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Normative Reason, Primitiveness, and the Argument for Semantic Normativism¹

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This paper sketches a particular line of criticism targeted at Scanlon's account of a normative reason, which is purported to kill two birds with one stone: to raise doubts about the plausibility of Scanlon's account of a normative reason and, next, to dismiss Scanlon's conception of what a normative reason is in the role of an argument for semantic normativism. Following Whiting I take semantic normativism to be the view, according to which linguistic meaning is intrinsically normative. The key argument for semantic normativism is that a word or expression has conditions for its correct use which *count*, or *speak in favour* of using it in certain ways and not in others. Specifically, it has immediate implications for how a subject should or may (not) employ that expression. I shall argue that if the favouring format of the analysis of a normative reason is not a particularly happy proposal in itself, then it supplies a superficial support for semantic normativism.

Keywords: counting in favour, normative reason, primitiveness, Scanlon, semantic normativism

0. Introduction

A popular and apparently innocent argument for the claim that meaning is normative says that what an expression or a word means provides the subject with some, though not necessarily decisive, reason to employ it in certain ways.² The same argument often takes the following form: that a word or expression has conditions for its correct use,

1 Earlier versions of this paper have been presented as talks at the following places: the University of Szczecin within Tadeusz Szubka's 'Master' Seminar in Analytic Philosophy (June 2013) and the University of Exeter during the 87th Joint Session of the Aristotelian Society and the Mind Association (July 2013). I thank the members of those audiences for their comments. Special thanks to Pekka Väyrynen for his correspondence and to two anonymous referees for their useful and extensive comments. The work on this paper was supported by the National Science Centre's grant 2012/04/S/HS1/00257 on the project 'Companions in Normativity'.

2 Daniel Whiting, *Is Meaning Fraught With Ought?*, 'Pacific Philosophical Quarterly' 2009 90, p. 537.

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normatively speaks in favour, or counts in favour of using it in certain ways. Among philosophers who ardently believe that what this argument holds is true in quite an obvious way are Daniel Whiting³ and Ralph Wedgwood.⁴ However, after several years of a hot debate⁵ about the plausibility of normativism in the philosophy of language and mind, it is now clear that semantic normativism in the form briefly characterized above is a controversial stance, to say the least.⁶ The main controversy revolves around easy and hasty inference from the premise that some semantic norm is in force (e.g. ‘cat’ means *cat* in English) to the conclusion about what a speaker ought (not) to do or has (not) reason (not) to do (she ought/has reason to apply the word ‘cat’ only to *cats*). Whiting and other (few) friends of semantic normativism believe that norms are magically imbued with reason-giving or prescriptive force, but most participants in the discussion reject this view. In this paper, I shall not be arguing that norm-normativism is an untenable position since many have shown this before.⁷ Instead, I would like to draw the reader’s attention to one particular element of Whiting’s argument for semantic normativism and argue that, notwithstanding our personal conviction about the credibility of the normativist claim in the philosophy of language and mind, the core argument for semantic normativism is unsuccessful, and its main flaw consists in appealing to the *implausible* conception of what a normative reason is. The conception of a normative reason being in play builds on the *favouring* relation account of a normative reason, and its origin traces back to Thomas Scanlon’s account of a normative reason presented in his seminal book *What We Owe to Each Other*.⁸

3 Op. cit.; Daniel Whiting, *The Normativity of Meaning Defended*, ‘Analysis’ 2007 67, pp. 130–140.

4 Ralph Wedgwood, *The Nature of Normativity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2007.

5 Cf. Anandi Hattiangadi, *Is Meaning Normative?* ‘Mind and Language’ 2006 21, pp. 220–240; Anandi Hattiangadi, *Oughts and Thoughts: Rule-Following and the Normativity of Content*, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2007; Anandi Hattiangadi, *Some More Thoughts on Semantic Oughts: A Reply to Daniel Whiting*, ‘Analysis’ 2009 69, pp. 54–63; Kathrin Glüer and Åsa Wikforss, *Against Normativity Again: Reply to Whiting*, (Unpublished manuscript) 2008; Kathrin Glüer and Åsa Wikforss, *Against Content Normativity*, ‘Mind’ 2009 118, pp. 31–70; Åsa Wikforss, *Semantic Normativity* ‘Philosophical Studies’ 2001 102, pp. 203–226; Alex Miller, *The Argument From Queerness and the Normativity of Meaning*, in *Truth, Existence and Realism*, ed. M. Grajner and A. Rami, Paderborn, Germany, Mentis 2010.

6 The thesis that meaning is normative entered the spotlight of philosophical attention due to Kripke’s seminal book on Wittgenstein: *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, Cambridge, MA, Cambridge University Press 1982, 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 makes room for the idea that what one means by an expression entails semantic normative reasons for the speaker to use the expression in a particular way, it is not worth to be taken seriously (cf. Åsa Wikforss. *Semantic Normativity*, p. 203).

7 Cf.: Georg Henrik von Wright, *Norm and Action. A Logical Inquiry*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London The Humanities Press, New York 1963; Hattiangadi, op. cit., 2006; 2007; 2009; Glüer and Wikforss op. cit., 2008; 2009; Wikforss op. cit., 2001; Miller op. cit., 2010; Peter Pagin, *Ideas for a Theory of Rules*, doctoral dissertation, University of Stockholm, 1987.

8 Thomas Scanlon, *What We Owe To Each Other*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press 1998.

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In this paper, I shall gesture towards an argument against the claim that meaning is normative in the reason-implying sense by means of attacking the Scanlonian account of a reason. The idea behind my argumentative strategy is quite simple: if the favouring relation account of a reason is the correct theory of a normative reason, then its applicability to the area of semantics should not be problematic. On the other hand, if we can demonstrate that this account of a reason fails *tout court*, the claim that the linguistic meaning of an expression provides us with any reason to employ it in a certain way will be untenable. Briefly, if the favouring relation account of a reason is a good theory of a normative reason, then, I contend, it is supposed to work when applied to any case at hand, be it from moral, epistemic, or semantic field.

The main problem with Scanlon's idea of a normative reason, as I shall show in section 1, is that it is not a conception of a *normative* reason at all. However, that objection is only seemingly fatal to Scanlon's account if the meaning of "normative reason" is seriously theory-driven, that is, if the meaning of the term "normative reason" is deeply inspired by a substantive conception of what normativity is all about that a particular philosopher at least tacitly accepts. Since I am of the general opinion that normative terms and expressions have their normative sense because a particular conception of what normative reason is is true, I do not find the first objection decisive. It may always be so that Scanlon's conception differs from the conception of his critics, in which case we land in the position that Stevenson once characterized "the disagreement in attitude."⁹ Where there is no possibility to establish, as a matter of fact, what normative reason is since normative reason is what your favourite conception says it is, the disagreement between two people using the expression "normative reason" with different meanings seems to be a disagreement in attitude, elicited by the feelings the term "normative reason" inspires in either of them. To those who think that Scanlon's idea of what normative reason is is the correct one, the acquaintance with an evaluative consideration produces the relevant pro attitude which is supposed to trigger the appropriate intention. On the other hand, those unpersuaded by the Scanlonian picture of normative reason when presented with an evaluative consideration, remain motivationally inert unless they recognize it as related to one of their aims. For that reason, in section 2 I consider the second and, in my view, devastating objection to Scanlon's account of what a normative reason is. Roughly, the objection in question is that Scanlon's conception does not meet its own standards. Specifically, it is built on the assumption that the idea of a normative reason is primitive while, in fact, something to the contrary is true. Were the concept of a reason primitive in

⁹ Charles L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language*, New Haven, Yale University Press 1944.

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the *proper* sense, that is, the sense that Scanlon needs it to be to make his account immune to the fatal objection, the fatal objection would be impossible. Or, at least, this is the view I shall be arguing for. My core argument in this section is essentially of the methodological character and boils down to the charge that Scanlon exploits the *wrong* sense of primitiveness—the one which is ineffective in ensuring that the notion of normative reason is primitive in the way quietist wants it to be. In section 3, I grant that Scanlon’s quietism about normative reasons is a defensible position, that is, a “normative reason” is “a consideration counting in favour of it.” Then, I briefly examine the pragmatics of normative discourse with the aim of showing that Scanlon’s conception simply fails to do justice to the practice. In particular, agents – or more precisely “minimally rational agents,” as Scanlon describes them—do not think of normative reasons the way Scanlon thinks they do. These minimally rational agents in everyday life are coders and decoders of messages transmitted within the sphere of social practice, which is globally end-oriented. Participants in social practices undertake actions with intention of achieving certain aims. But if it is the end that navigates the agent’s practical deliberation, the conception of a normative reason they make use of must somehow be end-related. In any case, this is the prediction to be made if Scanlon is right and the notion of normative reason is cognitively primitive, meaning that any minimally rational agent thinks of normative reasons in the very way described by Scanlon. However, a minimally *rational* agent cannot think that way because she cannot have an idea of normative reason that is unrelated to the idea of promoting the ends she happens to have. Differently put, the core objection discussed in section 3 is that Scanlon’s assumption regarding the agent’s minimal rationality does not square well with his overall idea of a normative reason. Finally, section 4 puts all things together, explaining concisely why the prospects of a particular argument for semantic normativism are so tightly connected with the success of the theory of normative reason that inspires the use of the term “reason.”

1. First objection to Scanlon’s account of normative reason

In the beginning, it should be stressed that the Scanlonian account of a normative reason¹⁰ has been the object of heavy criticisms in the recent years. The objections that have been raised against it revolve around the issues falling under three categories:

¹⁰ In passages where I simply report on Scanlon’s conception, I follow him in taking normative reason as a count noun—a normative reason. In critical parts, though, I speak of normative reason interpreted as a mass noun. The motivation for this distinction is explained in the main text as it plays an important role in my critical examination of Scanlon’s view.

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conceptual, metaphysical, and pragmatic. According to a complaint belonging to the first category of the charges, it is far from clear why we would think that the notion of a reason is a notion intrinsically normatively loaded. What specifically stands in need of explanation is why we would assume that whenever one encounters a reason, a normative relation between the considerations taken to be reason-giving and action or attitude is to follow straightforwardly. The objection as it stands does not deny that the notion of a reason can be normatively interpreted, what it denies is rather that 'a reason' allows for one and *only* normative reading.

The second objection touches the problem regarding the metaphysical status of the favouring relation, and recently it was meticulously discussed by Jonas Olson under the label of 'the extensional fallacy.'¹¹ Olson observes that the problem with this format of a normative reason account is that it generates theoretical commitments it cannot give a satisfactory account of. Briefly, if a reason is to be cashed out in terms of a favouring relation, then this favouring relation must be shown to be 'real,' meaning it must refer to something in the world. The problem with Scanlon's account is not that he understands the notion of a reason along the realistic lines, as something which has any natural fact as its extension, but rather that he leaves us in the dark when it comes to understanding what the *relation* of speaking in favour stands for.

Finally, the last objection takes as its target what is often regarded as perhaps the main advantage of Scanlon's theory of a reason, namely its intuitive attractiveness. In what follows, I shall develop a critical interpretation of Scanlon's account that falls under the conceptual and pragmatic sort of objections. In this section and in the next one, I analyse two sorts of drawbacks: one concerning the conceptual analysis of the notion in question and another closely related to it, which concerns choosing an unlucky substantive conception of a normative reason that badly serves Scanlon's theoretical purposes. In section 3, on a toy example I show how his account departs from the pragmatics of normative discourse.

Let me start with an explanation as to why I think that, despite appearances, Scanlon fails to deliver a conception of normative reason. It is uncontroversial across the board that normative reason is normative due to having the normative property, which is standardly interpreted in terms of the property of reason-giving or prescriptivity. That, in turn, implies that if one is intent on showing that a sort of entity enjoys the status of a normative reason, he or she must also show that there is more to normative reason than the property of being a reason. Alternatively, he or she must

11 Jonas Olson, *Reasons and The New Nonnaturalism*, in *Spheres of Reason*, ed. S. Robertson, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2009, pp. 164–182.

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convince us that there is no conceptual gap between the notion of a reason (count noun) and the notion of normative reason (mass noun). Scanlon seems to follow the second strategy and delivers the account of normative reason in which the term “normative reason” is an intrinsically normative term. But here the first problem arises: to provide a *conception* of a normative reason is, primarily, to answer the question about what makes a reason (count noun) *reason* (mass noun). Differently put, the main question to which a theorist of a normative reason should deliver an answer is what makes a property of being a reason (i.e. non-normative entity) have the *reason property*, i.e. something that truly implies normative consequences for not acting on it. The problem with Scanlon’s account is that he does not recognize the above difference, which in turn leads him to propose a weird definition of what a normative reason is: a reason for something is a consideration that provides a reason for it.¹² The weirdness in question resides in suggesting that what provides a reason provides a reason for it. This observation is either trivial or false. On one reading it is trivial since it simply states that a consideration that speaks in favour of something is that very thing. On another reading though, it is false. To be more precise, it is false when Scanlon’s slogan “a normative reason is a consideration speaking in favour of it” is treated as a definition of what a normative reason is. On the latter interpretation what we are told is that what merely provides a reason (i.e. consideration counting in favour) *is* a reason, but this cannot be so. What provides a reason does that very job due to having the normative property—the reason property. But the provider is something different from the thing provided. For that reason, Scanlon’s flag idea of what a normative reason is would be better interpreted as meaning that whatever entity (linguistic or non-linguistic)¹³ has the reason property, then *because* of having the very property in question, it possesses the power of implying normative consequences. Since the crucial distinction between what *makes* a reason speak normatively in favour of it (the reason property in my terminology) and what already has the reason-making property (a reason) has escaped Scanlon’s attention, his account of normative reason is not what it is. Again, if a normative reason is rather characterized as given than having the capacity *to give*, no wonder that it fails in generating normative consequences. If I am right and the consideration *counting in favour* itself (i.e. what is provided and not what provides) is impotent in producing normative

12 Similar worry has been recently articulated by John Broome in *Rationality through Reasoning*, Wiley, Blackwell 2013, p. 89.

13 Here I bracket the metaethical debate regarding what kind of entity normative reason is. Some philosophers think normative reasons are facts, other believe they are propositions. The ontological status of normative reason is of no interest to me in this paper.

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consequences of practical valence, Whiting's observation that the correctness conditions for the use of a word count in favour of using that word in certain ways and not other is too weak to be normatively prescriptive.¹⁴ To put the problem in terms of the introduced distinction between "what provides" and "what is the provider," the correctness conditions are merely what provides a reason *but* not what possesses the reason-making property itself, or is the genuine provider of normativity. An English word may have the lexical meaning it has, yet we are still justified in asking for an explanation as to why we should use it that particular way. Scanlon's account of a normative reason leaves us with no satisfactory answer to this sort of question. The only answer we can glean from his account is that *because*, say, 'cat' means *cat*, that very fact (if a semantic fact is a fact at all) alone is a normative reason to apply 'cat' to *cats* and not to *giraffes*. The problem with this answer though, is that semantic facts are norms describing which uses of a term are correct, and no norm barred from a substantive conception of normativity explaining what makes a norm normative in the reason-giving sense can do what semantic normativists think that the correctness conditions can do. Knowing the correctness conditions of an expression is like having a map: it will not tell you where you should go but can be of real help once you have made a decision to visit some place which is spotted on the map. So, if philosophers such as Whiting or Wedgwood (or the proponents of semantic normativism in general) are intent on making semantic normativism a plausible position *by means of* an argument that alludes to the notion of normative reason, they should choose wisely among the theories of normative reason that are available on the philosophical market. Specifically, it is advisable that in their search they should be guided by two particular questions: (i) is the meaning of "normative reason" grounded in a conception of normative reason at all?; and (ii) is the conception of normativity that inspires the meaning of "normative reason" a plausible one?

The general lesson to be derived from my considerations is that the notion of a normative reason is not an innocent notion, which implies that the meaning of "normative reason" is grounded in a substantive conception about the nature of normativity, as well as in a substantive conception of the role of reason in the ontology of normativity. Having said so, I contend, you cannot offer an *account* of what

¹⁴ Following von Wright, I distinguish between "prescriptivity" and "normativity." Prescriptivity is a formal property of an evaluative judgement whose prescriptive or imperative character is typically achieved by means of grammar (e.g. use of imperatives instead of declaratives). On the other hand, normativity is a substantial property of an evaluative judgment that cannot be read off the grammar alone. Now, to claim that a statement is "normatively prescriptive" is to claim not only that the statement in question does satisfy the formal requirement for representing the prescriptive content but also that the prescriptive content is normative since it is well-supported by reasons of genuine normative character. Cf. von Wright, op. cit.

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normative reason is unless you explain what the *source* of the reason property is, which in turn is something that you can do by resorting to a substantive theory of what normativity is all about. Consequently, accepting a particular idea of normative reason implies commitments to the relevant construal of normativity. But if that idea is seriously flawed in the first place, which is my main objection towards Scanlon's conception of a normative reason, using it *in* an argument for another and independently controversial claim seems to be a risky enterprise. Instead of lending more power to the proposed argument, it renders the argument unnecessarily weaker as it uncovers what has been taken for granted as question-begging. If "a consideration counting in favour of it" is *not* a definition of a "normative reason," then whatever consideration is such that enjoys that status, it is nothing but a consideration of the favouring character. But if that is the case, no easy conception-unmediated jump from it to normative reason is legitimate.

2. The second objection to Scanlon's account: preliminaries

The previous section was intended to justify my critical claim that Scanlon's account is *not* an account of a *normative reason* but, at best, a compelling presentation of the vehicle through which the reason property is transmitted—the property of being a reason. To deny that a conception of a normative reason is what it says it is seems to be the strongest possible objection one can raise against the conception. Given the objection is successful, one might be inclined to think that it is really fatal. However this need not be so. The criticized conception may still continue its existence because an adherent of it may disagree with *your*—the critic's—*conception* of what a normative reason is. And consequently, he or she may disagree with the requirements you put on a conception of a normative reason.¹⁵ Normativity is a vague concept, and "normativity" is a term of art—he or she might sensibly notice—which is another way of saying that the meaning of the term "normative reason" is *the* meaning a philosopher attaches to it on the ground of a theory of normativity he or she finds most attractive. In what follows, I shall proceed with this very assumption in the background. That is, I assume that *in light* of Scanlon's view, as well as in the view of adherents of his account of normative reason, the favouring relation account of a

¹⁵ Here, consequently, when I mean *normative reason*, a reason having the normative property (in the proposed terminology), I employ the noun "reason" construed as a mass noun. In this respect, I am not faithful to Scanlon's way of speaking. He does not attach much importance to the semantic difference between "reason" (mass noun) and a "reason" (count noun), and seems to play with both senses, which in my view introduces confusion.

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normative reason *is* an account of a normative reason—it answers all the questions any conception of a normative reason should answer. Nevertheless, as I shall demonstrate, it still fails badly in the end. And it fails *because* it does not stand up to its own standards. We are told that the idea of a normative reason is primitive. But this claim is not true. Were the concept of a reason primitive in the *relevant* sense, that is the sense that Scanlon needs to make his account immune to the fatal objection, the fatal objection would be impossible. More precisely put, I shall be arguing that Scanlon needs the concept of a normative reason to be *cognitively* primitive, that is, such that is immediately understandable in the suggested way in terms of the favouring relation by the “minimally rational agents” as he names them. Instead, however, he uses another sense of “primitiveness,” which is basicness or fundamentality (*conceptual* primitiveness in my terminology). This is not a happy idea, I contend, and for two reasons. The first reason is a methodological one: conceptual basicness or irreducibility plays no genuine role in Scanlon’s account. The second reason is substantial: it simply is not true that the concept of normative reason is irreducible to other concepts because Scanlon himself combines it from *two* elements: the idea of an explanation—a consideration counting in favour is supposed to explain why an agent stands in the normative relation to some action—and the idea of normativity—an explanation why the agent is standing in the normative relation to some action is to lead her quite automatically to act that way.¹⁶ In what follows, I shall focus on the neglected significance of the cognitive sense of primitiveness as I consider this objection to be more powerful than the latter. The reason why I think so is this: whereas an adherent of Scanlon’s conception may always protest against the charge regarding *masked* complexity of the concept of normative reason by denying that the stipulated decomposition is possible in light of her *favourite* conception of what normative reason is, she cannot so easily dismiss the objection that what she associates with the idea of normative reason is the idea of *semantic obviousness*, which would be justified if the notion of normative reason was *cognitively* primitive.

2.1. What primitiveness(es) are in play?

In the opening statement of the first chapter of his book *What We Owe to Each Other*, Scanlon writes the following:

¹⁶ A similar objection was raised by Broome in *Reasons*, in *Reason and Value: Themes from the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz*, eds. R. J. Wallace, P. Pettit, S. Scheffler, and M. Smith, Oxford, Oxford University Press 2004, pp. 28–55.

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I will take the idea of a reason as *primitive*. Any attempt to explain what it is to be a reason for something seems to me to lead back to the same idea: a consideration that counts in favor of it. “Counts in favor how?” one might ask. “By providing a reason for it” seems to be the only answer. So *I will presuppose the idea of a reason, and presuppose also that my readers are rational in the minimal but fundamental sense that I will presently explain.*¹⁷

In his further considerations, Scanlon does not elaborate on the feature of primitiveness that he ascribes to the notion of a reason, taking it probably as easily decipherable, or at least sufficiently suggestive to speak for itself. Here is a bit of evidence:

It may seem that in simply assuming the notion of a reason in a fully normative sense, and by assuming that *rational agents* are capable of making and being moved by judgments about reasons in this sense, I am begging an important question in contemporary debates about reasons. But *I do not think that these matters are really in dispute in the contemporary discussion of these issues.*¹⁸

Whenever normativists are confronted with the objection that the relation of “counting in favour” itself is not normative, they reply that the objection is odd and clashes with our “intuitions.”¹⁹ Or, they claim that the notion of normative reason is intrinsically normative, period. “If consideration counting in favour does *not* imply normative consequences, what else could do that job?”—they rhetorically ask. What is interesting to observe is that the *sense* of “primitiveness” that semantic normativists consider argumentatively attractive with regard to their own purposes, that is, primitiveness construed in terms of something uncontroversially true or obvious is not *the* primary sense of the term “primitiveness” that Scanlon makes use of on the very first page of his book. The semantic miscorrespondence between Scanlon’s use of the term “primitive” and semantic normativists’ use of the very same term is easy to understand. For a semantic normativist, in order to win his normativist claim, it is sufficient if he or she convinces the sceptic that there is no other meaning to the term “normative reason” than “consideration that counts in favour of it,” whereas Scanlon’s primary aim as a *theoretician* is different. He starts from a *metanormative* claim about

17 Scanlon op. cit., p. 17, emphasis added by JK.

18 Op. cit., p. 19, emphasis added by JK.

19 Whiting, op. cit., 2007; 2009; Wedgwood, op. cit.

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the general character of a *good* theory of normative reason, which in his case is essentially *quietist*. As I understand him, what he wants to say in the first place is that the fundamental significance of the concept of normative reason²⁰ (mass noun) manifests in that concept's multifaceted basicness. Now, in the quietist theory of normative reason the idea of basicness or fundamentality implies that the notion of normative reason has no *substantive* explanation. Applied to Scanlon's quietist view, it implies that there is no *explanation* of the meaning of "counting in favour." However, here we must be careful. If the above considerations of mine are correct, then it may look as if at the end of the day semantic normativists and Scanlon were using the term "primitive" in the same sense since the key message both parties want to convey boils down to the same content: there is no further answer to the question about the exact sense of "normative reason" because that sense is given only by "a consideration counting in favour of it." This opinion, I contend, is hasty and should be corrected. Though we may agree that the normativist *pragmatic* goal overlaps with Scanlon's *theoretical* goal, which is to undermine the intelligibility of looking for another substantive explanation of what normative reason is, normativists and Scanlon employ different *concepts* of primitiveness. Normativists make use of what I called the *cognitive sense* of "primitiveness" while Scanlon officially uses the *conceptual sense* that forms the core of his quietist stance in metaethics. But, as I shall show, the *conceptual sense* of "primitiveness" cannot be all if, as he writes next, minimally rational agents find the quietist idea of a normative reason obvious. If minimally rational agents (in Scanlon's sense) find Scanlon's explanation of the meaning of "normative reason" satisfactory, this must be so because these agents have a sort of a direct grasp of that concept's meaning. Otherwise, they would have no doubts about the sensibility of pursuing a further investigation into the proper sense of "a consideration counting in favour of it." Since minimally rational agents are cognitively satisfied with the given explanation, it is a mark that they have the same concept of normative reason, which in turn implies (falsely to my mind) that the concept of normative reason is a unity. Now, regardless of whether we find the *normative reason conceptual unity* claim plausible or not, it is clear that the *conceptual sense* of the term "primitiveness" is different from the *cognitive sense* of that term. And if I am right, Scanlon uses them both, which raises a new and powerful problem for the advocated account. The problem is no longer that he equivocates in his use of the term "primitive" (in the first quote he uses

20 As I wrote in section 1, Scanlon is blind to the distinction between the reason property, something that makes a reason normative and the property of being a reason, which is the bearer of the reason property. However, the charitable interpretation of the sense of his words is that *normativity* is associated with the reason-making property and not with a particular bearer of that property—a consideration counting in favor of it.

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the term “primitive” in the conceptual sense but in the second quote he employs the cognitive sense of “primitive”) but rather that his quietism about normative reason is unsupported. It is true that quietism in theory of normative reason goes well with the idea of conceptual primitiveness of the notion of normative reason; however, to be treated seriously it needs an argument for it. But *that* argument would have to demonstrate that the idea of normative reason is cognitively primitive. Alternatively, an argument that undermines the intelligibility of the search for justification for the quietist position would be needed. Scanlon delivers no argument for either of the two theses, which in turn suggests that he takes the quietist stance to be primitive or fundamental. Be it as it may, this suggestion itself begs an important question regarding the sense in which quietism is deemed primitive. Specifically, the idea of *metaethical primitivism* itself requires some explanation and motivation.

This observation ends the first part of the paper targeted at showing that first Scanlon and then his followers are too quick to use the concept of primitiveness as applied to the notion of normative reason. Scanlon’s mistake, as I think of it, is two-tier. First, he plays much with the sense of cognitive “primitiveness” he is openly silent about. Second, he fails to notice that quietism in the theory of normative reason, as in any *theory*, needs justification which is what a metaphysical claim about the irreducibility of some concept cannot do. That is, conceptual primitiveness of normative reason may be and, in fact, is an essential element of the quietist stance, but the element of a theory is not what renders the theory justified, especially if the element in question *alone*—conceptual basicness—is insufficient to get quietism about normative reason start off the ground. Notice that a concept may be irreducible to simpler concepts, but this in no way answers the question why the quietist theory of normative reason is the best theory we can get. Let us be clear on what the crux of my criticism is: quietism can be a position that builds upon the rejection of the need of substantive philosophical theorizing, but that does not undermine the sensibility of requiring a reason, even of pragmatic character, for thinking of quietism as of an attractive position. To put it differently, quietism about normative reason considered as a *theory of normative reason* on the ground of its definition needs no explanation, but quietism considered as the *best* theory of normative reason, i.e. quietism in metanormativity, definitely needs some. The worry I attempted to encourage in this section was that Scanlon wants to buy his quietism in the theory of normative reason “cheap” because he thinks that taking the notion of normative reason to be conceptually primitive is sufficient to make primitivism about normative reason well-supported. However, things seem not to be so. What speaks in favour of quietism about normative reason is what I called the cognitive primitiveness predictable of the notion of normative

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reason. However, you cannot get the latter sort of primitiveness from the former, that is, you cannot validly infer a conclusion about semantic obviousness of the notion of normative reason from the claim about conceptual irreducibility of that notion.

Semantic normativists, on the other hand, are guilty of putting undue credence in the argumentative shortcuts. They pick out a term “normative reason,” which is a deeply theory-laden term, and use it as if it was semantically innocent. Since it is not, their not fully considerate use of it weakens the argument they intended to make stronger.

3. Scanlon’s idea of normative reason and the pragmatics of normative discourse

In previous sections, I focused on downplaying Scanlon’s idea of a normative reason by arguing that thinking of it through the concept of primitiveness generates more worries than advantages. In this section, I shall continue my critical assessment of Scanlon’s account of a normative reason, but this time my strategy is different. I put aside my methodological and conceptual objections, and examine Scanlon’s account with the aim of checking how well it fares in doing justice to our everyday use of that notion. So, the objection I am about to raise is of pragmatic character. I shall be arguing that the advocated conception of normative reason simply does not do justice to everyday practice, which is bad if as many philosophers have convincingly claimed the notion of normative reason is the central workaday concept.²¹ Since my objection concerns the misunderstanding of the pragmatics of normative discourse, I shall heavily rely on examples.

For the moment forget my arguments from the previous sections and suppose that Scanlon is right when he claims that “a consideration counting in favour” is the correct definition of “normative reason.” However, the natural next question that presses to be answered is this: what exactly this “counting in favour” means? As I see it, there are two ways in which the idea of counting in favour might be further elaborated. These two ways amount to two interpretations that I call respectively ‘unsubstantive’ and ‘substantive’ one.

On the *unsubstantive* interpretation that something, precisely some consideration, counts in favour of some action or attitude means two things: 1) that something, more specifically, some fact entered the spotlight of one’s attention due to one’s direct

21 Cf. Broome, op. cit., 2013; Joseph Raz, *Engaging Reason: On the Theory of Value and Action*, Oxford University Press 1999; Mark Schroeder, *Slaves of the Passions*. Oxford University Press 2008.

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interest in that very thing or indirectly because of one's interest in something else when, for example, one unintentionally perceptually registers some object because one's attention has been focused on something else; and 2) that this fact being the target of one's direct or indirect attention makes an agent realize that various courses of action have opened up to him or her.

I consider the proposed interpretation of "counting in favour" under the label 'unsubstantive' because no straightforward practical consequences are implied by the fact that some object or the situation which the agent finds herself in exhibit features in virtue of which certain courses of action seem to make sense, or make more sense than other, or are more appropriate to undertake. The key idea standing behind the non-substantive interpretation of the notion of normative reason construed in terms of "consideration counting in favour" is that where no agential interest arises, facts (both non-evaluative and evaluative) remain mute, so to speak.

Let me now present the unsubstantive interpretation of the favouring relation by means of an example. Imagine that there is a plate with delicious strawberries on my kitchen table. Now, consider scenario number 1. Let us start the scenario by supposing some truths about me, including the following ones: I love strawberries, and this was me who bought these fruits because they looked delicious on the market. Having granted that, imagine next that I am staring at these fruits as they lay on the table, thinking about the approaching pleasure of turning a sweet strawberry in my mouth. The fact that these strawberries are delicious speaks in favour of my tasting them because, as my story suggests, I am fond of this kind of fruits, and the circumstances are favourable: the strawberries are within the reach of my hand. Now, consider scenario number 2. The scenery remains unchanged: a plate with yummy strawberries is on my kitchen table; however, certain other truths hold. It was not me who brought these fruits to my kitchen (who on Earth did that??), and I am not a fan of strawberries (assume that I prefer pears over any other fruits, and I am not a great amateur of fruits in general). In this case, the fact that yummy strawberries are on my kitchen table, as previously, speaks in favour of various courses of action on my part. I can pick up one and taste it, or I can give them all to my neighbour, to mention just two quick thoughts that occur to me. However, plenty of other options seem to be equally available. I can throw them away, if I suffer from some phobia of being poisoned, and I have no idea how these fruits have landed on my kitchen table. Or I may use them to kill someone who loves strawberries, or I may leave them and wait until I will get some idea about what to do with them.

The point of these examples is to suggest that "counting in favour" need not automatically bear into mind a normative relation that is of relevant practical

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consequences. That certain evaluative fact obtains, such as that strawberries are delicious, alone speaks neither in favour of tasting them, nor in favour of offering them to one's neighbour. In fact, it speaks in favour of *no* particular course of action at all unless we take into account other factors out of which the most important is the agent's aim. Having a clear aim navigates one's attention to the ways of attaining it, and hence it helps to transform facts of no normative significance into those with the normative relevance. In any case, it is natural to think that issues regarding what is *worth* doing appear in the horizon of agent's deliberation once some aim of her has been settled.

Now, the easiest way of changing the unsubstantive (in the sense explained above) interpretation of the "counting in favour" relation into the substantive interpretation of normatively practical significance is by appealing to some theory of normative reason that underpins the proper meaning of "counting in favour." If we decide on that move, the fact that delicious strawberries are on my kitchen table starts, so to speak, to count in favour of certain courses of action, for example for tasting them because there is something good either about these particular strawberries (they are exceptionally yummy), or about strawberries in general (they contain elements that are beneficial for our health), or about some activity that the presence of delicious strawberries invites (eating tasty, or tasty and healthy stuff). The problem with the two suggested readings of "counting in favour" for the plausibility of Scanlon's account is that the first and unsubstantive one is not necessarily normative because the only information we can directly glean from some particular fact (be it evaluative or not), isolated from the framework of one's aim or intention, is that certain options are available. If delicious strawberries are on my kitchen table, then that fact itself quite innocently speaks for various courses of action, where "counting in favour" masks an obvious observation that it is in my capacity to do something with them. On the other hand though, the second and substantive interpretation shows that the concept of normative reason is not primitive (in the relevant sense of cognitive primitiveness I discussed in section 2) because it is deeply rooted in some value-based theory of normativity. This last observation, when applied to our example, suggests that the presence of delicious strawberries on my kitchen table counts in favour of some action (thus constitutes normative reason) of mine because there is something good or attractive about these strawberries, strawberries in general, or my eating delicious and healthy stuff. Now, if we assume that reasons are normative because they are grounded in some value-based theory of normativity that is the correct account of normativity, then it will turn out that the 'thing' that makes it the case that some fact gains the status of the *normative* favourer is not that fact itself but rather some substantive theory of normativity, according to which normativity is intrinsically connected to

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value. In accordance with the latter suggestion, there is normative reason for me to pick up and taste a delicious strawberry because some value-based theory of normativity is deemed correct. Properly articulated, the idea runs as follows: there is normative reason to taste delicious stuff because evaluative properties of an object are generally taken to be the bearers of normativity.

Inscribing normativity into a concept on the basis of one's favourite theory of normativity and one's favourite metaethical account of the meaning of normative terms is not a philosophical crime insofar as one is able to live up to the exigencies that such a position implies, one of which is that cognitive primitiveness ascribed to the idea of normative reason is no longer an available option.

If the above considerations are not mistaken, it looks like the only way of disambiguating the sense of the term "counting in favour" is by explicit alluding to a substantive theory of normativity that drives one's use of the term "normative reason." Under that proposal, whether "counting in favour" is to be better construed in unsubstantive or substantive fashion is relative to the account of normativity against which it is assessed. If you are a robust normative realist, then it strikes you to be *uncontroversially* true that "consideration counting in favour" directly implies normative consequences of practical valence. However, if you are a hypotheticalist about normative reasons, then you are going to claim that the fact that strawberries are healthy and tasty is not sufficient to elicit any intention in you. If the argument from ambiguity of "consideration counting in favour" works, it successfully shows that Scanlon's idea of a normative reason built upon the implicit assumption of the semantic obviousness of the notion "normative reason" is indefensible. To put it simply, if the question regarding the exact sense of "counting in favour" makes perfect sense, as I think it does, quietism about normative reason is untenable. And it is untenable because, as I tried to show, it hangs upon the incredible idea that the concept of normative reason is cognitively primitive—implying that we all agree upon the meaning of "normative reason." However, were this optimism justified, one of the hottest debates in metaethics regarding the nature of normative reason would have come to an end. But this scenario strikes me as hardly probable.

4. Putting things together

The aim of this paper is to encourage the worry that semantic normativists have badly chosen the argument for the claim that the meaning of a word or an expression is inherently normative, if the argument under consideration uses the Scanlonian sense of a normative reason.

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Recall the claim in the discussed argument for semantic normativism in the form articulated by Daniel Whiting: that a word or an expression has conditions for its correct use, *speaks in favour* or *counts in favour* of using it in a certain way. In my critical examination of that claim I focused on what I consider as the very ground of the argument, namely Scanlon's account of a normative reason. According to Scanlon, that the favouring relation obtains is sufficient to imply normative practical consequences for what an agent has a normative reason to do. Moreover, that the favouring relation obtains and is the source of a normative claim on an agent is something that Scanlon considers as requiring no explanation. Things simply are that way that when you register certain evaluative fact being the case, such as that strawberries are yummy, or that resort is pleasant, or that it is correct in English to apply the term 'cat' to *cats* and not *giraffes*, you automatically conceive this very fact as a normative reason for you to act in the relevant way. My core objection to the above intrinsically normative picture of a reason was that neither truths, nor evaluative truths are sufficient to generate normative consequences of practical valence in the case of a lack of one's interest in questions to which the relevant truths provide an answer. What I have attempted to do in this short paper was to justify the claim that Scanlon's account of a normative reason is not a good (if any at all) account of *normative* reasons. My criticism consisted of three prongs. The first prong revolved around the idea that Scanlon blends together the source of normativity—the reason property—with the bearer of the normative property—the property of being a reason. Neglecting the distinction in question leads him to define a “normative reason” in terms of something that itself lacks the reason property. Consideration alone is what provides a normative reason and not a thing that itself is normative. The second prong explored the credibility of Scanlon's conception from the internal perspective of the proposed account. Here I argued that his quietism about normative reasons is unjustified as, in order to be defensible, the concept of a normative reason would have to be cognitively primitive, but it is not. Finally, the third prong raised the worry that Scanlon's idea of what a normative reason is simply does not do justice to the pragmatics of the normative discourse. In a nutshell, minimally rational agents—*because* they are rational—are not moved to act simply on the ground of discovering the evaluative property of a thing or a situation. Rather it is more plausible to think that somehow rational agents treat some considerations to be normatively significant once they have managed to relate them to an end they want to promote. Scanlon may disagree with me that the end-related idea of a normative reason is the most plausible one, but then he owes us an argument in favour of his own idea. In my view, he cannot provide a successful one. The argument that would make his conception of a normative reason hold firm requires an argument that cannot

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be delivered, namely the argument for the plausibility of the cognitive primitiveness of the notion of a normative reason.

If my criticism of the Scanlonian conception is well-taken, then it lends support to the general claim that no consideration alone is capable to generate normative consequences of practical valence. So if you are a normativist of a kind, better do not employ Scanlon's sense of a "normative reason" to win your claim.

Abstrakt

Racja normatywna, pierwotność i argument na rzecz normatywizmu semantycznego

W artykule zarysowana została krytyka wymierzona przeciwko koncepcji racji normatywnej T. M. Scanlona, której celem jest zarówno podanie w wątpliwość wiarygodności ujęcia racji normatywnej Scanlona, jak i odrzucenie Scanlonowskiej koncepcji racji normatywnej w roli argumentu na rzecz normatywizmu semantycznego. Idąc za Whitingiem, normatywizm semantyczny rozumiem jako pogląd, według którego znaczenie językowe jest wewnętrznie normatywne. Kluczowy argument za normatywizmem semantycznym głosi, że słowo lub wyrażenie posiada warunki swojego poprawnego użycia, które *przemawiają na rzecz* używania go w określony – taki, a nie inny – sposób. W szczególności posiada ono bezpośrednie konsekwencje dla sposobu, w który podmiot powinien lub może używać tego wyrażenia. Będę argumentować, że jeśli ten kształt analizy racji normatywnej nie stanowi sam w sobie udanej propozycji, to dostarcza jedynie powierzchownego wsparcia normatywizmowi semantycznemu.

Słowa kluczowe: przemawiać na rzecz, racja normatywna, pierwotność, Scanlon, normatywizm semantyczny