

## Essentially but not Exhaustively Rule-Governed

One way to make a case for the normativity of content is by claiming that thought is essentially rule-governed. This strategy is widely recognized in the literature and is the subject of much discussion. In this paper I will address one particular type of objection mounted against it (call it *the regress objection*): thought cannot be essentially rule-governed because in such a case every thought would require the thinker to follow an infinite number of rules.

The clearest instance of such an objection is found in a paper by Kathrin Glüer and Åsa Wikforss [Glüer & Wikforss, 2009]. The same concern is also present elsewhere in the literature [Boghossian, 1989, 2005, 2008], and I also address in the paper.

The objection Glüer and Wikforss raise is intended to show that the CD thesis cannot be good.

- CD. The content of a subject S's thought is determined by the rules governing S's reasoning.

Being so general a thesis, commitment to CD is shared by a large number of proponents of *normativist* accounts. That would make the regress objection a very powerful one, capable of refuting all such accounts.

What rules are we talking about? Glüer and Wikforss call them "*rules of rationality*", and in such a category one can fit all rules putatively governing the formation and sustaining of a person's mental states, and her reasoning, both theoretical and practical: believe only that which is supported by evidence; if you believe *p* and believe that if *p* then *q*, you're rationally permitted to believe *q*, and much more. In their argument they concentrate on rules for belief but they mean their conclusions to have a wider validity, encompassing rules for all types of mental states.

What does it mean to be governed by rules? The authors appeal to a crucial distinction between

- i. cases of *mere regular behavior*, and
- ii. cases of *genuine rule-following*.

*Genuine* rule-following requires the rule to figure in the agent's mental states: the agent must have accepted a commitment to conform her behavior to the rule, or, as they prefer to put it, the rule should play a positive role in the agent's motivation to behave as she behaves. They don't say much about the other kind of accordance to a rule – mere regular behavior. It would be important to know if they have any positive conception in mind or whether this is just a negatively defined category, meant to accommodate whatever doesn't fit in the other one. They claim that normativity can only be found in ii. I tend to disagree. That does not mean, necessarily, that I sustain that mere regular behavior can be said to be normative – first I would have to be sure about what is meant by *mere regular behavior*. What I'm hinting at is that we don't know if the proposed distinction is intended or not to exhaust all modes of accordance to rules. Call it what you will, I tend to think there's a good case to be made in favor of the normative nature of actions performed in accordance to rules that fall outside ii. I'll not endeavor the defense of this view here, but I want to make it explicit that while I'll meet the authors in their own setting, focusing only cases of *genuine* rule-following (ii), I don't share their assumption that normativity can only be found in such cases.

Cases of *genuine* rule following (ii.), they explain, must involve a practical inference along the lines of:

- P1. I want to believe what is in accordance with rule *R*
- P2. To believe that *p* is in accordance with *R*
- C. I want to believe that *p*

The problem, according to Glüer and Wikforss, is that any such reasoning involves new mental states – an intention in P1, a belief in P2, ... – that would, in their own turn, require new rules determining them, rules that would involve new mental states, and so on, infinitely. This would make it impossible for any thought to be entertained.

My counter objection consists in claiming that in order for thought to be properly said to be essentially rule-governed – even in the so-called *genuine* sense of rule-following here in play – it should not be necessary that all thoughts are determined by rules. It should be enough that some thoughts are determined by rules and that (what I take to be some fairly minimal kind of) holism of the mental is true. By holism of the mental I mean the view that any thought requires other thoughts, that a person could not sustain just one thought in isolation from a large enough mental system. If that is true, for any thought it would then be the case that either that thought is itself rule-governed or that it bears essential relations to other thoughts that are rule-governed. Any thought would still require rule-following and that seems enough to make a case for the normativity of content.

The regress objection is ineffective against this new view. We prevent the regress by allowing some mental states to not be *genuinely* governed by rules. In addition to that – dealing with the objection – I take the resulting picture to be much more plausible than the one the authors were trying to discredit. Instances of active commitment towards greater rationality are very ordinary. We find them in the cognitive efforts of a detective trying to solve a mystery or of a theorist trying to make a theory more coherent. We find it also, unquestionably, in everyday life, e.g., in the conscious planning of one's time between appointments, or when one discovers he's lost and realizes – revising some of his beliefs – that he must have missed the right turn. I expect this to be pretty obvious but I'll explain in more detail why cases such as these seem to me perfectly good examples of thought determined by rules governing one's reasoning. Ultimately, since no one's aiming at a perfect rationality, I don't see why we should lament the fact that not all of our thoughts can be governed by such rules – as the regress objection goes to show – provided that some are.

- Boghossian, P., 1989. "The Rule-Following Considerations," *Mind*, 98, 507–549.  
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Glüer, K. and Wikforss, A., 2009, "Against Content Normativity," *Mind*, 118: 31–70.