative, and there is no ‘pure’, attitudinally neutral predication, hence no attitudinally neutral propositional content.

Yet, the description of the activity of judgment above can accept Hanks’ view of content. Indeed, given that view, nothing is content if it is not amenable to integration into judgment *or any other propositional attitude*, each of which are different modes of predication. The acts of judging that x is F and merely entertaining that x is F apply the same predicate to the same object—a predication that would not be what it is were these two attitudes towards it not by essence tokens of the type, ‘predicating F of x ’. So the constitutive relation between judgments that x is F and the content x is F remains in place. (For a note on the relationship between my description of the judgment-content relation and Russellianism about content, see note 12 below.)

Planks (a) and (b) are key to refuting the Source Objection, so they deserve elaboration. There are three nodes of the activity of judgment—a judging subject, a judgment and a content. Content is constitutive of judgment. Judgment is the kind of thing to operate on a propositional content; all judgment is judgment that p or it is just not a judgment. Judgment is constitutive of content, as well. Nothing is content if it is not amenable to integration into judgment.⁹ Therefore, content and judgment are inter-constitutive.

More specifically, content and judgment inter-constitute such that contents are the constitutive patients of acts of judgment. The content is a component of the judgment (an act) distinct from the judgment *per se*. The content is operated upon by the judgment; that is how it becomes part of the judgment. A judgment is about a state of affairs in virtue of the content.¹⁰ This selection—this intentionality—is essential to both judgments and contents. It is part of the essence of judgment that it operates on some content to select a state of affairs, and part of the essence of content that it can be so acted upon. One is the constitutive act to the other’s constitutive patient.

(Technically, propositional contents are constitutive patients of judgment. I assume that it is constitutive of sub-propositional contents that they be combinable into content with propositional form. So sub-propositional content facts are essentially normative if propositional content facts are.)

2.2.1 – Resolving Two Difficulties; Clarifying the Account

One might have a particular misgiving about situating content as the constitutive patient of judgment. Judgments’ *objects*, not their contents, might seem better candidates for being constitutive

⁹ See note 11.

¹⁰ I switch here from ‘fact talk’ to speaking about states of affairs because judgments can be about facts that do not obtain. (This is not a deep ontological claim about truthmakers.)

patients of judgments. What each judgment is about is essential to that judgment. Judgments are about states of affairs, not contents. What judgments are about, if anything, determines they ought/not be made. If this is right, then the objects of judgments, not the contents, would be the source of enjoinder, hence essentially normative.

Thankfully, judgments' objects are not their constitutive patients, as states of affairs aren't judgment-dependent as a category. They cannot satisfy the plank (a) of Constitutive Patiency. It is not constitutive of a state of affairs that it be the object of a judgment. If x is a constitutive patient of φ -ing in Φ , then x cannot exist or obtain in conditions in which Φ is impossible. Assuming some minimal realism, states of affairs—*qua* states of affairs—do not depend upon the possibility that anyone thinks about them. Content's role in judgment, by contrast, is constitutive of content. Whatever is 'left over' without the role in judgment would lack one of content's essential properties.¹¹

As a bonus, if contents, not objects, are the constitutive patients of judgment, then a nagging difficulty with ENMC unrelated to the Source Objection also disappears. ENMC may imply that *all* states of affairs are normative (Gibbard 2012, 76-7). From the fact that a state of affairs a exists (much less obtains), it seemingly follows that: one ought to judge that a obtains only if a obtains. 'Judge that a obtains only if a obtains' is a plausible rule. Hence the existence of a would imply the subject's enjoinder by the rule. The enjoinder seems to follow *by essence* from a , as well. The identity of a thing is a part or function of its essence. a 's identity (*inter alia*) fixes the conditions under which one ought to judge that a obtains. *All* states of affairs, then, would be essentially normative. But if contents are the constitutive patients, then contents are thereby dependent on the possibility of being involved

¹¹ A full defense of propositional contents' dependence upon the possibility of being judged with merits more treatment than space permits. But it certainly seems plausible. (The claim is defended in Green 2014, 162-78.)

in judgment, not states of affairs. States of affairs *per se* are not automatically normative (nor should they be).¹²

2.3 – From Constitutive Patiency to Essential Normativity

The relationship between judgment and content is now detailed enough to afford a reply to the Source Objection. To preview that reply: because contents are constitutive patients of judgments, content facts of the form, ‘*S* possesses *C*’ imply, by essence, that *S* is enjoined by rules for how judgments ought to treat *C*, if there are any such rules. Thus, if there are such rules, ENMC is true (i.e., content is essentially normative). The Source Objection assumes *arguendo* that there are such rules. So it fails.

Here is the full reply to the Source Objection.

Essential Judgment Normativity Implies ENMC

(P1) If: (a) activity Φ takes place such that it has (at least) the following constituents: constitutive acts (φ 's), constitutive patients (π 's); and Φ -participants; and (b) the fact that Φ takes place implies by essence that Φ -participants are enjoined by rules for how π 's ought to be treated by φ 's, then: the fact that x exists, where x is any of the constituents listed in P1a, implies by essence that Φ -participants are enjoined by rules for how π 's ought to be treated by φ 's.¹³

¹² On Russellian views, the contents of judgments are sets of their truthmakers (facts and states of affairs, hence objects and properties). If that's true, judgment's contents are, more or less, what I have been calling their objects, and any old fact or state of affairs would be *per impossibile* normative.

The worry disappears once the account of the network of judgment is translated into a Russellian idiom. These theories still posit intensions that relate judgments to the right sets of truthmakers. Claims about the constitutive patiency of content facts can be translated into claims about the constitutive patiency of the relevant intensional facts, themselves functions of judges, contexts, and Russellian contents.

My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing for clarity on how this paper's claims about judgment and content sit with respect to non-Fregean views.

¹³ For 'implies by essence', see the introduction (p. 3).

Commentary: Activities are networks. The nodes and their relations are an activity's essential constituents. So if (it is a fact that) such-and-such constitutive patient exists, that fact implies by essence that the patient has a certain bearing to each other node and the activity's rules. The existence of a constitutive patient implies by essence the enjoinder of all participants by whatever rules there are for treating the patient in constitutive acts. For instance, the fact that a pawn exists implies by essence that chess takes place, which implies by essence: i) that there are chess players; and ii) the rule that players can only capture diagonally with pawns is in force. To adapt an adage: in for a metaphysical penny (the pawn), in for a metaphysical pound (the activity of chess, including its components and rules).

(P2) The activity of judgment takes place such that it has (at least) the following constituents: judgments, i.e., the activity's constitutive acts; propositional contents, i.e., the activity's constitutive patients; and judges, i.e., the activity's participants. [see §2.2]

(P3) The fact that the activity of judgment takes place implies by essence that judges are enjoined by rules for how propositional contents p and their sub-propositional constituent contents C ought to be treated by acts of judgment. [see §2.2]

Commentary: Again, the Source Objection grants for the sake of argument that there are rules for using contents in judgments. If judgment is an activity, then P3 correctly describes what the Source Objection's concession amounts to.

Here, then, is the consequence for judgment and its constitutive patient, propositional content:

(C1) The fact that x exists, where x is any of the constituents listed in P2, implies by essence that S is enjoined by rules for how propositional content(s) p and their sub-propositional constituent contents C ought to be treated by acts of judgment. [P1-P3]

(P4) If the fact that C exists implies by essence that S is enjoined by rules for C 's use, then that fact that C exists is a fact of the form, ' S possesses C '.

Commentary: For contents, existence equals possession.¹⁴ Additionally, only those subjects who possess a content are enjoined by rules for its use. This is an intuitive implication of 'ought implies can' as it concerns judgment. It is not the case that S ought use C thus-and-so if she cannot, and S cannot use C unless she possesses C .

(C2) The fact that S possesses C implies by essence that S is enjoined by rules for how propositional content(s) p and sub-propositional contents C ought to be treated by acts of judgment. [C1, P4]

(P5) A fact is essentially normative iff that fact implies by essence that some S is enjoined by a rule. [df. 'essentially normative']

(C3) The fact that S possesses C is essentially normative. [C2, P5]

The argument comes down to Earth a bit if one considers the contrast between constitutive and run-of-the-mill patients. Umbrellas are the patients of many actions. There are things one ought or ought not do with (or sometimes to) an umbrella. But those obligations follow from facts about the rational will, utility, interests, intentions, or the like—the stuff responsible for moral and instrumental rules. It is not constitutive of umbrellas or umbrella-hood that certain umbrella-involving actions are obligatory, permissible, or prohibited.

¹⁴ It equals possession or, for platonists, in-principle possessability by a judger. If platonic senses are essentially the type of thing graspable by judgers, then they conditionally imply the judgers' enjoined by rules. The in-principle possessability would preserve the platonic sense's status as a constitutive patient of judgment. (My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for prompting this clarification.)

Therein lies the reason why content facts are essentially normative and ‘umbrella-facts’ are not. Content and judgment inter-constitute. If there are rules for using *C* in judgment at all, then it is constitutive of *C* that anyone who possesses the content accord with those rules. *C* is a constitutive patient of judgment; it is part of its essence that acts of judgment ought to accord with whatever rules there are for judging with it. Content, it turns out, is just as much the source of enjoinder by these rules as judgment, and vice versa. In judgment as in chess: in for a metaphysical penny (the fact that *S* possesses *C*), in for a metaphysical pound (the activity of judgment, including its components and rules).

Thus the conclusion stands: if there are rules for the use of a content in judgment, then ENMC follows. The Source Objection fails.

3 – CONCLUSION

Philosophers of mind and language have been busy sharpening the many of the claims made earlier on by Wittgenstein, Kripke, Boghossian, and others about the normativity of three related intentional phenomena: assertion, belief, and content. Earlier statements of normativism treated differences between the senses in which assertion, belief, and content are normative, respectively, with a bit of apparent indifference. Arguments and intuitions underlying the plausibility of normativism for all three of them might seem to turn out, upon inspection, to support normativism for just two, or only one.

The Source Objection is an instance of this pruning trend. If the objection is sound, the defense of ENMC on the basis of content’s relation to belief is a prime example of normativists running one ‘normativism about *x*’ together with another. Yet, if there are rules for forming beliefs

(judging) with contents, and judgment is an activity with contents as a constitutive patient, then nothing has been conflated. Belief and content are normative together, without one's normativity subvening the other's. As Lagnappe, the reply to the Source Objection also heads off the possibility that judgment's relation to content norms actually renders all facts normative, which would make ENMC absurd.

Moreover, the reply defeats the Source Objection while bringing on board hardly any controversial assumptions or about content, and none that any theory of content attracted to normativism would find unpalatable. While it is not trivial that propositional content has constitutive relations to judgment, it is well-motivated and certainly not *outré*. Popular versions of conceptual- and inferential role semantics views of mental content take it on board, or at least trace its lineaments. (Not coincidentally, these views are friendlier to content normativism than others.¹⁵) Yet, the defense of normativism offered here neither entails nor presupposes these views. If it did, this paper's strategy against the Source Objection would be unduly partisan. I have claimed that the activity of judgment, at least *in part*, constitutes content. There is no claim that it constitutes content *in toto*. Nor does the activity of judgment as described above entail anything about content individuation. It requires only one assumption about the particular inferential or otherwise doxastic transitions a judger must be able to make to possess a concept—one who grasps a concept must be able to make *some* judgment with it. The possessor needs this ability in order to satisfy the 'ought implies can' condition on enjoinder by the rule, 'judge that *p* with *C* only if *p*'. With this satisfied, the judger has the 'can' that lets her to be enjoined by the 'oughts' incurred by grasping *C*. That is an assumption congenial to all content

¹⁵ Some views of content would reject even this minimal relationship with judgment (e.g., Dretske 1988, Fodor 2008). They would probably not be interested in replies to the Source Objection, as they view ENMC as a non-starter, whatever ENMC's relation to rules for judgment.

normativists. Whatever theory of content leads one to content normativism, then, the reply to the Source Objection can lend a hand.¹⁶

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