

Taking It Seriously: Norm-Relativity, Normativity of Meaning and Rationality

Recently Alexander Miller in his paper entitled „The Argument from Queerness and The Normativity of Meaning” referred to Mackie’s famous argument from queerness to see whether Mackie’s reasoning can be successfully applied in the dispute on semantic normativity. That is, Miller was interested in answering the question about whether there is a plausible analogue of Mackie’s argument which, when transposed to the philosophy of language, can conduct us to the conclusion that ascription of meaning as Error-Theorists claim, are systematically and uniformly false (Miller 2010:3). His answer was negative: argument from queerness cannot be a useful tool in the hands of opponents of semantic realists. I share Miller’s view on this matter, and I am not going to put into question the conclusion he reached. The question I am interested in is whether we can, as Miller suggests, build a successful argument against the thesis that meaning is normative using the blocks from Mackie’s argument. The premise under consideration derived from Mackie’s argument says: *If moral judgments are judgments ascribing reasons for action then moral judgments are judgments ascribing categorical reasons for action*. Miller writes that if in the sentence above we replace ‘moral’ by ‘semantic’ the thesis will have “no plausibility whatsoever” (Miller 2010:3). The last phrase indicates that according to Miller Mackie’s premise retains its plausibility *both* in moral and non-moral, semantic context. Miller’s argument, inspired by Mackie’s results, against semantic normativism is to work, granted that, as he believes, Mackie’s second premise is true. However, he has not shown that Mackie’s right in his second premise within the domain of morality, and without reasons supporting Mackie’s claim, we lack reasons to believe what he believes. To model one’s argument on the analogy with some other argument we first need to prove that the original argument is flawless.

My paper divides into three sections. In the first one I shall show what is wrong with Mackie’s second premise, and in effect what makes Miller’s strategy to fend off semantic normativism by means of the analogue of Mackie’s second premise ineffective. Here I shall offer my proposal of how to read the thesis about normativity of morality, which I later use to show similarities between the normativity of morality and the putative normativity of meaning. Specifically, I shall argue for rejecting the narrow understanding of normativity adopted by semantic antinormativists, and in its place suggest an alternative wide reading of normativity that much more fits our commonsensical views on the nature of prescriptivity. The main idea lying behind my understanding of normativity is that normativity does not primarily concern *what ought to be done* but rather *what is implied by having categorical reasons* for some behavior. Under the proposed view the putative normativity is primarily a phenomenon of thought, not of action. Briefly, on my account the thesis that meaning is normative commits one to nothing over and above *taking meaning seriously*, where this expression is to be read as a special and mostly tacit attitude towards the social fact that words or expressions have fixed correctness conditions. On my account from the speaker’s taking the meaning of the word ‘cat’ seriously nothing follows as to how she ought to *apply* the word ‘cat’ in some particular circumstances. The scope of commitment on the part of a normativist about meaning, as I shall show, restricts itself to the negative obligation of not switching the meaning of the word or expression upon will, and remains silent about what particular *use* of the meaning of some word or expression is linguistically valid or invalid. In the second, I am going to show that the core arguments put forward by semantic antinormativists work due to tacit acceptance of several assumptions that are either mistaken, or in principle inaccessible to *antinormativists*. To show the illusionary success of the semantic antinormativist’s point of view I shall scrutinize and respond to four main arguments that are brought against the thesis that meaning is normative. The first concerns the implication of the thesis that meaning is normative with regard to the obligation of speaking the truth. The second hinges on the difference between hypothetical imperatives and genuine *prima facie* obligations to the effect that norms of meaning generate mere hypothetical imperatives. The third admits that from the fact that meaningful expressions have correctness conditions one cannot derive the conclusion that meaning is intrinsically normative. And the fourth puts into question the idea of normative reading of a certain norm on the ground of this norm being ill-supported (Miller 2010). I shall argue that none of them is successful.

Finally, in section three, I shall argue in favor of a quasi-nihilistic thesis that even granted my argument in defense of the normativity of meaning, is correct, it *does not matter* much. ‘What does not matter’ is whether my or other better theoretical arguments for normativity of meaning are correct, if we are left with a strong pragmatic argument in favor of the normative thesis. The argument I have in mind is the argument from the rationality of preferences. And seems to be this kind of argument that even semantic antinormativists have no reason not to subscribe to.

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