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# Dismantling Normativism

## Rozbroić normatywizm

Summary

In his article "Is Meaning Fraught with Ought?" (2009), Daniel Whiting advanced quite a battery of refurbished arguments for the claim that linguistic meaning is intrinsically normative. He ended the paper with the conclusion that he had managed to achieve two of his stated aims: to defend normativism and to show how the normativist can turn the innocent platitude that meaningful expressions possess conditions of correct use into an argument in favour of normativism. In the present article, I show that Whiting failed on both counts, although his failure reveals an important issue which has been overlooked by both parties to the debate. The issue in question is one of methodology: the plausibility of semantic normativism turns on the *theory* of practical normativity to which a particular philosopher tacitly or explicitly subscribes. To put my main criticism in a nutshell: semantic normativism cannot be defended without a plausible account of the nature of semantic reasons.

Keywords: normativity, normativity of meaning, Kripke, Whiting, practicality, normative reason

Streszczenie

W swoim artykule z 2009 roku „Is Meaning Fraught with Ought?" Daniel Whiting wytoczył całą baterię argumentów na rzecz tezy, że znaczenie językowe jest z natury normatywne. Whiting zakończył swój artykuł stwierdzeniem, że udało mu się zrealizować dwa wytyczone cele: obronić normatywizm semantyczny oraz pokazać, w jaki sposób normatywista może niekontrowersyjną tezę głoszącą, że wyrażenia językowe posiadają warunki poprawnego użycia, przekształcić w wiarygodny argument na rzecz normatywizmu

w języku. W niniejszym artykule twierdzę, że wbrew deklaracjom Whitingowi nie udało się osiągnąć założonych celów. Pokazuję również, że niepowodzenie jego przedsięwzięcia ujawnia kluczowy, choć przeoczany aspekt całej debaty wokół normatywności w języku. Pominięty przez Whitinga element dotyczy metodologii, a konkretnie uzależnienia wiarygodności tezy normatywizmu semantycznego od koncepcji racji normatywnych. Mój główny zarzut wobec argumentów Whitinga można streścić następująco: aby obronić stanowisko normatywizmu semantycznego, jego zwolennik musi przedstawić przekonującą teorię racji normatywnych o charakterze ściśle językowym.

Słowa kluczowe: normatywność, normatywność znaczenia, Kripke, Whiting, praktyczność, racja normatywna

## 0. Introduction

The thesis that meaning is normative entered the spotlight of philosophical attention due to Kripke's seminal book on Wittgenstein,[1] where he suggested that any theory of meaning, in order to be successful, must satisfy the requirement of normativity. In other words, unless a theory of meaning accommodates the idea that what one means by an expression entails a semantic normative reason for the speaker to use it in a particular way, it is not worth to be taken seriously.[2] Due to lengthy debate on Kripke's claim in philosophy of language and mind, the thesis has lost much of its initial appeal, though it is still attractive to many. Daniel Whiting is no doubt an ardent adherent of the normativity thesis. He argues for the view he calls "normativism", according to which, the meaning of an expression has direct implications for how a subject should or

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[1] S. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1982.
[2] Cf. Å. Wikforss, "Semantic Normativity", *Philosophical Studies* 102 (2001), p. 203.

has reason to employ it.[3] In his article "Is Meaning Fraught with Ought?", he purports to show that the normative thesis, notwithstanding the forceful attacks which it has received over the past thirty years of the debate, has not only survived but also proved to be much more resistant to defeat than many could have thought. I claim both that Whiting's conviction is mistaken and also that he failed to persuade us that we have good reason to accept normativism. However, I also believe that we can learn a lesson from the failure of his normativism if we take into account an important issue that has been overlooked by both parties to the debate. The issue in question is that the plausibility of semantic normativism turns largely on the plausibility of the *theory* of practical normativity to which a particular philosopher tacitly or explicitly subscribes. To put my main criticism in the form of a slogan: there is no normativism without a plausible theory of practical normativity.[4]

By a theory of practical normativity, I mean a theory of normative reasons, which tells us what makes a claim normatively binding on the agent. If the success or failure of the thesis that meaning is normative is strictly bound to some account of normativity, as I will argue, then the chances of the intrinsic semantic normativity that Whiting opts for look rather bleak. That is because if semantic normativism is a credible stance, its credence does not stand on its own. To put it bluntly, if meaning is normative in any sense at all, it is only *derivatively* normative, owing its normative force to a *theory of normativity*. And that is precisely the crux of the anti-normativist position.

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[3] D. Whiting, "Is Meaning Fraught with Ought?", *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 90 (2009), p. 535.

[4] In "Normative Reason, Primitiveness, and the Argument for Semantic Normativism" (*Etyka* 50, 2015), I discuss the connection between a theory of practical normativity and the prospects of semantic normativism. I also call into question the usefulness of Scanlon's account of a normative reason in terms of a consideration *speaking in favour of something* as an ally of semantic normativism.

In effect, I join the camp of the semantic anti-normativists, although my reasons for siding with them are not the ones they articulate.

This paper is divided into eleven sections, in which I critically review Whiting's refutations of the recent anti-normativist objections. The three key arguments against semantic normativism that Whiting finds ineffective (with their many variations) are the same as those that his opponents consider as counting in favour of anti-normativism. The first revolves around the meaning of "correct" in the assertion of correctness conditions for concepts. The second alludes to the notion of a "standard" or "norm" that either does or does not imply certain significant consequences. Finally, the third refers to what follows with regard to one's *practical* commitments from the allegedly innocent claim that there exist true normative propositions, i.e. propositions involving straightforward normative notions like "ought" or "may".

Following Whiting, I will consider all of them from the perspective of how they contribute to the tenability of normativism and explain why I do not think they do their job as Whiting claims. As will be seen over the course of my scrutiny of Whiting's arguments, the main reason behind my scepticism about the truth of his thesis of meaning's intrinsic normativity is grounded in the conviction that any serious attempt at providing support for normativism misses its target unless one succeeds in demonstrating that meaning itself warrants normative reason-talk. In other words, unless one demonstrates that lexical meaning *itself* is the very source of the normative claims on the speakers, the anti-normativist's slogan that normativity in theory of meaning is an idle label retains its appeal.[5] I will end the paper by showing that, despite Whiting's unsatisfactory arguments as to why we should accept the the-

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[5] Cf. K. Glüer and Å. Wikforss, "Against Content Normativity", *Mind* 118 (2009).

sis that meaning is intrinsically normative, normativism may still be a viable option if one is ready to pay a certain theoretical price. Whether the price is worth paying is the question I leave the reader to answer.

## 1. What follows from "correct"?

The normativity thesis based on "correctness" starts with the following claim: if an expression has meaning, there are conditions for its correct use.[6] In fact, that the meaning of a term can be given by its correctness conditions seems platitudinous to both parties to the debate. The controversy begins with the question as to what follows from saying that meaningful expression possesses correctness conditions. Let us take the English word "cat", which refers to all and only cats, and then ask what information we can gain from the fact that the word "cat" in English denotes, or is true of, all and only objects which are cats. An obvious answer is that knowing what "cat" means in English, we also know that certain uses of the word "cat" are semantically correct whereas others are incorrect for the same reason. Thus, if I say "cat" when pointing to a weasel, it is an example of the incorrect use of that term. So far so good. The dispute begins when it comes to interpreting what exactly it means that certain uses of a term are semantically correct or incorrect. Is it just an innocent evaluation in the light of semantic standards or something informing us what we *ought* (not) to or *may* (not) do with the expression? Semantic normativists such as Whiting defend the normative reading of semantic standards on the assumption that the notion "correct" as employed in the statement about what it means for the word "cat" to apply to all and only cats is a normative

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6 S. Kripke, *Wittgenstein…*, p. 23–4; P. Boghossian, "The Rule-Following Considerations", *Mind* 98 (1989), p. 513; cf. J. Fennell, "The Meaning of 'Meaning is Normative'", *Philosophical Investigations* 36/1 (2013), p. 57.

concept *sui generis*.[7] In this vein, when the notion "correct" appears in a statement, it warrants a prima facie normative reading of the claim. In other words, according to normativists, to say that something is "correct" suggests that, all things considered, there is (some) reason to do so.[8] In the proposed normative reading of "correct", evaluation goes hand in hand with prescriptiveness, because evaluation is understood as a straightforward normative notion. Correspondingly, if I say that you filled in a job application correctly, according to the normativists my words would normally be interpreted as conveying the message that you did what you ought to have done when engaged in the activity under consideration.

On the other hand, the anti-normativists oppose a straightforward normative reading of "correct" by pointing to its ambiguous character.[9] In their view, whether "correct" is to be read normatively or non-normatively depends on the context, and not on the definition of the term "correct". Whiting finds their response implausible because of the alleged counterintuitive consequences entailed by the ambiguity thesis with regard to "correct".

To show the alleged flaw in the anti-normativist approach, he invites us to consider the following inference:

(1) Sophie behaved correctly when she returned the wallet she found to its owner.
(2) Sophie correctly applied "red" to the red object.

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[7] D. Whiting, "Is Meaning Fraught with Ought?", p. 538–9.

[8] Cf. R. Wedgwood, *The Nature of Normativity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007.

[9] K. Glüer and Å. Wikforss, "Against Normativity Again: Reply to Whiting", MS, 2008, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Asa_Wikforss/publication/265279895_Against_Normativity_Again_Reply_to_Whiting/links/54db332b0cf261ce15cf7327/Against-Normativity-Again-Reply-to-Whiting.pdf, p. 2; K. Glüer and Å. Wikforss, "Against Content Normativity", p. 36–37; A. Hattiangadi, "Some More Thoughts on Semantic Oughts: A Reply to Daniel Whiting", *Analysis* 69/1 (2009), p. 59–61.

So,

(3)  Sophie behaved correctly twice.[10]

Whiting's observation about the inference is that it suffers from fallacious equivocation *if* the term "correct" is ascribed a different meaning in (1) and (2). Whiting's point is well taken and applies to some anti-normativists like Hattiangadi who explicitly claim that "deontic terms, such as 'correct' […] are not always normative".[11] However, extending the equivocation in question to *any* anti-normativist is too hasty. Whiting owes us an explanation as to why he thinks that the anti-normativist would have to commit this erroneous reasoning in the first place. The anti-normativist could happily agree that the threat of equivocation is unavoidable if a particular notion sometimes warrants a normative reading and at other times a non-normative one, yet claim that the charge is misfired, since her view is not that "correct" in some contexts expresses a *normative* notion and in other contexts not, because in any context whatsoever "correct" expresses the same evaluative notion. An evaluative notion is a normative notion but a weak one. To say that something – an act or action, for example – is correct is to say that it meets the relevant norm or standard. So one easy way to escape the objection in question is for the anti-normativist to claim that "correct" is merely an evaluative term that has no straightforward prescriptive consequences. According to that line of thinking, the anti-normativist is free to hold that both sentences (1) and (2) express *evaluative propositions* about Sophie's meeting the relevant (different in both cases) standards. Another defensive strategy available to the anti-normativist is to deny that she subscribes to the rea-

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[10]  D. Whiting, "Is Meaning Fraught with Ought?", p. 538.
[11]  A. Hattiangadi, "Is Meaning Normative?", *Mind and Language* 21 (2006), p. 224.

soning which Whiting thinks that she does, while maintaining that "correct" is indeed an ambiguous, normative term that changes its "normative character", to use Kaplan's expression, depending on the context. To find support for her claim, the anti-normativist could allude to the ordinary discourse and claim that "correct" as it occurs in (1) has a clearly prescriptive sense, whereas "correct" as it occurs in (2) has a merely evaluative, and so non-prescriptive, sense. In order to grasp this, all we need to do is translate the sentences in (1) and (2) into evidently normative sentences and then check whether this interpretation does justice to our semantic intuitions. There is no question that "ought" is a paradigmatically normative term (if any term is), so it is natural to expect that if "correct" is used normatively in both the sentences in Whiting's example, as he claims, then these two sentences should maintain the same sense when expressed with the use of a different normative word – "ought". However, that is not what happens. The sentence "Sophie ought to return the wallet she found to its owner" is naturally read as having a prescriptive sense, which is not so in the case of the sentence "Sophie ought to apply 'red' to the red objects". Can you imagine an everyday situation in which you would use "ought to apply 'red' to red objects" in a strong, imperative sense? I doubt it. If we use words in accordance with their correctness conditions, we do so not because we treat lexical meanings as practical obligations, but because sticking to their meanings facilitates efficient communication.

## 2. Evaluation and reasons

Would my defence of the anti-normativist's stand with regard to the notion of "correct" convince Whiting that there is nothing in the notion "correct" itself that makes it a normative notion? Or is there still an argument he could adduce in support of his allegedly platitudinous claim to the contrary? I suppose

that he could appeal to the intuition that whenever one says that something is correct, one at least implicitly takes a positive attitude towards whatever is thought of as being correct. So the idea seems to be that whenever I hear "It's correct" or "You did it correctly", I interpret it as praise and encouragement to act similarly in similar contexts. The problem with this suggestion is that it confuses *praise* for what I did with the *normative evaluation* of what I did in the light of normative reasons explaining my behaviour. To put the idea simply: to say that something I did was correct does not mean that what I did is something I ought to have done or that I had a normative reason to do it. Suppose that you have been working on a difficult mathematical problem, but as a non-specialist you ask my opinion on the solution you have arrived at. Imagine then that I am qualified to judge the results of your work. Having looked through the paper you gave me, I say with admiration: "Excellent! Absolutely correct!" Does my true appraisal of your mathematical skills imply normative appraisal of what you have done? Obviously not. Judgment of correctness is not equivalent to normative evaluation. That you have done something correctly, even something that many people find impressive, is perfectly reconcilable with the claim that you did something without a positive normative reason for doing it or that you did something despite having a normative reason not to do it. Whiting seems to ignore this option. According to him

> The Normativist is committed only to holding that, due to the presence of the term 'correct', *if* (S3) were true, it would have implications for what one should, may or has reason to do (or not to do). This is hardly a 'crazy' view or, if it is, that needs to be demonstrated.[12]

where (S3) has been defined as:

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[12] D. Whiting, "Is Meaning Fraught with Ought?", p. 543.

*S* correctly rides the rollercoaster $\leftrightarrow$ *S* has eaten cornflakes for breakfast on a Tuesday sometime in the past year[13].

To show that a view is implausible, one does not need to prove it is "crazy"; easier ways are usually at hand. One of the most obvious is to provide evidence that the view in question is not supported by argument, which, to my judgment, is the major flaw in Whiting's exposition. The missing argument, as I have tried to show, is the one about the connection between the meaning of a term and its implying a substantive normative claim on the speaker.

Whiting may still remain unconvinced, but this time he can ground his doubts on the acknowledged social practice of interpreting sentences with the term "correct". The argument for his case might run as follows: when people use the term "correct", they do not normally use it in a descriptive way, but rather with the purpose of expressing their opinion that it was right for the person to do something the way they did. Is it not plausible to observe that, according to the so-called ordinary speaker of English, saying "correct" is like saying "right', and "right" seems to be an uncontroversial normative notion?

One important concern about this suggestion is that if we admit that "correct" *has* a normative reading because it is *given* normative reading, we are making a sociological or a psychological claim, or both at once. Such claims may well be true, but their truth does not yet make them claims *about* how we ought to interpret "correct" in the sentences. Briefly, I may, by way of custom or social training, translate "correct" into "right" without having any normative reason for doing so.

Moreover, reading social codes is rather tricky. Suppose that the society in which I live sets some store by codes of etiquette and that dress code is a particular code of etiquette to which members of my society attach importance. Now, imagine that

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13  Ibidem, p. 542.

I am invited to an official academic ceremony. According to the rules of the code that people in my society respect, wearing a black dress on that occasion is correct and putting on a red jacket is incorrect. Now, the question is what kind of message the rule of dress code conveys for an ordinary member of the society. It seems to me that the straightforward information I glean from the rules of the code is only of an evaluative, or non-normative, character: which dress suits the circumstances in question and/or which dress is thought to be appropriate in the light of the specific dress code norm. Such information allows me to decide which dress option meets the relevant standard but *in itself* leaves me in the dark about which one – all relevant things considered – I ought to wear. That I would be better advised to wear what satisfies the dress code for the occasion than what I like most is a conclusion to be derived not simply on the grounds of which dress meets the standard, but on the basis of something else, which would normally comprise considerations related to the social reception of my dress. If I decide to wear something that conforms with the dress code, the reason for my choice will have to do with my concern to retain a good reputation in a certain social environment, which would be offended if I ignored the dress custom, rather than with the value attached to the dress code norm itself.

## 3. Correctness and intuitions

As we have seen, in order to render his normativism a plausible view, Whiting seeks alliance with common-sense intuitions. His strategy is perfectly reasonable. If the normativist's intuitions fit squarely with the intuitions most of us have, that might cast serious doubt on the view shared by the anti-normativists with regard to lexical meaning, since it might be unlikely that most people's intuitions are distorted. But before we condemn the anti-normativist to defeat, we should be told why looking at correctness through evaluative lenses would stand in op-

position to people's "ordinary intuitive judgments". Does that not square with the common-sense judgment that when I hold that how you filled in the job application form is correct, I am not saying anything beyond making a factual statement that *with respect to the standard* for filling in a job application form you behaved accurately? And if it happened that you filled in some spaces with untrue information (lying about your age or marital status, for example), that would incline me to state only that you filled in the particular spaces *incorrectly*, which would not necessarily entail any reproach on my part about what you did – something that would certainly be the case if I found out that you had done something you genuinely ought not to have done. Note that I may hold a deep conviction that lying about any issue, however petty, is generally regrettable, yet my moral stance on not keeping to the facts is irrelevant when I am supposed to be judging your action according to the standard that relates to filling in a job application form. That you lied on the form for no good reason is something that calls for moral rebuke, but when evaluated in the light of what correct form-filling consists in, your behaviour is simply incorrect or, if you prefer, *wrong* in a non-normative evaluative sense, relative to the standard. When we transpose all this to the area of semantics and the problem of lexical meaning, we can easily see that simply because a certain expression in a particular language possesses conditions of correct applications, no *ought* of practical import directly ensues, which is precisely the objection that the anti-normativists put forward.

## 4. Semantic normative reasons

If my arguments from the previous sections are correct, and it is hard to believe that the truth about what some expression means entails some practical commitment for a speaker, then the question is: what constitutes a normative reason for the speaker of a language to use words of that language in a par-

ticular way? Let us return to Whiting's example with Sophie, who correctly applies the English word "red" to some red object. By definition, it is obviously true that "red" in English refers correctly to red things. Moreover, if you are an adherent of normativity in the *rule-implying* sense,[14] you hold that because there are facts which tell you what is correct or incorrect according to a rule in some social institution, you also hold that something's being correct in the light of the rule entails normative consequences of practical import. Admittedly, you firmly believe that if it is correct to apply "red" in English to all and only red objects, you are required in the rule-implying sense of normativity to conform to what it says. Note, however, that if this account of normativity in the area of semantics were correct, then we would get a distorted picture of what communication is all about. Briefly, if the rule-implying sense of normativity is a plausible position, then most ordinary users of the language would live in false awareness, so to speak, about why they apply words of their language as they do. In Whiting's example, in the response to the question of why she uses the term "red" correctly, Sophie would say that she does so because in English it is correct to apply "red" to something that is red. Though such an explanation of Sophie's behaviour is not incredible, especially in the context of her having been socially trained to obey the linguistic rules of her society, it seems to me that it does poorly in providing us with a genuine explanation of why she employed the word as she did.

A much more natural answer to the question of why Sophie uttered "red" when she did is because she wanted to express the belief that there was something red in front of her. If that explanation is the right one, as I think it is, then the fact that "red" in English refers to red objects does not in itself consti-

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[14] To my knowledge, the expression "normativity in *the rule-implying* sense" was introduced by Derek Parfit in his book *On What Matters*, vol. 2, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, p. 308.

tute a normative reason for Sophie to use the word one way or another. It seems plausible to assume that a normative reason of the semantic kind is a reason bound to the speaker's conversational aim. Sophie did not use the word "red" simply because it exists in the English dictionary (many other expressions exist too, but she did not feel compelled to use them at that particular moment), but presumably because something red drew her attention and she wanted to communicate that fact to someone else.

Given that normative semantic reasons are goal-related, this can teach us something about why semantic correctness is not intrinsically reason-giving, as Whiting and many others think. But let us first recall what is at stake here: if correctness conditions for the use of a particular term immediately generate practical normative commitments, then the correct explanation of why Sophie uttered the word "red" is given by the definition of what "red" means in English. I have claimed that this sounds implausible because the reason why she ought to have said "red", if that were the case, was not of a semantic kind. The genuine normative reasons that she might have had would have been connected to non-linguistic features of her situation. If this picture is a convincing one, then semantic correctness for the application of a linguistic expression does not go hand in hand with non-semantic correctness of one's speech act. In effect, there is a discrepancy between what would be correct for you to say by way of a semantic standard for the term in question, and what would be correct for you to say with regard to your communicative intention.

To see the gap, imagine that although Sophie happened to say truly and correctly "It is red" when pointing to a red object, that was not what she wanted to say. Suppose that she knew that I am not particularly good at distinguishing bright colours and was intent on misleading me by telling me that the object of our attention was red whilst she actually thought it

was pink. It seems clear to me that in terms of her intention, she acted incorrectly, since she had no reason to say "red" with reference to the red object. Now you can reject my explanation of her normative reason because of its subjectivist twist. Sophie – you are tempted to say – might have taken something to be her normative reason, but might have been deeply mistaken about it. Such things happen all the time. Finally, you may add, personal reasons need not be true normative reasons. Apt as your objection seems to be at first glance, it is mistaken. If you are right that personal reasons are bad candidates for telling us what a speaker has a normative reason to say, then Sophie's deep conviction that speaking her mind is what gives her reason to say what she says would be an implausible suggestion. But that in turn strikes one as a bizarre idea of what linguistic communication is all about, since we are invited to think that language serves the expression of linguistic truths. However, people do not use words because they want to conform to lexical meanings of terms but because they want to use those terms to communicate some information. Using words according to what they mean is a tool of effective communication but not an end in itself.

However, if the crux of the objection invoking the threat of subjectivism was simply to state that a speaker's desires, unrelated to the context of communication and social circumstances in which she finds herself, cannot constitute normative reasons, a proponent of semantic anti-normativism could easily offer a reply that perfectly accords with this requirement of giving an objective normative reason, but violates a semantic norm. Suppose now that Sophie is a malicious girl who derives pleasure from deceiving others. Then suppose that at the bus station she meets Peter, who she knows is really bad at telling colours apart. Yet there is one colour which he recognises very well and which sparks his fury: pink. Sophie does not know about Peter's "hatred" of pink, and because she wants to deceive him, she says "Look, this bus is bright red!", whereas in

fact the bus in question is vibrant pink. This sort of example clearly shows that there are cases where an agent has an objective normative reason to violate a semantic norm, even if she remains unaware of such a reason, as in the example in question. (Note that Sophie does not know that her intentional departure from the correct use of "red" is *the right* thing to do in the circumstances.)

Philosophers like Whiting who argue for the rule-implying account of normativity, according to which a standard or a rule provides you with normative reason to act on it, face a problem about which their favoured theory seems to be helpless: they cannot give us an adequate description of what happened when Sophie said – truthfully, but incorrectly, in the light of her intention – that some particular object was red. Assume this time that Sophie wanted to describe the pink bus as *red* but hurriedly and unexpectedly said the truth. If we appeal to the standard-implying sense of normativity in explaining Sophie's linguistic behaviour, what we get is that Sophie did exactly what she was required to do, notwithstanding what her actual goal was. If what truly matters is one's conformance to the rules, then the fact that Sophie happened to obey the semantic rule for "pink" in English makes her linguistic behaviour right or correct in the normative sense. Consequently, we are entitled to say that Sophie's unwanted conformance to a valid semantic norm calls for positive normative evaluation. But that strikes me as an unsound result. It turns out that, by Whiting's proposal, whether one fulfils one's normative commitment or not is something that may be the case even if one does not actually decide to conform to the norm in question. Worse, one can earn praise for doing what one ought to do even in a situation where one intended to violate the norm but failed! That is, I contend, an unwelcome consequence for the normativist, because if a speaker behaves in a linguistically correct way *automatically*, regardless of her communicative intentions, what sense is there in speaking of semantic

"oughts" in the first place? If you use your words in a rather automatic, unthinking way, how can you be sensibly held to be the addressee of semantic *norms* in the first place? Moreover, the assumption that Sophie behaved *correctly* in her unintentional use of "pink" to refer to the pink bus clashes with widely shared intuitions of the Kantian pedigree about what fulfilling a normative commitment consists in. To satisfy a normative requirement, it is not enough to act *in accordance with it*; one must act in accordance with it *for the right reasons*. Applying these considerations to the case in point, we will say that Sophie would have behaved *correctly* in her use of the word "pink" *if* she had employed it to describe the colour of the bus as it appeared to her. Note that this outlook on the fulfilment of a normative requirement matches the common practice of normative evaluation of actions (linguistic behaviour included), namely, we judge acts as correct or incorrect based not on the standards that they meet but on the reasons that underlie them.

## 5. *Values and normative reasons: semantics and ethics*

Whiting and other semantic normativists want to persuade us that the fact that "cat" in English means *cat* and not *weasel* constitutes a reason for a speaker of English to use the word in accordance with its extension, regardless of whether saying so has any connection with the speaker's communicative intention or the end she wants to achieve. The strategy under consideration is, however, doomed to fail for the very reason that it is hard to understand what could motivate one's loyalty to whatever is constitutive of the meaning of the word "cat" if not that uttering "cat" in accordance with its meaning is conducive to the speaker's aim. It is useful to note that any potentially successful defence of externalism about reasons in ethics, which seems to be the only domain where externalism, at least at first sight, retains its plausibility, is usually paired

with a defence of the intrinsic values underlying judgments about moral reasons.[15]

If we can agree that suffering is something that all sensible animals try to avoid, the fact that suffering is wrong may be reason for anybody not to impose unnecessary suffering, independently of whether at some particular moment they really feel like punishing their persecutor and their desire to do so is not blind. But can we draw an analogy in the case of semantic meaning? Is there any intrinsic value to be ascribed to the fact that words and expressions have established correctness conditions or, to put it more simply, is it of intrinsic value to us that we apply "cat" in English to *cats?*

The correct answer to the question seems to me to be a negative one. We do not care about the extensions of the expressions we use; we are only concerned with attaining our communicative or conversational aims. If uttering "cat" with regard to some cat suits my conversational aim at some particular moment, then the fact that "cat" means cat is what constitutes my reason to say "cat" rather than "weasel". So even if externalism about normative reasons in ethics is true, it could not help the semantic normativist, for the simple reason that it is difficult to see what intrinsic value there could be in the fact that words have the correctness conditions that they do.

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[15] Externalism about normative reasons in ethics is the position according to which some actions are wrong for all people irrespective of their psychological make-up and goals. Among the famous adherents of this view are W.D. Ross (*The Right and the Good*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1930) and Thomas Nagel (*The Possibility of Altruism*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1970). It is interesting to note that externalism about reasons is typically held by robust realists in metaethics like Russ Shafer-Landau (*Moral Realism. A Defence*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2003), Terence Cuneo (*The Normative Web: An Argument for Moral Realism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007) and David Enoch (*Taking Morality Seriously. A Defence of Robust Realism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011).

## 6. Normativity and function

At this point, though, Whiting might invoke his scepticism about the non-normative character of meaning and appeal to the notion of "function", proceeding with his argument as follows: it is uncontroversial that artefacts such as a knife or a glass have a certain role. In that sense, it is completely innocent to say that a knife ought to be used for cutting and a glass ought to be used to contain water or some other liquid.

If we grant that, we have no choice but to admit that there is some reason to use a knife and a glass in accordance with the purpose for which they were invented rather than in some non-standard way. And if this is what we can guardedly say about these things, why cannot we say something similar about meanings, that is, that they serve the function of facilitating communication, and therefore provide some reason to employ them correctly? In this context, to say that meanings of terms ought to be used correctly implies no strong "oughts", but nevertheless generally speaks for using them that way.

True as it is that lexical meanings facilitate communication, and thus contribute to attaining one's conversational ends, employing them correctly is not the only way to succeed in conveying the intended message. If my conversational success does not necessarily depend on my correct application of the words or expressions, and the notion of semantic normative reason is supposed to be primarily an explanatory notion providing an accurate answer to the question as to "why" I *ought to say* "cat", then the mere fact that "cat" in English applies to cats is not the reason I say "cat" when I speak it.

## 7. Normativity and standard

So far we have carefully considered Whiting's elucidations of the normative use of "correct" in the case of semantic correctness and shown that there is no reason to suppose that "correct" in that context behaves normatively rather than as

evaluation lacking immediate prescriptive consequences. We have also offered an explanation of why it is too hasty to derive conclusions about what one ought (not) or have reason (not) to do by appealing to statements involving the term "correct". Our suggestion was that lexical meaning cannot be the source of *substantive* normative truth. If this argument is convincing, then one may say it settles the issue, proving that Whiting's stance is untenable. However, many people are still reluctant to accept the anti-normativist's approach to meaning since they believe that the rule-implying theory of normativity fares better in doing justice to our intuitions. Recall that rule-implying normativity holds that what generates normative consequences about what anybody ought, or has reason, to do is the existence of the relevant standard for correctness. Now it is high time to check whether the suggestion that lexical meaning sets a *standard* for correct use is a better argument for normativism.

Let us start with the observation that we now shift the problem of normativity from the issue as to whether it is the fact about meaning itself that generates normative statements about what one may, should or has reason to do to the issue of whether meaning conceived as a *standard* entails normative consequences. At first glance, one might consider that introducing standard talk implies an important change to the debate. We do not think that any institutional standards – morally, legally or generally – are inherently reason-giving. And if meaning is a standard like any other, we should think of it in an analogous way.

Unlike many participants in the discussion, I do not see how appealing to standards helps to move the issue forward. A "standard" is something that we use to measure whether things successfully conform to it or not. Thus a standard of correctness is a statement that provides us with descriptions of behaviours which count as correct or incorrect in the light of it. There is no standard whatsoever from which immediate

normative implications can be derived. That is so because if there is any prescriptiveness to be attached to a standard it does not come from something's being a standard but from something else. In the case of a legal norm, normativity usually comes from the relevant authority that is capable of setting up regulations governing a certain area of civil activity; if the law in question is a bad law, however, its relevant normativity, that is, the normativity issuing prescriptive consequences, is "corrupted", so to speak.[16] Lexical meaning is not a standard in the proper sense. Neither is it similar to a legal standard, which when in force (which is another way of saying that it has currency in a certain society) automatically entails normative consequences, threatening those who violate it with sanctions. When used with regard to meaning, "standard" is a non-committal notion, which can be restated in non-normative terms.[17] Instead of saying that by the standard of correct English "cat" applies to all and only cats, we can re-describe the claim as follows: in the light of the practice of members of the English-speaking community, "cat" is used for cats. And though it is true that societal practices can generate normative commitments, the mere fact that a certain practice takes place is a natural fact. A normative reason to use the English word "cat" in accordance with its lexical meaning appears either when we successfully defend the missing additional normative claim to the effect that there is something good or valu-

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[16] I am grateful to the referee for pressing me to clarify the relation between the normativity of a legal norm and its genuine, prescriptive character.

[17] The concern that the standard *qua* standard is devoid of prescriptive import has been ingeniously spelled out by Alex Miller ("The Argument from Queerness and the Normativity of Meaning", in: *Truth, Existence and Realism*, eds. M. Grajner and A. Rami, Mentis, Paderborn 2010, p. 9). He observed that the mere fact that some standard is operative, even when expressed by means of correctness conditions, does not mean we can infer from it information concerning how one ought or has reason to behave.

able in conforming to the norms in question or else when we show, as I have attempted to do in the previous sections, that if there are semantic normative reasons, their normativity has its origin in the purpose of communication. And that is indeed a bad prospect for normativism, since no matter which of the two suggestions appeals to you, neither of them is reconcilable with Whiting's claim that it is lexical meaning itself that has or implies semantic normative reasons.

## 8. Prima facie reason

It is interesting to see that Whiting demurs about deriving any strong prescriptive conclusions from what he takes to be a rather innocent claim that a statement about what one ought to do with the lexical meaning of a particular expression can be translated as a claim about the meaning fact providing only a prima facie reason. More precisely, Whiting holds that speaking in terms of semantic obligation is

> not counterintuitive so long as the 'semantic obligation', or rather the statement concerning what one ought to do, is understood as *prima facie* (cf. Whiting, 2007, pp. 138–9). What an expression means provides one with *some* (not necessarily conclusive) reason to employ it in a certain way. Such reason is not dependent on what a subject happens to desire, though it might be defeated, overridden, silenced, outweighed, etc. by other considerations, say moral or pragmatic.[18]

Evoking the notion of prima facie reason may indeed turn out to be a non-committal move, as he suggests, but I do not think that the reason for that would be one that the normativist would welcome. In a nutshell, the problem with Whiting's appeal to the notion of prima facie reason is not that "semantic obligations" are easily imagined to be silenced or trumpeted

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[18] D. Whiting, "Is Meaning Fraught with Ought?", p. 546.

by prudential or moral respects, which is something that he admits is to be expected, but that the *notion* of prima facie reason itself does poorly in the role of an ally in his theoretical enterprise. That is because what is considered as a prima facie reason *need not* have that status. And that very consequence should worry the normativist. Let me explain, beginning with a short historical introduction.

It is useful to recall that there has been a lot of debate in philosophy over past decades regarding the conceptual and substantial nature of prima facie reason.[19] However, it now seems rather uncontroversial that what W. D. Ross meant by introducing the expression "prima facie" with regard to some duty, that is, duty being obligatory unless it is overridden or trumped by another duty or duties, is not what Ross's term suggests. An example of a prima facie duty, in Ross's understanding, is the duty to keep promises: you should keep a promise unless it is outweighed by strong moral considerations (reasons). Judging by this example, it is clear that what Ross thought of in terms of "prima facie duty" more adequately corresponds to the notion of "pro tanto reason".[20] The difference between the two is essential, since pro tanto reason, as the Latin suggests, is reason that *genuinely* matters, although it may be trumped by other considerations, whereas something which is regarded as prima facie reason, or reason "at first sight", need not be reason at all. If Whiting thinks of prima facie reason in its literal sense, then the anti-normativist would have no point in disagreeing with him. In fact, she would applaud the norma-

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[19] Cf. W.D. Ross, *The Right and the Good*; S. Kagan, *The Limits of Morality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1989; J. Dancy, "Prima facie reasons", in: *A Companion to Epistemology*, eds. J. Dancy and E. Sosa, Blackwell, Oxford 1993; A. Reisner, "*Prima facie* and *Pro Tanto* Oughts", *International Encyclopedia of Ethics*, ed. Hugh LaFollette, Blackwells, Oxford 2013, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/9781444367072.wbiee406

[20] See S. Kagan, *The Limits of Morality*, p. 17.

tivist's conclusion: yes, facts about meaning are only *apparent* reasons, and so, properly speaking, not reasons at all. But if what Whiting has in mind when employing the misleading term prima facie reason indeed falls under the definition of pro tanto reason, then we come back to the starting point of the controversy between the two sides, since to avoid criticism the normativist must support the view that I labelled externalism about semantic reasons.[21] In other words, he owes us an explanation of how the fact that linguistic expressions possess conditions of correct application accounts for their binding character for any speaker of the language in question, if there is nothing in the linguistic meaning itself that is the object of the speaker's concerns.

Whiting's intuitions suggest to him that facts about meaning, like any other sort of facts, be they moral, epistemic or concerned with etiquette, are of equal potency in terms of generating prescriptive consequences. If he believes so, we are justified in asking him to propose some solution to the problem which every externalist about reasons has to deal with, namely, how something can be a genuine reason for someone if its link to the agent's motivational set is too distant and feeble. If there is nothing of my concern in the fact that "cat" in English refers to cats ("cat" might equally well refer to giraffes, and that would leave me equally indifferent) and there is no authority that can impose on me a painful sanction for ignoring the semantic norm for the word "cat" in English, what drives the idea that the word "cat" being correctly applied to all and only cats is pro tanto reason for me, you and anybody else who speaks English, irrespective of our conversational aims?

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[21] However, the prospects of externalism about normative reasons look rather bleak. It is instructive that even most prominent contemporary externalists about normative reasons (see n. 15) do not speak of externalism in the field of linguistics.

Whiting cannot meet this objection with a simple answer; that is, he cannot say that there is reason to use words of the language one is speaking in accordance with their extensions because the *point* of one's speaking that language is to be understood. He cannot seek support for his stance by appealing to the value of being understood which one can sensibly assume that most speakers share, because that would be self-refuting. Granted that we generally abide by the standards of the correct application of expressions in the language we speak, he would subscribe to the view which he explicitly rejects in the opening statement of his paper, namely that meaning is not *intrinsically* prescriptive.

In response to my criticism of his philosophically unsophisticated use of the term "reason", he may answer by noting that I read too much from his rather innocent claim about normative reasons provided by the standard of correct use for expressions in some language *L*. Once again, to support his view, he might seek alliance in the so-called common sense conviction that there are indeed plenty of reasons that just one agent at some definite moment of time faces, of which only some become normatively operational, owing to the specificity of the extra-linguistic context.

But if what Whiting wants to say boils down to the observation that any true proposition, because it is true and is the focus of one's contextually determined attention, is by that very fact reason-giving, then reason-talk is empty, in the sense that everything is or may be a potential reason for anything, theoretically speaking, although, due to the "ought implies can" principle, it will hardly have any practical consequences. Adding the proviso that not all facts matter in the same way, and therefore do not give agents a similarly strong reason to act, will not help unless we offer a convincing account of the *theoretical* importance of the distinction between reasons that matter a great deal, those that matter less and those whose prescriptive force lies somewhere in between. If

reason-talk is paradigmatically talk focused on solving deliberative questions about what one ought to do in certain circumstances, introducing the category of reasons that do not matter much because of their contextual muteness is explanatorily idle. Do we pay attention to *reasons qua reasons*, theoretical constructs, contextually unrelated to our current aims, communicative or otherwise? I very much doubt that we do.

## 9. Overriding desires

A lot has been said above about why implanting the notion of prima facie (and indeed pro tanto) reason into the context of the debate on the implications of semantic meaning is not a good idea from the perspective of normativism, yet the confusion over the proper interpretation of that notion demands our attention. The anti-normativists, as Whiting aptly contends, are not impressed by the normativist's appeal to prima facie reasons or oughts because in their view nothing warrants the idea of *semantic* obligation.[22] If we were to assume the existence of a *genuinely* semantic obligation, their argument goes [23], it would be a very odd "obligation", since it would be easily overridden by the desire to lie, mislead, etc. If the idea of prima facie obligation is to retain its meaning, it simply cannot be

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[22] The issue of our possible obligations to language was discussed in an exchange between Dummett and Davidson, but since this construal of the claim that meaning is normative is not central to the debate between semantic normativists and their opponents to which I refer, I do not discuss the problem of the social role of language. I am grateful to the referee for pressing me to explain that omission.

[23] P. Boghossian, "Is Meaning Normative?", in: *Philosophy – Science – Scientific Philosophy*, eds. Christian Nimtz, Ansgar Beckerman, Mentis, Paderborn 2005, p. 207; A. Hattiangadi, "Is Meaning Normative?", p. 232; A. Hattiangadi, *Oughts and Thoughts*: *Rule-Following and the Normativity of Content*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2007, p. 188–9; K. Glüer and Å. Wikforss, "Against Normativity Again", p. 4.

that mere desire outweighs whatever is the object of the relevant "at first sight" obligation.

If the nature of obligation is to constrain the agent's motivation, assuming that there is an obligation which does a poor job of constraining one's inclinations and desires, supposedly because no intrinsic value is threatened by lack of observance of it, obligation is merely idle talk. Whiting remains unconvinced about this and attributes his scepticism to the controversy over whether it has been successfully established that a prima facie ought *can* be overridden only by other (prima facie) obligations.[24]

In order to cast doubt on the view, he invites us to consider Darwall's suggestion that there exist desires which can override putative prima facie obligations. Note that if this suggestion turned out to be tenable, the anti-normativist's stand against identifying the use of the words of one's language according to their meanings with semantic prima facie obligations would collapse, as the whole argument for the anti-normativist's case is built on the assumption that duties are in principle resistant to desires or else are only apparent duties. Hence, if the normativist succeeded in showing something to the contrary, that some consideration may retain the status of prima facie obligation yet be overridden by some desire to do something else, the anti-normativist would have to find some other argument for their thesis. The question is, however, whether Whiting's suggestion is convincing. My answer is in the negative.

First of all, it is debatable whether Darwall's defence of desires that are normatively equal in strength to prima facie obligations works. In order to see how Darwall's internalism about reasons might help Whiting's purposes, let us briefly consider the example that Darwall uses to illustrate the option in question: the existence of desires capable of trumping

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[24]  D. Whiting, "Is Meaning Fraught with Ought?", p. 547.

prima facie obligations. To prove his point, he gives us an example of a middle-aged daughter whose parents insist on her eating broccoli. According to Darwall, there is a sense in which we can say that the woman's *dislike* of broccoli constitutes a reason for resisting her parents' wishes.[25] However, the moral that Darwall derives from the example is that sometimes one's preferences, even unimportant ones like food preferences, matter – if, that is, not satisfying them in the context can be seen as denying one's self-respect. Now to judge Darwall's example as successful in gesturing at the possibility of desires with normative power equal to that of prima facie obligations, his example would have to make it clear that what overrode the daughter's prima facie obligation to defer to her parents' wish in the given example was her distaste for certain vegetables. Briefly, if the daughter's normative reason for opposing her parents' expectations was her dislike for broccoli, so something not connected to her intentional control, Whiting's idea of appealing to Darwall's view would have a destructive impact on the anti-normativists' argument. However, I do not think that this is the case. Darwall's example, suggestive as it may seem to many, does not show what it is supposed to show, namely, that it is the daughter's *desire* that overcomes the prima facie obligation. An alternative story is available. A different explanation of the daughter's normative reason would be one that alludes to the moral value of self-integrity. That one ought to respect one's own autonomy is not something that the anti-normativists have reason to disagree with. In fact, that some principle of moral integrity is prescriptively binding is a view to which they could subscribe, since they think that *sui generis* normative reasons of practical significance are embedded in morality's claims on us. To sum up, if Darwall's example fails as a straightforward argument for the existence

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[25] S. Darwall, "Desires, Reasons, and Causes", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 67/2 (2003), p. 442.

of desires that can successfully compete with prima facie obligations, Whiting's hope for reinforcing normativism by means of Darwall's account of normative reasons remains unfulfilled.

## *10. Argumentative hotchpotch: desires, goals and reasons*

To be fair to the debate, however, one must observe that the anti-normativists also fail in their claim that my uttering "cat" when in the presence of some cat may be threatened by the *desire* to say something to the contrary. Appealing to desire here is misleading, as it suggests that what one is about to say (and the words one is going to use) is in a sense accidental or depends on a whim. Thus, saying "weasel" when I see clearly that the animal lurking behind the bush is a dark cat is something that I choose to do on purpose, as when I decide which ice cream to buy. The latter is strongly dependent on my taste, which it is not in my hands to change, and so cannot be spelt out in terms of normative reasons (on the assumption that no other relevant considerations come into play, such as concern for health, limited availability of ice creams in the store, etc.), whereas the first is not. If I lie to you about what creature I am staring at, this usually has to do with the particular message I want my words to convey rather than my playing with words, though of course in particular circumstances I may utter an expression without giving any thought as to whether what I am saying corresponds to how things are. Nevertheless, such instances are unusual and take place when the speaker lacks a communicative intention or a conversational aim. If communication is to be thought of as intentional activity, it is not goalless, and setting goals is not something that occurs to the speaker, as she may just feel like trying an ice cream flavour that she has not fancied before.

Introducing this correction to the anti-normativist's view on desire does not change the substance of that view; on the

contrary, it even enhances it, because it supports the claim that one's actions are always goal-oriented, and having a goal is not something that simply occurs to the subject but rather a plan, maxim or intention which is the agent's answer to the question about what she wants to attain at a particular time and why. Moreover, adopting a goal gives rise to normativity, since normative reasons are bound to a goal. Reformulating the anti-normativist's central argument by replacing desires-talk by wants-talk will help us to see where Whiting errs when he alleges evident dissimilarity between what gives the subject reason to go out without an umbrella when it is raining and what gives her reason not to call a rich person "poor".

In Whiting's example, the case is easy: "I ought not to go outside if it is raining" is contingent on my *desire* to stay dry. If I did not mind getting wet, or even welcomed the idea of getting wet, then because of my desire I would be appropriately advised to go out in the rain, because the fact that I am fond of getting wet will be what constitutes my reason to go out when it is raining. The problem with Whiting's example is that it brings him to the wrong conclusion. On Whiting's account of the example, the desire to get wet constitutes a normative reason, say, to leave one's umbrella at home, but that description of things seems wrong. A desire to get wet informs my *plan* of going out without an umbrella, yet it is not in itself a normative reason for me to do so. The normative reason in question is given either by my goal (say, the goal of getting wet in the first rain this summer) or by something I care about (say, impressing my younger colleague by showing him how "cool" I am).

Since Whiting mistakenly thinks that in the non-linguistic case under discussion it is a desire that generates prescriptive consequences, telling me what I *ought* to do, he also mistakenly thinks that there is a vivid disanalogy between the non-linguistic case and the linguistic case. To put it bluntly, he seems to hold that desires might be normative reasons-generators

when it comes to everyday matters like taking an umbrella or buying a new pair of shoes, where there are no standards regulating outdoor clothing or telling me precisely what a decent wardrobe should contain, which is not the case when we think of language use. Since the components of language include lexemes ("words", in ordinary parlance) that provide us with *norms* of their correct application, voluntarism in their use is not an option. Whiting seems to think otherwise. Notwithstanding what my linguistic desires are, he argues, my misuse of "rich" to describe someone who is poor calls for a negative normative evaluation. To this sort of reasoning, two comments are in order. One is that Whiting's argument about disanalogy between the use of language and the plan to get wet is unsuccessful, since he has not shown that desires constitute or at least crucially contribute to normative reasons in the latter case but not in the former case. And if desires do not necessarily play such an important role in generating non-linguistic actions, as Whiting stipulates, what reasons are there to care about whether the activity of using language is in this respect similar to any other type of human activity in the first place? None, I think. My second comment is that, even if Whiting is right that my misapplication of the word "red" to an object in its extension deserves a correction, as it is in some sense "inappropriate", he has not shown that the alleged inappropriateness stems directly from a violation of the semantic norm, and not from some goal, be it a first-order one like saying what I see or a second-order one: to transmit my thought in the most economical and efficient way, which seems more probable when one sticks to the meanings of the words. To sum up: if Whiting's argument about the desire-driven nature of normative reasons in respect to non-linguistic performances was plausible, he might have claimed that the situation with language use was different, as it is tightly regulated in a way in which other areas of human activity are not. But I have shown that this argument, even if successful, is generally irrelevant.

Even if desires were generators of normative reasons in the case of ordinary actions, why could they not also be generators of normative reasons in the case of linguistic behaviours? Specifically, what makes Whiting think that the psychology of action would look differently in the two sorts of cases under consideration? And if desires are genuine action-precipitators, then why not think that my use of words in one way or another is dictated by my desire to use them in a particular way? Moreover, and more importantly, Whiting's juxtaposing of the use of linguistic expressions with the undertaking of actions like going outdoors in the rain misses its target, since we are not shown what he expects to show, namely that the way in which one employs the word "rich" is not goal-related. What we have been shown is only that what "rich" means is not contingent on one's conversational goals.

But the latter is not a moot point. The anti-normativists do not put forward the view that what an expression means in a language depends on the speaker of that language, which would be an absurd view, but only hold that meaning itself, without further assumptions regarding the speaker's communicative or conversational intention, or simply her aim, does not warrant talk about semantic prima facie reasons. Whiting gave us no evidence to the contrary, which might lead us to reject the suggestion that how one uses words is relative to the effect one wants to bring about.

That the normativist maintains his conviction about the allegedly striking disanalogy between a desire-based plan to go out when it is raining and a desire-insensitive plan regarding one's employment of expressions of one's language is presumably due to the assumption that in the case of meanings there are *norms* of correct use that constrain linguistic freedom and do not have counterparts in the form of norms governing when it is correct to go out in the rain. Intuitively appealing as the disanalogy may seem, it does not do its job of proving that what one may or ought to do in a semantic case is subject to restric-

tions unrelated to one's aims, which is not what obtains when we consider whether one is allowed to get wet in the rain. But is it true that what makes the two cases different is connected with the fact that semantic norms exist? I doubt it. If what makes facts about meanings non-hypothetically reason-giving is that they are in force in some linguistic community, then analogously we may allude to the existing prudential norm, which also retains its currency in society and which says that one ought not to risk one's health for no good reason, which is how we may interpret a desire for or indifference to getting wet. If both kinds of norms are norms in an informal sense and as there is no authority that could impose sanctions for not acting in accordance with them, we are left with little idea of the purpose served by such an appeal to norm-talk other than rhetoric. Whiting owes us an explanation of what makes these two norms non-similar with regard to the kind of normativity ascribed to them.

Why, according to him, does the fact that expressions have fixed correctness conditions make them *norms* non-contingently binding on the subjects in contrast to norms of prudence, if both kinds of norm are based on beliefs shared in the community regarding the correct use of some expression, and what is the correct behaviour when it is raining with regard to both kinds of norm? In other words, why is loyalty to norms of linguistic meaning seen as more important, warranting criticism when violated, whereas acting against some norm of prudence, such as the norm which says that one ought not to go outside if it is raining, lacks such a privileged status?

In order to win his claim of dissimilarity between the proposed examples, Whiting has to provide an argument to the effect that facts about meaning are intrinsically prescriptive in a sense that facts about what it is reasonable for someone to do in certain circumstances are not. To do that, however, Whiting would have to engage in the debate on the plausible theory of

normative practical reasons and their connection with value, and then make us believe that semantic reasons externalism is the right stance to adopt. Otherwise his elucidations, intuitively compelling as they may look to some, lack theoretical grounding.

## *11. Conclusion: flaws and prospects*

Several times in his article, Whiting stresses that the anti-normativists do not present any principled objection to the thesis that meaning is intrinsically normative. I think that this claim does not do justice to the arguments put forward by his opponents. Yet regardless of what one thinks about the arguments adduced by each party, I have attempted to show that his comment can be successfully used against him, as he does not provide us with an outright argument for normativism. Nor has he offered a successful argument against the anti-normativist's position. Moreover, his objections to anti-normativism have turned out to be either mistaken or problematic, whereas the crucial three arguments addressing normativism are rather sound. They concern issues that Whiting either passed over or failed to contradict, namely, the relation between fact about lexical meaning and norm, between fact about lexical meaning and reason for action, and between semantic norm and obligation. Until he clarifies the nature of the linkage between notions crucial to the discussion, normativism will fail to constitute a serious theoretical alternative to anti-normativism.

One thing needs to be stressed, however. The failure of Whiting's argument that meaning is an intrinsically normative notion does not by itself make his position untenable, if we take into account that he describes his task as an attempt to show why one *should accept* normativism.[26] In

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[26] D. Whiting, "Is Meaning Fraught with Ought?", p. 535.

terms of psychological reading, it may still be the case that we possess reasons in favour of normativism despite similarly strong arguments against that position's plausibility. In fact, that is what contemporary adherents of error theory in ethics propose. They admit that error theory is the theory that best fits the evidence about the nature of moral properties; hence it can be accepted as a theory. Yet the fact that some theory turns out to be true is not in itself an argument that there are *reasons to believe* that error theory is true. According to adherents of error theory, despite the putative fact that error theory is true, nothing yet straightforwardly follows to the effect that there is reason for me, you or anybody to believe that it is true. To believe that error theory is true, one must have some reason to do so, and the best candidate is the aim to have a correct theory about the nature of normative properties. In brief, there is no uncontroversial transition from something's being true to its standing in a normative relation to any agent.[27] For the sake of accuracy, I have to note that it seems to me unlikely that Whiting would be willing to adopt this strategy of defending his normativist position, for the simple reason that he is committed to the opposite view, that something's being true alone suffices to generate or imply normative consequences.

## Acknowledgements

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[27] Cf. J. Olson, "Error Theory and Reasons for Belief", in: *Reasons for Belief*, eds. Andrew Reisner and Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011.

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