

## Norms and Explanation of Action

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### Abstract

It seems obvious that the mere acknowledgment of a norm cannot explain the agent's undertaking what the norm prescribes; Steglich-Petersen makes the point as there is *no* strong relation between normative judgments and motivation from such judgments. To explain why someone does what a norm prescribes, according to Steglich-Petersen, we need to know not only that they acknowledge the norm, but that they are motivated to follow it. I will argue that this apparent truism is false in the case of constitutive norms. In a constitutive norm, the action specified in the correctness condition is constitutive of what is governed by the norm. I will focus on the constitutive norm of belief to argue that the mere acknowledgment of the norm suffices to explain the transparency of belief. That is to say, I explain why a subject who deliberates whether to believe that *p* thereby, in virtue of acknowledgment of the belief norm, deliberates whether *p*.

**Keywords:** Normativity, Belief, Constitutive, Transparency, Motivation.

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## Introduction

Among other interesting issues in the literature of philosophy of action, The Humean theory of motivation has been widely discussed. According to the idea, very roughly, motivating toward actions always involves the presence of *both* beliefs and desires. A belief that p (say that a jug of water is in the fridge) depicts the world as being in a state of affairs such that p is true. The belief, however, according to the Humean account is not enough to explain being motivated to do an action (namely, going towards the fridge to take the jug of water). Apart from the belief, that the agent has specific desires (say, to drink water) plays an explanatory role. A desire that p, unlike a belief, doesn't depict the world as being in the state that p; rather it expresses a desire that the world be such that p is true (say, the desire to drink the water). Desire is a state of mind that is satisfied when the world fits it; and according to the Humean account, any adequate explanation has to be based not only on beliefs but also on desires. There is a vast amount of questions and debates regarding the Humean account, much of it very difficult, and even a basic treatment of any of them would probably require a book. So my aim in this short note is to focus on a topic relating to the theory of moral internalism, which has Anti-Humean spirit. According to moral internalism, there is an internal or conceptual connection between a normative judgment (say, a judgment like I ought to donate to charity) and motivation. The idea denies that motivation always involves the presence of *both* beliefs and desires. Philosophers like McDowell, Wiggins, and Smith endorse the internalist<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, externalists, e.g. Railton and Brink, deny internalism. They, consonant with the Humean account, hold that the connection between judgment and motivation is only external and contingent.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I will consider a new anti-Humean internalist theory of motivation advanced in the last fifteen years in the

literature, according to which, beliefs themselves can be intrinsically motivating. In order to pave the way, I will start by specifying Steglich-Petersen's (2006, 2009) thesis on motivation. He advances an anti-internalist view according to which normative judgments are not intrinsically motivating; that is, apart from acknowledging a norm, that the agent has *want* to comply with the norm is needed to explain that the agent is motivated to follow the norm. Apart from this, in sections 1 and 2 I will also specify the ideas of norms, the distinction between constitutive and non-constitutive norms, as well as the so-called normativity of belief thesis. I will end by arguing pro the claim that a *constitutive* norm can be intrinsically motivating.

## 1. Steglich-Petersen on motivation

It is an apparent truism that norms as such cannot explain the actions they prescribe (Steglich-Petersen 2006: 506-507)<sup>3</sup>. If there is a norm for  $\phi$ -ing, it will typically prescribe the correct way of  $\phi$ -ing; it will prescribe what the subject ought to do to undertake  $\phi$ -ing correctly. For example, if  $\phi$ -ing is ‘promising to  $\psi$ ’, then the norm for promising says that  $\phi$ -ing correctly prescribes that the agent  $\psi$ . If you promise to meet a friend for coffee, you undertake that promise correctly only if you meet them for coffee. In general, we can say that where there is a norm governing  $\phi$ -ing, the norm prescribes ‘ $\text{pres}(\phi)$ ’ as the correct way of  $\phi$ -ing, where ‘ $\text{pres}(\phi)$ ’ is undertaking the action prescribed by the norm. That the action of  $\phi$ -ing is governed by a norm helps us make sense of agents when they undertake  $\text{pres}(\phi)$ , for if they acknowledge the norm, their doing so contributes to our understanding of why they  $\text{pres}(\phi)$ . It would seem obvious, however, that the agent’s acknowledgment of a norm for  $\phi$ -ing cannot of itself explain why they  $\text{pres}(\phi)$ . To explain that, we need more information, and if the norm figures in the explanation we need to know not only that they

acknowledge the norm but that they are motivated to follow the norm. There is a difference between the acknowledgment of the norm for  $\phi$ -ing and being motivated to follow the norm. The latter might explain the agent's undertaking what the norm prescribes,  $\text{pres}(\phi\text{-ing})$ , but not the former. Ignoring the distinction between acknowledging a norm and being motivated to follow the norm misconstrues the relationship between norms and the explanation of actions that they prescribe. The mere acknowledgment of the norm governing promising cannot explain why you meet your friend for coffee when you promise to do so.

Notwithstanding the apparent truism above, there are instances of  $\text{pres}(\phi)$  execution of which can be explained by mere acknowledgment of the norm for  $\phi$ -ing. There are cases where grasping of the norm alone suffices to explain the prescribed action without further need of the assumption that the agent is motivated to follow the norm. The apparent truism that acknowledgment of a norm is never enough to explain the prescribed action is mistaken.

The case I focus on concerns normative explanations in the literature on the normativity of belief. Consider the phenomenon of the transparency of belief. This is the claim that deliberation about whether to believe that  $p$  is transparent to deliberation about  $p$ . In other words, a subject undertaking the former thereby undertakes the latter. Some normativists (e.g. Shah 2003; Shah 2006; Shah and Velleman 2005) have tried to explain the transparency of belief by appealing to the norm governing doxastic deliberation<sup>4</sup>. The idea is that we can explain why a subject who undertakes deliberation about whether to believe  $p$  thereby undertakes deliberation about whether  $p$  by citing the norm governing the former action – the belief norm. The precise way in which the norm governing the former action explains the latter is not fully articulated by Shah and Velleman (2005), but I propose to consider the explanation

in its simplest and, arguably, most contentious form. This makes the argument *prima facie* implausible and at odds with the apparent truism. Examining the argument in detail shows, however, that the opening truism is false.

So, consider the claim that the mere acknowledgment of the norm governing doxastic deliberation explains why an agent's engagement in one action – deliberation about whether to believe p – gives rise to another action, deliberation about whether p is true. The key claim is that the former action is governed by a norm that says that when deliberating about whether to believe that p, the proper way to do this is to deliberate about whether p is true. The latter action is what is prescribed as the correctness condition for the norm governing doxastic deliberation. So the argument posits a norm, the correctness condition of which requires a prescribed action and that action is explained by acknowledgment of the norm.

Prima facie, this argument misconstrues the relationship between norms and the explanation of action as evidenced in the opening apparent truism. The matter is, however, not straightforward and neither is the failure of the truism a local matter that arises only in the case of the norm for belief. There is a quite general point about the relationship between norms and the explanation of action that the apparent truism gets wrong. I continue by getting the general point in focus and then turn to apply the general point to the case of belief.

## **2. Norms and correctness conditions of actions:**

A norm for  $\phi$ -ing lays down correctness conditions for  $\phi$ -ing of the general form,

(N)  $\phi$ -ing is correct only if C is satisfied.

In (N), ‘correct’ is not a synonym for ‘true’; it is a normative notion relating to how one ought to act when C is satisfied. It is

a matter of some debate precisely how one should define the scope of the ‘ought’ in articulating (N)<sup>5</sup>. For the purposes of the current issue, I take the point of (N) to be of the following form: To say that (N) provides a correctness condition for  $\phi$ -ing amounts to saying that anyone  $\phi$ -ing who acknowledges the norm is prescribed to meet condition C. Acknowledging the norm for  $\phi$ -ing amounts to be accepting that one is prescribed to undertake whatever is required in condition C. Now the force of the apparent truism seems plain, for acknowledging a norm for  $\phi$ -ing and thereby acknowledging that one is prescribed to undertake whatever C requires cannot be enough to explain one’s undertaking C, if one does. We regularly fail to undertake what we are prescribed, so acknowledgment of our prescriptions cannot explain our undertaking such things when we do. We need also to be motivated to do as prescribed. A simple example illustrates the point.

Suppose you think that promising is governed by a norm, namely that the correctness condition for promising to do something is that you undertake the action. So, promising prescribes that you go on and undertake the promised action. But that does not suffice to make it the case that one who has promised will go on and do as they are prescribed, even if they acknowledge that they are under such prescription. That is the thought behind the opening truism. So far, so truistic. But now consider the class of norms that are constitutive norms.

Constitutive norms are norms for actions that specify correctness conditions for  $\phi$ -ing that are constitutive of what it is to undertake a  $\phi$ -ing. To say that the norm is constitutive is not to say that the norm has a different form, it is rather to say that the action that is specified in the correctness condition for  $\phi$ -ing is constitutive of what it is to  $\phi$ . To say that a norm is ‘constitutive’ is to make a claim about the relation between the correctness condition and the action that the norm governs. To say that a norm is constitutive is to say that it lays down a

correctness condition that is constitutive of the action governed. The norm for belief is the norm that governs doxastic deliberation:

(NB) Believing that p is correct only if p is true.

It is claimed by many key normativists (e.g. Boghossian 2003, 2005; Shah and Velleman 2005) that the norm of belief is a constitutive one; that is to say, the correctness condition is constitutive of the action governed by the norm.

It is important that we be clear about the activity that is allegedly governed by the norm of belief. The activity is ‘believing that p’. This must not be confused with the state of having the belief that p. Norms govern actions and the action involved in normativism about belief is the activity of doxastic deliberation. It is the activity of putting our concepts in order to arrive at that attitude to propositions that we call belief. One can organize one’s concepts into complexes for other propositional attitudes and, arguably, none of these involve a norm, let alone a constitutive norm. But, so the normativist suggests, the activity of organizing concepts into propositions to which one takes the attitude of belief is governed by a constitutive norm. That, at any rate, is the thesis in play. And it is that activity of organizing concepts so as to arrive at an attitude of belief that is supposedly norm-governed. Put simply, the thought is that you should organize concepts into the belief that p only if p is true. It would be a mistake to take the attitude of belief towards p, if p were false.

In the general terms I used above, to say that doxastic deliberation is norm-governed is to say that anyone deliberating about whether to believe that p is under a prescription to do this only if p. The prescription that flows from this is that undertaking doxastic deliberation correctly prescribes that they deliberate whether p. But now you might ask why does this show that by acknowledging the norm (NB) the agent has to not

only deliberate about whether to believe that  $p$ , but also to deliberate about  $p$ ? That is to say, why does mere acknowledgment that they are prescribed to undertake doxastic deliberation by reference to its normative correctness condition make it the case that will do this? Might it not still be the case that they fail to be motivated to follow the prescription that they acknowledge?<sup>6</sup> The claim that the norm is constitutive is supposed to close off this possibility.

Let us represent the structure of the issues here in the following way. We have some action of type  $\phi$  that is governed by a norm  $(N\phi)$ . The correctness condition that  $(N\phi)$  specifies for  $\phi$ -ings is some prescribed action  $\text{pres}(\phi)$ . In general, we have,

$$N(\phi): \phi\text{-ing is correct only if } \text{pres}(\phi)\text{-ing}$$

Suppose an agent acknowledges  $N(\phi)$ . If we consider promising under this format, then the relevant instance would be where  $\phi$  is ‘sincerely uttering ‘I promise to  $\psi$ ’ and  $\text{pres}(\phi)$  is ‘ $\psi$ -ing’, giving us:

Sincerely uttering ‘I promise to  $\psi$ ’ is correct only if the utterer  $\psi$ s

or, informally,

A subject who sincerely utters ‘I promise to  $\psi$ ’ is prescribed to  $\psi$

That, of course, illustrates the appeal of the apparent truism, for acknowledging that one is prescribed to  $\psi$  under such conditions does not of itself explain one’s  $\psi$ -ing.

The claim made by normativists about belief is that acknowledging  $(N\phi)$  is enough to explain why an agent deliberating about whether to believe that  $p$  is thereby in a position of deliberating about whether  $p$ , where  $\phi = \text{‘deliberate whether } p\text{’}$ ,  $\text{pres}(\phi) = \text{‘deliberate whether } p\text{’}$ . It is that

claim that appears to be unwarranted without ignoring the distinction between acknowledgment of a norm and being motivated to follow a norm. In the case of promising, the subject might lapse in their prescription. So why not in the case of the belief norm?

So how does the claim that the norm for belief is constitutive avoid this problem? To say that one action is constitutive of another is to say that undertaking one is not possible without thereby undertaking the other. Where the norm ( $N\phi$ ) governs  $\phi$ -ing and it is a constitutive norm, and the norm specifies undertaking  $\text{pres}(\phi)$  as the correctness condition for  $\phi$ -ing, this amounts to the claim that it is not possible to undertake  $\phi$ -ing without  $\text{pres}(\phi\text{-ing})$ . In summary, the constitutive norm is of the same form as others:

$N(\phi)$ :  $\phi$ -ing is correct only if  $\text{pres}(\phi\text{-ing})$

but what makes it constitutive is that  $\phi$ -ing and  $\text{pres}(\phi\text{-ing})$  are such that,

$\text{ConN}(\phi)$ :  $\neg\Diamond$  to undertake  $\phi$ -ing and not  $\text{pres}(\phi\text{-ing})$ .

There are many such constitutive norms that are trivial. For example, let  $\phi$  be ‘deliberate about whether to promise to meet a friend for coffee’ and  $\text{pres}(\phi)$  be ‘place oneself under an obligation to meet a friend for coffee’. While it is, of course, possible to promise to meet a friend for coffee and then not show up; it is not possible to make that promise without placing oneself under an obligation to show up. Placing oneself under an obligation is constitutive of promising. Someone who claimed to have made such a promise and then insisted that they were under no obligation to show up would be judged to have misunderstood what it is to make a promise. Placing oneself under the appropriate obligation is constitutive of making a promise.

This might make the notion of constitutive norms appear

trivial. In many cases they are, but nonetheless, it shows that there is a constitutive norm for promising that is of the above form. So the idea of a constitutive norm makes sense. What makes the constitutive norm for promising appear trivial is that fact that the correctness condition for the constitutive norm for promising, namely what the norm prescribes for correct promising, is itself prescriptive. The constitutive norm for promising unpacks the normative notion of correctness and expresses it in another guise, the guise of being under an obligation. The norm prescribes a correctness condition for promising – *pres(promising)* – the content of which is prescriptive. The correctness condition merely unpacks the original prescription and expresses it in alternative terms.

Now consider the norm for belief. The claim that this is a constitutive norm is the claim that the norm is of the above form where ‘ $\phi$ -ing’ = ‘deliberating whether to believe that  $p$ ’ and ‘*pres*( $\phi$ -ing)’ = deliberating whether  $p$ , and that the norm is constitutive means that

It is not possible to deliberate whether to believe that  $p$  and not deliberate whether  $p$ .

In this case, although the norm is of the same form as the constitutive norm for promising and supports the schema for an impossibility claim of the same form, the norm has a surprising result that differentiates it from the promising case. In the case of belief, the correctness condition is not a further prescription. In the case of promising, the constitutive norm prescribes a correctness condition for promising, but that condition is the undertaking of a further prescription – to place oneself under an obligation. In the case of belief, the constitutive norm prescribes a correctness condition for doxastic deliberation, but that condition does not have a prescriptive content. The condition is simply an action – deliberating whether the relevant proposition is true. In the promising case, the constitutive norm unpacks the prescribed correctness condition

with a further prescription. In the belief case, the correctness condition specifies an action – decide whether  $p$ . As such, in the belief case, the constitutive norm discharges the prescription governing  $\phi$ -ing by identifying the correctness condition with an action, not a further prescription to act. It is this discharge of the prescription in the correctness condition that makes it seem that the constitutive norm for belief ignores the distinction between acknowledging a norm (accepting a prescription) and being motivated to follow a norm (undertaking the action specified in the correctness condition). And it is this discharge of the prescription that makes the belief case look akin to the false claim about promising that an agent's promising to  $\psi$  explains why they  $\psi$ .

### **3. The constitutive norm of belief explains transparency**

The above explains the general form of the idea of a constitutive norm and shows that the constitutive norm that has been proposed for belief is of a form that can be identified in other cases, e.g., the constitutive norm for promising. What makes the constitutive norm for belief counter-intuitive is that it is a norm the correctness condition of which discharges the prescription and requires that the agent acts. Hence, where 'deliberating whether  $p$ ' is the correctness condition for 'deliberating whether to believe that  $p$ ', mere acknowledgment of the norm governing the latter suffices to explain the agent's undertaking the former. If this is right, it requires that we accept the impossibility claim that flows from acknowledging a constitutive norm.

Where a constitutive norm is of the form,  $\phi$ -ing is correct only if  $\text{pres}(\phi\text{-ing})$ , then it must be impossible to undertake  $\phi$ -ing without  $\text{pres}(\phi\text{-ing})$ . That is what it means for the norm to be constitutive. So the question about the belief norm comes down to this:

Q: Is it possible to deliberate whether to believe that p without deliberating whether p?

We need a further clarification prior to coming to a view on Q. If deliberating whether to believe that p is opaque, that is to say, if it is possible that one might deliberate whether to believe that p without realizing that is what one is doing, then it would be difficult to see how the impossibility claim could hold. However, in the debate about the normative explanation of transparency, it is clear that the constitutive nature of the truth norm for belief flows from what it is to understand an attitude as a belief<sup>7</sup>. The activity that is supposedly governed by the norm is the activity of forming a belief, putting one's concepts in order to arrive at the attitude to a proposition that we call belief. It is the activity of forming or managing the attitude of belief, but it is not the activity of forming the attitude of belief as such, for it need not be the case that the attitude of belief is always transparent to the subject. There are many attitudes of belief that we form without realizing what we are doing. Many are done automatically, below the radar of our awareness. That need not matter. Normativists about belief need claim only that it is the activity of forming the attitude of belief *conceived as such* that is governed by the norm. The norm is a requirement on understanding that the activity one is involved in is the activity of forming the attitude of belief. The norm follows from what it is to grasp the concept of belief, so it is only those cases of forming beliefs that involve the subject's deployment of the concept of belief that involve the truth norm. It is not forming beliefs as such that is governed by the norm; it is forming beliefs conceived as such that is norm-governed<sup>8</sup>.

This means that our question Q needs fine tuning. The question now is:

Q\* Is it possible to deliberate whether to take the attitude conceived as the belief to the proposition p without deliberating whether p?

The normativist claim is that grasp of the concept of belief requires acknowledgment of the truth norm

believing that p is correct only if p.

To say that this is constitutive is to say that what constitutes considering an activity as an activity of forming the attitude of belief to p is that one considers it subject to a correctness condition that one believes that p only if p. To consider whether to form the attitude of belief to p while remaining non-committal whether p does not make sense. That is the impossibility claim that the normativist makes at this point. It is analogous to the impossibility claim regarding the constitutive norm of promising: considering whether to promise to meet a friend while remaining non-committal whether one is under an obligation to meet them does not make sense. The cases are parallel.

This is not, however, to say that the truth norm is trivial in the way that the constitutive norm for promising is trivial. Quite the opposite. What the above argument shows is that the idea that the truth norm is constitutive for belief is a very powerful claim. It is not falsified by analogy with the ordinary non-constitutive norm for promising; it is structurally identical to the constitutive norm for promising. Like that, it entails an impossibility claim to the effect that, given the understanding of the activity governed by the norm, it is not possible to undertake that action without undertaking the action prescribed in the correctness condition. That is what makes the norm constitutive but, in the promising case, the correctness condition involves accepting a further prescription. In the belief case, the correctness condition discharges the prescription and requires an action. That is why, acknowledgment of a constitutive norm, in this case, explains an action. The phenomenon of the transparency of belief is the phenomenon that a subject undertaking a deliberation whether to believe that p is thereby immediately driven to undertake the deliberation whether p.

Undertaking the former activity leads transparently to the latter. The explanation for this provided by normativists is that the former activity is governed by a constitutive norm that prescribes the latter activity as the correctness condition for the former. The conclusion might be odd and striking, but if it is wrong, it is not because it ignores the apparent truism that acknowledgment of a norm can never explain an action. Indeed, the apparent truism is false. The move that matters in the argument to explain transparency on the basis of acknowledgment of the truth norm is the move that answers Q\* in the negative. The move that matters is the impossibility claim regarding what is involved in considering whether to take the attitude conceived as the belief to a proposition. Understanding the concept of belief makes it the case that it is impossible to take the attitude conceived as the belief to some proposition without thereby considering whether that proposition is true.

**To sum up:**

My key claim is that the widely accepted thesis in the literature that mere acknowledgment of a norm cannot as such explain the agent's undertaking what the norm prescribes, is not plausible in the case of *constitutive* norms. In order to substantiate the claim, I considered the constitutive norm of belief. I argued that mere acknowledgment of the norm can explain transparency of belief, that is, a subject who deliberates whether to believe that p thereby, in virtue of acknowledgment of the norm, deliberates whether p.

**Endnote**

1. Dealing with the issue in full details is extraneous to the purpose of this short paper, for more details on this, please see references like McDowell (1998), Wiggins (1991) and Smith (1994).

2. Dealing with the issue is extraneous to the purpose of this short paper, for more details on this please see references like Railton (1993) and Brink (1989)

3. To see another version of the thesis in the literature, see for example Smith's (1994) motivational internalism and (**reference is deleted for anonymity**).

4. For example, Shah and Velleman claim that transparency can be explained in this way, see (2005: 501): "when one deliberates whether to have an attitude conceived as a belief that  $p$ , one deliberates about an attitude to which one already applies the standard of being correct if and only if  $p$  is true, and so one is already committed to consider it with an eye exclusively to whether  $p$ ".

5. But to keep matters simple and to capture the intuitive sense of what seems key to norms for action, I propose to focus on the prohibitive sense of norm that is intuitively the dominant notion in (N). I do this by articulating the key intuition of (N) as:

(KIN) where C is the correctness condition for  $\phi$ -ing, if C does not obtain, it is not permissible to  $\phi$ .

This covers our formulation of the norm of belief which is a prohibitive norm (**reference deleted for anonymity**). This formulation also captures a key intuition for most norms for action: the norm specifies a condition the absence of which makes the action wrong. Where there is a correctness condition for an action, the failure of that condition provides circumstances under which the agent ought not to act. But that the agent ought not to  $\phi$  if C does not obtain, does not rule out their  $\phi$ -ing, for if they are not motivated to follow the norm, they might still  $\phi$ .

6. See Steglich-Petersen (2006) for a related objection against Shah & Velleman that exploits the apparent truism.

7. Shah and Velleman: "conceiving of an attitude as a belief ... entails ... applying to it the standard of being correct if and only if it is true" (2005: 497).

8. There are normativists who conceive of normativism as a thesis about the essence of belief, rather than about the concept of belief, e.g. McHugh & Whiting (2014). Our argument applies only to that form of normativism understood as a thesis about the concept of belief. This is consistent with the narrowing of the scope of normativism about belief that I advocate in this paper.

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