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Dose the Conceptual Interdependency of Belief and Desire Undermine the Normativity of Content?*

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Abstract

The normativity of mental content thesis appears to have been the most influential in contemporary philosophy of mind. Paul Boghossian (2003, 2005) has developed an argument for the normativity of mental content on the basis of two premises, i.e. firstly, the normativity of the notion of belief and secondly, the priority of the notion of belief to the notion of desire. In his recent article Alexander Miller (2008) has criticised Boghossian's argument for the normativity of mental content. To make the objection against the normativity of content, Miller has argued that the second premise of Boghossian's argument is since belief and desire are conceptually interdependent. My purpose in this paper is to show that content normativity thesis prevails Miller's attack. In order to establish the claim I will argue that content is normative even if belief and desire are conceptually interdependent.

Keywords: *normativity, belief, desire, content, interdependeny.*

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Introduction

It is widely held that a concept is normative only if it is constitutive of our understanding of a statement given 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 to a key objection against the normativity of content thesis proposed by Miller (2008).

In section one of this paper I will reformulate Boghossian's argument for the thesis in details. I will then, in section two, clarify Miller's objection against the normativity of content thesis. In sections three and four, I will propose a new argument for the normativity of content thesis to show that Miller's objection fails.

1- 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 understand that one *ought* to believe that P only if P" (Boghossian 2005: 212). In other words, he argues that the concept of belief is normative since grasping an attribution of belief for someone requires grasping that the attribution implies an *ought*, i.e. 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 Ebeneezer believes that P.

According to the normativity of belief thesis implies:

(2) Marco understands that Ebeneezer 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 in to an *ought* of any kind" (Boghossian 2005: 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 desire of hers, 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 *ought*s about desires by 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" (Boghossian 2005: 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 to 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?" (Boghossian 2005: 212)

In the third step, Boghossian endorses the idea that our understanding of content has to go through 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" (Boghossian 2005: 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, and 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" (Boghossian 2005: 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" (Boghossian 2005: 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" (Boghossian 2005: 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" (Boghossian 2005: 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 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 through 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 through 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" (Boghossian 2005: 214).

2- Miller on the conceptual interdependency of belief and desire and the normativity of content

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 Ebeneezer believes that there is beer in the fridge.

Implies:

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

Likewise

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

Implies:

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

These points, according to Miller, are good reasons to endorse the interdependency thesis between belief and desire, far from being a 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 claims 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 of (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).

In what follows I will argue that Miller's interdependency thesis, even if true, cannot undermine Boghossian's normativity of content thesis.

3- Dependent normativity and independent normativity

In order to pave the way to defuse Miller's attack I will first distinguish between the two senses in which Boghossian claims that belief and content are normative.

I remarked above that, according to Boghossian's argument, belief is normative since understanding a belief attribution requires understanding that forming the belief is constrained by an ought, but content is normative for we understand content only through belief which is a normative notion. The idea, it seems to me, shows a kind of asymmetry between belief normativity and content normativity. That is to say, in Boghossian's argument belief normativity is independent of content normativity but content normativity requires belief normativity (as according to the argument content normativity *follows*

from the assumption that we understand content only through belief *which is a normative notion*). To abbreviate the idea that there is such an asymmetry between belief normativity and content normativity, from now, I will say that, in Boghossian's theses, belief is independently normative but content is dependently normative.

Note that the constraints 'independent' and 'dependent' on the notion of normativity should not remind the notion of spectrum; that is, by saying that in Boghossian's argument belief is independently normative but content is dependently normative I do ***not*** mean, that the latter concept is less normative than the former one. What I mean is simply that belief normativity is independent of content normativity, that is, belief is normative as such. But this is not the case for the other way around, if it turned out that belief is not normative it would follow that content is not normative.

4- Miller's objection against the normativity of content fails

My claim is that Miller's argument against Boghossian's content thesis does not work. In order to establish the claim I will argue that Boghossian could endorse Miller’s reflection that belief and desire are conceptually interdependent, whilst manoeuvring to preserve his argument for the normativity of content. My alternative argument on behalf of Boghossian for the normativity of content has the following three premises:

(12) The concept of belief is independently normative.

This premise is grounded on the basis of Boghossian’s consideration, embodied in the first step of his argument, according to which understanding a belief attribution requires understanding that forming the belief is constrained by an ought.

(13) We understand content only through 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 are just what the attitudes are attitudes towards.

(14) Belief and desire are conceptually interdependent.

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

I will now argue that the three premises entail Boghossian's normativity of content thesis.

Since (13) holds that understanding content requires understanding an attitude, say, understanding desire, and that (14) holds that desire and belief are conceptually interdependent, it follows that understanding content requires understanding both desire and belief. In short, (13) and (14) imply:

(15) We understand content only through understanding belief and desire.

Since (15) holds we understand content only through understanding belief (and desire, of course) and that (12) holds that belief is an independent normative concept, it follows that we understand content only through an independent normative concept which is belief. This means that content is dependently normative. In short (12) and (15) imply:

(16) Content is dependently normative.

I said that the normativity of content is dependent, for the normativity of content follows from the normativity of belief, so it is a dependent normativity.

5- Conclusion

My argument above, if 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, it is justifiable to believe that the concept of content is normative. Thus, Boghossian’s argument prevails Miller’s attack.

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