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Rules Regresses

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Is the content of our thoughts determined by norms such as 'if I know that p, then I ought to believe that p'? Glüer and Wikforss (2009a) set forth a regress argument for a negative answer. The aim of this paper is to clarify and evaluate this argument. In the first part I show how it (just like an argument from Wittgenstein (1953)) can be taken as an instance of an argument schema. In the second part, I evaluate the relevant premises in some detail, and argue that the dialectical situation is slightly more complicated than a 'dilemma of regress and idleness', as Glüer and Wikforss have dubbed it.

I Introduction

Content Determining Normativism is the following thesis:

> CD The content of a subject S's thoughts is determined by the norms governing S's reasoning. (Glüer and Wikforss, 2009a, p. 54)

Glüer and Wikforss (henceforth G&W) point out that CD Normativism is to be distinguished from Content Engendered Normativism on the one hand, i.e. the thesis that the content of our thoughts engenders certain norms, and from meaning Determining/Engendered Normativism on the other, i.e. the same thesis in terms of meaning rather than content. Yet, in the following I shall

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focus on CD Normativism only. Also, there is a strong and a weak version of CD depending on whether the determination by norms is all there is to content or whether this plays only a partial role. Following Glüer and Wikforss (2009a, p. 54), I shall consider CD in general.

CD is about what norms? Here are two candidates from Glüer (2009b, §3.2); note that I have put the obligations in the consequent, and that throughout the paper I assume that p and q are to be substituted for sentences):

- If I know that p, then I ought to believe that p.
- If I believe that p and that if p then q, then I ought to believe that q.

One of the main aims of G&W's 'Against Content Normativity' (2009a) is to disprove CD. Their strategy is as follows: "We are going to suggest that there cannot be such rules." (2009a, p. 54) In particular, some regress arguments for this position are on offer: one concerning a regress of motivations, one concerning a regress of contents, and one concerning a regress of implicit norms. In the following, I will focus on the second case, viz. the regress argument of contents, and set the others aside. I have selected this case, because it is immediately directed against CD Normativism (cf. Glüer and Wikforss, 2009a, p. 56). By contrast, the two other regress arguments are directed against slightly different claims (e.g. that belief formation is motivated by rules), and it remains to be seen how CD Normativism and possibly other positions are exactly committed to these.

Here is the relevant text at length:

> As we said, all CD Normativists are committed to the following: [CD, cited above]. This holds for S's beliefs quite as well as for any other of S's intentional states, including S's intentions and other pro-attitudes. Thus, already the requirement of a pro-attitude toward what is in accordance with a rule R clearly leads into a rule-regress for CD Normativism. Let us call this the *regress of contents*. Its moral is the following: CD Normativism cannot, on pain of vicious regress, construe any kind of intentional mental state as a condition on rule-following. (Glüer and Wikforss, 2009a, p.57)[2]

[2] For a version of this argument cf. (Boghossian, 2008, p.487).

The central aim of this paper is to clarify this argument. What exactly is its conclusion? What premises are responsible for it? As it is a regress argument, it is likely that it shares the same kind of premises and inferences with a group of other regress arguments. So in the first part of this paper I set forth an argument schema, and show how G&W's argument can be taken as an instance of that schema (§II). In the second part, I evaluate the relevant premises in some detail and see how the argument can be used against CD Normativism (§III). (Note that any other argument for or against CD Normativism will be left unaddressed.)

II Reconstruction

Consider the following argument schema.

Regress Schema

1. For any item x of type i, S can φ x only if S can ψ x.

2. For any item x of type i, S can ψ x only if there is a new item y of type i and S can φ y.

3. For any item x of type i, S can φ x only if S can φ an infinity of items of type i. (1, 2; TRA, ICI)

4. S cannot φ an infinity of items of type i.

5. For any item x of type i, S cannot φ x. (3, 4; MT)

Throughout this paper, 'S' is to be replaced with an arbitrary subject, 'items of type i' with a specific domain, and the Greek letters φ, ψ with predicates which express actions involving the items in that domain. The inference rules are abbreviated as follows: TRA = Transitivity, ICI = Conjunction Introduction in the Implicatum, MT = Modus Tollens. There are three premises, i.e. lines (1), (2), (4), and two inferences, i.e. lines (3) and (5). Line (3) is the infinite regress. An alternative for this would be

3*. For any item x of type i, S can φ x only if [S can φ another item y, and S can φ yet another item z, and S can φ yet another item v, etc.].

It might be disputable whether you can reach infinity by Conjunction, but important for the argument is that the number of items exceeds S's capacity.

I would like to stress that I do not think that this schema is the most basic argument schema for regress arguments, because there are at least two others (see Wieland, In preparation). The reason why I have chosen for the above schema in this case is that G&W seem to have a conclusion of the form 'S cannot φ any item x of type i' in mind. This is explicit in the motivations case: "Belief formation motivated by rules turns out to be impossible." (Glüer and Wikforss, 2009a, p. 56)

There are many regress arguments in philosophy (ranging from epistemology to ethics), and it would be worth exploring which of them can be stated in terms of the above schema. Compare some well-known sceptical conclusions: S cannot justify any proposition or norm; S cannot resolve the liar paradox; S cannot demonstrate that B follows from A and if A then B; S cannot fix the reference of 'rabbit'. In the following I provide an instance of the schema from Wittgenstein (1953, §§185-6).

Instance 1: Rules

1. For any linguistic item x, S can fix the correct use of x only if S can use a rule to fix the correct use of x.

2. For any linguistic item x, S can use a rule y to fix the correct use of x only if S can fix the correct use of y.

3. For any linguistic item x, S can fix the correct use of x only if S can fix the correct use of an infinity of rules. (1, 2)

4. S cannot fix the correct use of an infinity of rules.

5. For any linguistic item x, S cannot fix the correct use of x. (3, 4)

Here is an example of the regress in line (3):

- S can fix the correct use of '+2' only if S can appeal to a rule such as 'for all numbers n, one ought to write n+2'.

- S can use 'for all numbers n, one ought to write n+2' to fix the correct use of '+2' only if S can fix the correct use 'for all numbers n, one ought to write n+2'.

- S can fix the correct use of 'for all numbers n, one ought to write n+2' only if S can appeal to a rule such as 'for any occurrence of 'all', the meaning of 'all' does not shift after 1000'.

etc.

This regress, or at least a version of it, is sometimes called a regress of interpretations (e.g. Glüer and Wikforss, 2009a, p. 58). The reason seems to be that each rule can be seen as an interpretation of previous rule, and not that fixing the correct use of something would be a form of interpretation. In particular, it is Wittgenstein's pupil who has to interpret the expression '+2', yet the argument above is about the teacher's abilities.

In the following, I use the argument schema to reconstruct G&W's regress argument against CD Normativism. (Note that I will use an extra premise, but as this premise just states one extra necessary condition, this does not affect the general form of the argument.)

Instance 2: Contents

1. For any thought x, S can think x only if S can be guided by a rule.

2. For any rule x, S can be guided by x only if S can have a pro-attitude towards what is in accordance with x.

3. For any rule x, S can have a pro-attitude towards what is in accordance with x only if S can think that p is in accordance with x.

4. For any thought x, S can think x only if S can think an infinity of thoughts. (1, 2, 3)

5. S cannot think an infinity of thoughts.

6. S cannot think any thought. (4, 5)

Alternatives for lines (1), (2) and (3) can be obtained via

- For any item x of type i, S can $\varphi\ x$ only if S can $\psi\ x =$ in order to $\varphi\ x$, S has to $\psi\ x$.

This would give us the following (which are universally quantified versions of the premises suggested to me by Åsa Wikforss):

1*. For any thought x, in order to think x, S has to be guided by a rule.

2*. For any rule x, in order to be guided by x, S has to have a pro-attitude towards what is in accordance with x.

3*. For any rule x, in order to have a pro-attitude towards what is in accordance with x, S has to think that p is in accordance with x.

Now the overall dialectic of the argument is as follows. CD Normativism is to be committed to premise (1), and if the rest of the premises is equally in place, then that view would entail that we cannot think any thought. As this is an absurd result, CD Normativism has to go.

III Evaluation

The reconstructed regress of contents argument from the previous section has four premises. If we assume that all inferences are valid, then there are four options to resist it, viz. by denying one of the premises. This is interesting because G&W suggest that there is only one option (viz. idleness) next to the regress. I will turn to this at the end of this section. First I go through the premises one by one.

Premise (1): For any thought x, S can think x only if S can be guided by a rule.

Here, the issue is not whether this is plausible in general, but only whether CD Normativism is committed to it (rather than any other position). It seems clear that this premise follows from CD (see §I) as long as CD is read fully unrestricted: the content of *all of* a subject S's thoughts is determined by the norms governing S's reasoning.

As a consequence, CD Normativism may resist the premise by holding that the content of many, but not all, of our thoughts is

determined by rules. Yet, this restriction strategy would need proper motivation (just like restriction strategies to resolve paradoxes, for example). In this case it is to be shown why there would be two sorts of thoughts, viz. those for which the content is determined by rules, and those where this is not the case.

Premise (2):: For any rule x, S can be guided by x only if S can have a pro-attitude towards what is in accordance with x.

If any rule is to determine the content of my thoughts, then the idea of this premise is not that I am required to hold firm or even true beliefs about what is in accordance with the rule and what is not, but I minimally need to have a pro-attitude towards that. This means, simply put, that I should want what is in accordance with the rule. Compare the actions case. If the rule 'for any number n, I ought to write n+2' plays a role in the course of my actions, then I at least want what is in accordance with this rule. Yet, why not suppose, as some readers of Wittgenstein have suggested (e.g. (Wright, 2007, pp. 496-8)), that the rules might remain implicit and that we may follow them 'blindly' without such pro-attitudes?

G&W's argument here is that pro-attitudes are needed to distinguish rule-determined content from content which is merely in accordance with a rule (Glüer and Wikforss (2009a, pp. 57-9), cf. Glüer and Pagin (1999, p. 208), Boghossian (2008, pp. 480ff).) Take the actions case again. If I have not at least a pro-attitude towards what is in accordance with 'for any number n, I ought to write n+2', then on what grounds can it be said that this rule guides me whatever I do? Even in the case where I write the right series of numbers, then my pro-attitude is needed to distinguish my rule-guided behaviour from behaviour which is merely in accordance with the rule, i.e. from regular, mechanical behaviour or behaviour that is correct only by accident.

Also: if rules remain implicit, and do not fulfill the roles just outlined (viz. guide our actions, determine our thoughts), then it is not clear what their role is. That is, in that case the rules are presumably idle (Glüer and Wikforss (2009a, p. 60), they refer here to Quine (1979, p.106).)

Premise (3): For any rule x, S can have a pro-attitude towards what is in accordance with x only if S can think that p is in accordance

with x.

The basic idea of this premise is that pro-attitudes involve thoughts (viz. mental content), and so one cannot have a certain pro-attitude without thinking the corresponding thought. In the following I will suggest that it is plausible that intentional states in general involve thoughts, but that the connection between pro-attitudes and thoughts comes with a complication.

Intentional states in general are states where someone is mentally directed at other states. Familiar intentional states are belief possessions, i.e. states of the form 'S's believing that p' where S is directed at the believed state that p. Furthermore, if S believes that p, then it is plausible to suppose that sometimes S thinks the thought that p as well. So at least some intentional states involve mental content, and the question is whether this holds for pro-attitudes as well.

The complication is that it is not easy to see what thoughts might be involved with pro-attitudes towards 'what is in accordance with R'. There is a possibility to get thoughts, but then we have to suppose that these pro-attitudes involve practical inferences of the following format (varieties of these inferences are described in Glüer and Pagin (1999, §1, esp. p. 217):

PA_1 I want what is in accordance with R.

B That p in accordance with R.

PA_2 Hence, I want that p.

The first premise is the initial pro-attitude (PA_1), the second premise is a belief (B; again: this belief need not be true or whatever), and the conclusion is the final pro-attitude (PA_2). Only the latter pro-attitude is an intentional state of the form 'S's wanting that p' where S is directed at the approved state that p. Furthermore, both B and PA_2, but not PA_1, may involve a thought. Believing that p is in accordance with R may involve the thought that p in accordance with R, and wanting that p may involve the thought that p. Also, 'that p' might be general or rather specific. For example, if the rule is 'for any number n, I ought to write n+2', then 'that p' might be general or rather specific:

- that I ought to write n+2 just after n, for any number n;

- that I ought to should write 1002 just after 1000.

Note that I used the thoughts involved with B for premise (3), but the thoughts involved with PA_2 will do as well. In any case, my point is that pro-attitudes involve thoughts (and (3) holds) only if S makes such practical inferences (or at least holds such beliefs).

Yet, why would the CD Normativist not just grant that pro-attitudes are indeed required for rule-following (premise 2), but deny that pro-attitudes involve mental content (premise 3), so that the regress argument is stopped? Perhaps this route is unavailable, because if pro-attitudes would not involve thoughts (with general or specific content), then there is no use to appeal to them to explain why a thought is determined by a certain rule, rather than another rule. Compare the action case once more: "By virtue of what is it true that I use the '+' sign according to the rule for addition and not some other rule?" (Boghossian, 2008, p. 491)

Furthermore, if the CD Normativist bites the bullet in this, then it reduces to the view that content is determined by rules irrespective of any differentiation among the latter. If this is unacceptable, then the motivation of the premises so far can be summarized as follows. Pro-attitudes are needed to explain why thoughts are determined by rules (rather than not), and further thoughts (related to those pro-attitudes) are needed to explain why thoughts are determined by certain rules (rather than others).

Premise (5): S cannot think an infinity of thoughts.

If this holds, then S cannot do what is required to entertain t_1, and so cannot entertain t_1 (or any other thought). But does it hold? Consider the list of thoughts that S should be able to think:

- the thought that p_1 is in accordance with R_1;
- the thought that p_2 is in accordance with R_2;
- the thought that p_3 is in accordance with R_3;

etc.

CD Normativism is not committed to holding that the content of each thought is determined by a different rule (moreover, that would be rather surprising). So, if the rules R_1, R_2, R_3, etc. could just

be the same, one may wonder whether the thoughts just listed are not just the same as well. Moreover, if they are not distinct, then it is not obvious that S cannot have 'so many' of them (and hence it would not be established that S is unable to entertain any thought in the first place).

Yet, it seems they must be distinct after all. The reason is that the content of each thought t_n is determined only thanks to the content of a further thought t_{n+1}, viz. the one that is involved in one's pro-attitude towards the rule which determines the content of tn (cf. Fig. 1). Simply put, if the thoughts were identical, they had to play a role in the determination of their own content. If this is absurd, then the thoughts must all be distinct.

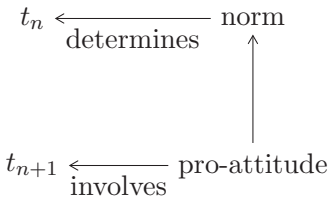

Figure 1:

Summing up, the CD Normativist has in principle the following options:

(i) reject (1) by defending that the content of only one group of thoughts is determined by norms;

(ii) reject (2) by defending that content might be determined by norms even if we do not have pro-attitudes towards the latter;

(iii) reject (3) by defending that the relevant pro-attitudes do not involve mental content;

(iv) reject (5) by defending that it is not impossible to entertain an infinity of thoughts (e.g. if they are identical);

(v) accept the whole argument and the sceptic conclusion (6) that no-one is able to think.

Not all of these options are equally worth exploring, but my main point is that the dialectical situation is somewhat more complicated

than a 'dilemma of regress and idleness' (Glüer and Wikforss, 2009a, p. 54). In particular, idleness is only related to one of the five options listed above, viz. (ii). Even if all options are carefully dismissed, the situation for CD Normativism is one of five implausible horns, rather than two.

IV Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to clarify G&W regress argument against CD Normativism. I employed an argument schema and showed how the argument can be spelled out in terms of it (§II). Also, I evaluated its premises in some detail, and argued why the situation is slightly more complicated than a dilemma between two implausible horns (§III). Let me conclude with three general remarks.

First, as was already clear from Glüer and Wikforss (2009a), 'the' regress of rules does not exist. In this paper I spelled out two rule regresses, and the Appendix hosts two more. (Another rule regress which is worth mentioning is the well-known Kripke (1982, ch. 2).)

Second, regress arguments are strong arguments, not because they cannot be resisted, but because they can be used against substantive positions like CD Normativism.

Third, argument schemes such as the one I presented in this paper for a group of regress arguments are useful for at least the following four, related reasons. On the basis of the schema it can be seen (i) what specific arguments have in common; (ii) what their conclusions are, and what not; (iii) which premises are responsible for those conclusions, and which not; and (iv) which options are available to resist the arguments, i.e. which premises may be attacked.

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Appendix

In the following I provide two more instances of the argument schema presented in §II in order to illustrate its applicability. The first is from Glüer and Wikforss (2009a, pp. 55-6).

Instance 3: Motivations

1. For any belief x, if S can form x only if S can be motivated by a rule.
2. For any belief x, S can be motivated by a rule only if S can form a belief y that to believe that p is in accordance with x.
3. For any belief x, if S can form x only if S can form an infinity of beliefs. (1, 2)
4. S cannot form an infinity of beliefs.
5. S cannot form any belief. (3, 4)

Glüer and Wikforss (2009a, pp.55, fn. 55) note that this motivations' regress is similar to the one by Carroll (1895). I am not sure. I take the moral of Carroll's regress to be that Achilles never demonstrates that the Tortoise is forced to accept a conclusion if he adds extra premises of the form 'if the foregoing premises are true, the conclusion must be true' to the argument. No such problem seems at play in G&W's case. The version of Boghossian, different from any of the arguments discussed above, is closer to the Carroll case (as he himself acknowledges):

> If on the Intention View, rule-following always requires inference; and if inference is itself always a form of rule-following, then the Intention View would look to be hopeless: under its terms, following any rule requires embarking upon a vicious infinite regress in which we succeed in following no rule. (Boghossian, 2008, pp. 492-3)

My reconstruction:

Instance 4: Inferences

1. For any rule x, if S can follow x only if S can infer what x calls for in the circumstances in which S finds herself.

2. For any rule x, S can infer what x calls for only if S can follow another rule y (i.e. 'from x and the circumstances, one ought to infer such and such').

3. For any rule x, if S can follow x only if S can follow an infinity of rules. (1, 2)

4. S cannot follow an infinity of rules.

5. S cannot follow any rule. (3, 4)

Note: G&W do not buy this one, and reject (2). Specifically, they deny that inference involves following a rule (2009a, p.57, fn. 58); (2010, pp.162-4).