Against Normativity Again: Reply to Whiting

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In his recent paper "The normativity of meaning defended", Daniel Whiting defends the claim that *meaning is an intrinsically normative notion* against two lines of objection raised to it in the literature.[1] According to Whiting, "to say that meaning is a normative notion is to say that a statement of what an expression means is, or immediately implies, a statement about what we ought (not) to or may (not) do with that expression" (134). Let's say of a statement about *x* that implies a statement about what we ought (not) to, or may (not), do with *x* that it has 'normative consequences', and let's call the claim that statements of what an expression means have immediate, or direct, normative consequences 'Normativity'. We shall argue that Whiting fails to defend Normativity against the objections he considers.

1. Correctness

One popular argument for Normativity tries to derive it from the claim that meaningful linguistic expressions necessarily, or essentially, have conditions of *correct application*. Since correctness is a normative notion, the argument goes, statements of correctness conditions for an expression have *direct* normative consequences for the use of that expression. In a nutshell: no meaning without correctness conditions and no correctness conditions without direct normative consequences.[2]

Those who have objected to this argument have not denied the truism that meaningful expressions have correctness conditions. We shall go along with Whiting here and take this to amount to a commitment to the following principle, "where '*w*' is a word, '*F*' gives its meaning, and '*f*' is that feature in virtue of which *w* applies (134)":

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[1] Whiting 2007. All page references without author or year are to this paper. Versions of one or both of the objections he discusses are, for instance, to be found in Horwich 1995; Glüer 1999a; 1999b; 2000; 2001; Wikforss 2001, Boghossian 2005, Millar 2006, Hattiangadi 2006.

[2] See, for instance, Boghossian 1989, 513, and Blackburn 1984, 281f, for versions of this argument.

(C) w means $F \rightarrow \forall x$ (w applies correctly to $x \leftrightarrow x$ is f)

What the anti-Normativist denies is that (C) has any direct normative consequences. In support of their claim, anti-Normativists have pointed out that a) 'correct' can be used in normative and in non-normative ways, and b) the relevant notion of correctness in (C) is the notion of *semantic correctness*. What that precisely amounts to depends on the choice of basic semantic concept; the main contenders are *truth* and *warranted assertibility*. Either way, the anti-Normativist submits, the notion of semantic correctness is non-normative in precisely the sense that no statements about what we ought (not) to or may (not) do with w directly follow from (C).[3]

Putting this point more positively, the present authors have argued that what (C) gives us is nothing more than the conditions for the application of the basic semantic concept to applications of w.[4] Nothing in (C) shows that this has to amount to anything over and above the possibility of *categorizing*, or *sorting*, applications of w into two basic semantic kinds; for instance, the true and the false. Nothing in (C) shows that correct applications of w are those that ought to, or may, be made of w.

Let's call a categorization that has no direct normative consequences a 'non-normative' categorization. Sorting things into tables and non-tables should clearly be non-normative in this sense. Now, saying that a categorization is non-normative is not the same as saying that it cannot be used to derive normative consequences. Indeed, *any* categorization can be used to derive normative consequences. But not directly. Any categorization of things into As and *non-A*s, be they actions or not, can be used to derive normative consequences *if a suitable norm is in force*. Take tables. If a suitable norm is in force, for instance the norm that tables under all circumstances ought to be kicked, normative consequences can be derived from something's being a table. But not directly. Things can be categorized into tables and non-tables without any such norm being in force.

The Normativity thesis must therefore not be mixed up with the claim that normative consequences can be derived from semantic categorization. That would utterly

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[3] Note, that since both parties to this dispute accept (C), the dispute concerns the very concept of semantic correctness, not its extension. A non-normative notion of semantic correctness has precisely the same extension as the alleged normative one.
[4] See especially Glüer 2001: 60f; Wikforss 2001: 205ff.

trivialize the thesis. Normative consequences can be derived from any categorization. But not every categorization is such that they can be derived directly. The anti-Normativist claims that semantic categorization is like sorting objects into tables and non-tables: No immediate normative consequences ensue.[5]

In support of his argument, Whiting tries to hijack an analogy provided by Hattiangadi. The example is that of a minimum height requirement for going on a certain ride in a theme park. Hattiangadi observes that whether a child meets this 'standard' is a "straightforwardly non-normative, natural fact" (2006, 224). Whiting agrees that in order for the child to meet the standard certain descriptions concerning her height must be true of her. However, he argues, given that the "standard is in force" (136), the fact that the child meets this standard has immediate implications for whether she *may* (or *should not*) go on the ride: "If she were to do so incorrectly, *with the norm in place*, sanctions or criticism (...) would be appropriate" (136, emphasis ours). A similar conclusion, he contends, holds in the case of meaning. If *'w* means *F'* does indeed imply that there are conditions for the correct application of the term, then this equally has implications "for whether it may or should be used in certain ways" (ibid.).

As far as we can see, this simply illustrates the point that a given non-normative categorization (here, of children as having or not having a certain height) can be used to derive normative consequences – *if* a norm to that effect is 'in force'. Here, this is the norm that children under a certain height may not go on the ride in question. That does nothing to show that we would not be able to sort children by height if no such norm were in force – clearly, we could. Rather, it seems perfectly obvious that we can do that. Our point is precisely that (C), by itself, gives us no reason to think that the same does not hold for semantic categorization: Sorting applications of *w* by, for instance, truth and falsity is possible without any norms being in force.[6]

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[5] There might, of course, be *other* reasons for why semantic categorization has to be loaded with normative consequences. What is relevant here is simply that this does not *immediately* follow from an expression's having conditions of semantic correctness.
[6] Notice that the notion of a 'standard', just like the notion of correctness, has non-normative and normative uses. Whiting seems to have the latter use in mind when he speaks of a standard *being in force*. It is of course trivial that meeting the standard in this latter, normative sense has normative consequences for whether the child may (or should not) go on the ride. Similarly, if 'semantic standard' is construed normatively, the fact

2. Prescriptivity

The second part of Whiting's paper defends the claim that "statements about meaning immediately imply a prescription, and not merely a statement of correctness-conditions" (136) against an objection commonly made in the literature. More precisely, Whiting defends the following principle:

(P) w means $F \rightarrow \forall x$ (w ought to be applied to $x \rightarrow x$ is f)

Against (P) it has been argued that the antecedent can hold without the consequent being true. Thus, it might be the case that under certain circumstances I ought to lie, i.e. ought to apply w to something that is not f, but that does not mean that w, in those circumstances, does not mean F – quite the contrary.[7] Whiting grants this to the anti-Normativist; no all-things-considered oughts or obligations follow directly from 'w means F'. Nevertheless, he argues, the Normativist can hold on to his intuition if he qualifies the relevant prescriptions or obligations as *prima facie obligations* (137f). Semantic prima facie obligations can be overridden by stronger obligations of other kinds, for instance by moral obligations.

Naturally, the anti-Normativist does not think that any prima facie obligations follow from 'w means F', either. Several authors have noted that according to their intuitions, the alleged semantic obligations can be overridden by mere desires, such as the desire to lie or mislead. That is not how prima facie obligations behave, however; genuine prima facie obligations can only be overridden by other (prima facie) obligations (Hattiangadi 2006: 232). The anti-Normativist concludes that if there are any semantic obligations, they are at most hypothetical, contingent on our desires.[8]

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that a given use 'meets the standard' is, as Whiting puts it, 'clearly a normative or evaluative matter' (135). But what we wanted to know was why the notion of a 'semantic standard' (or, as we have put it, the notion of a 'semantic category') should be construed normatively in the first place; not what follows if it *is* construed that way.

[7] Cf. Glüer 2000: 461; Wikforss 2001: 206; Hattiangadi 2006: 227; Boghossian 2005: 207.

[8] Cf. Wikforss 2001: 205, Hattiangadi 2006: 232, Boghossian 2005: 207, Miller 2006: 109.

It should be clear, though, that we now have reached an impasse. The Normativist in his turn does not share the intuition that mere desires can override what he thinks is a semantic prima facie obligation. Predictably, Whiting argues that acting on a mere desire to lie or mislead is, to him, as much violating a semantic norm as acting on the desire to murder is violating a moral norm (cf. 139). We conclude that further intuition-mongering will not get us anywhere at this point.

Whiting's attempt at getting out of the impasse fails in an instructive way, however. He writes: "True, I might not follow the norm for the use of an expression simply because I do not feel like doing so. But that alone does not show that there is no norm in force; my use of the expression should still be judged *incorrect*" (139). This reply just brings us back to square one: The only relevant sense in which my use of the expression in this case would be incorrect is the *semantic* sense. We have yet to be told why the distinction between semantic correctness and incorrectness has anything to do with normativity in the first place.

We would therefore like to end on a methodological note. The Normativist pushes an intuition, the intuition that meaning has immediate normative consequences. His opponent does not share this intuition. In such a situation, the one defending the intuition has three options: He can either conclude that he and his opponent do not talk about the same topic, or that his opponent has a poor grasp of the relevant concept and that the opponent's intuitions therefore can safely be ignored. Or he can move on and provide *further* argument. Pending further argument, however, we cannot but conclude that normativity does not seem to be anything but an idle wheel in the theory of meaning.

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