

On Turner's Anti-normativism

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Abstract Stephen Turner's anti-normativism is based on the idea that the normative can be explained away by social science. Exploiting the idea fostered by the sociology of scientific knowledge that reasons can be understood naturalistically as the causes of the beliefs of scientists and endorsing a non-normative conception of rationality, Turner has argued that normative accounts are better understood as "Good Bad Theories" (GBT). GBT are understood as false accounts that play a role in social coordination like magical or religious rituals in primitive societies (e.g. Tabu and the like). According to Turner, "norms," "obligations," "reasons," and "commitments" are like Tabu and can be explained away as GBT. Hence, Turner expected normative accounts to disappear completely in a fully disenchanted world.

Turner focuses on the idea, widespread among philosophers, that the normative does not reduce to the causal: his main claim is that social science succeeds in the reduction of the normative in causal terms, overcoming normative/causal dualism. Furthermore, this success is presented as creating a serious challenge for normativism. By focusing on certain (supposedly normative) features of beliefs like those involved in belief change dynamics, I will point out some interesting implications and problems for Turner's anti-normativism.

1 Introduction: Stephen Turner's Anti-normativism

Normativity, according to many flourishing trends¹ in contemporary philosophy, is key to understanding many of the social and institutional realities we inhabit, and complex phenomena like linguistic practices. Stephen Turner defines normativity as follows:

Normativity is everywhere. The sign of this, [...], is that normative terms are ubiquitous, and we constantly and necessarily rely on them. Correct and incorrect, right and wrong,

¹ These go by the name of "normativism." As Jaroslav Peregrin wrote, normativism according to Turner "includes [Christine] Korsgaard, [Onora] O'Neill, [Saul] Kripke, David Lewis, [Paul] Boghossian, [Wilfrid] Sellars, [John] McDowell, [Robert] Brandom, [John] Haugeland, [Joseph] Rouse, etc." ([15], p. 64). To this list we can surely add Kant, Neokantianism, Joseph Raz, Hans Kelsen, and Peter Winch. See Turner ([27], chs. 2-4).

good and bad, rational and not rational, valid and invalid – the list is long. The normative is a special realm of fact that validates, justifies, makes possible, and regulates normative talk, as well as rules, meanings, the symbolic and reasoning ([27], p. 1).

Despite normativity's apparent centrality and pervasiveness in human affairs, Turner is quite unimpressed by its frequent explanatory uses by current and past normativist philosophers. Turner's anti-normativism, in fact, is based on the idea that the normative can be explained away by social science, which provides a sociological explanation of what we do when we invoke normative terms and follow rules. According to the sociology of scientific knowledge, for example, "reasons" can be understood naturalistically as "the causes of the beliefs of scientists" ([27], p. 7). By endorsing a non-normative conception of rationality somehow inspired by Max Weber and Donald Davidson—that something is rational if it is intelligible ([27], chap. 6)—Turner has argued that normative accounts can be better understood as what he calls "Good Bad Theories" (GBT). GBT are false accounts, akin to bogus folk theories, that play an undeniable role of social coordination like magical or religious rituals in primitive societies (e.g. Tabu and the like), and that stabilize social practices into regular patterns ([30], p. 250):

[...] we may describe these various folk conceptions as "Good Bad Theories", meaning that they are good theories for a particular, unspecified set of purposes in a particular setting, but bad theories if we are thinking of them as adequate explanations of anything, or as proto-explanations that can be turned into genuine explanations with a little empirical vetting and some minor revision ([27], p. 43).

Therefore, normative notions like "norms," "obligations," "reasons," and "commitments" are merely folklore such as Tabu and hence can be understood as GBT. Hence, normativity would not be necessary and *sui generis* (i.e. irreducible) as normativist theorists usually claim.

Turner thus expects normative accounts to lose their appeal completely in a disenchanted world: insofar as social science provides an alternative (causal) explanation which does not rely on normative notions, these notions become dubious and explanatorily idle. There are indeed many positive aspects to this disenchanting move, which is in a sense an eye opener and arguably could be an authentic turning point in the normativism debate (see also [15], pp. 60-61). Because of this novelty, there is a sense in which it is legitimate to say that there are "pre-Turner" and "post-Turner" stages in this debate; with its challenge to normativism, the naturalistic account presented by Turner reshapes a debate that, at least until recently, mainly revolved around the normativity of meaning and content.² Turner's proposal is surely more radical as it claims that normativity can be explained away.

A significant part of Turner's attack on normativity concerns the ways in which normativist philosophers defend their point of view, especially their more controversial arguments like those inherited from traditional philosophy. The Kantian transcendental standpoint is, as a matter of fact, of special importance in this

² See, for an overview, [10]. This could suffice as a presentation of a pre-Turner version of the debate, mostly focused on the normativity of mind and language. For a post-Turner version see [6], [18], and [1].

tradition. According to Turner, in fact, normative notions appear only in accounts defended in terms of what he calls “transcendental arguments”—the search for missing unavoidable presuppositions in what is to be explained—often based on pathological “regresses” which exploit exclusively tendentious descriptions—where normativity is often already embedded or presupposed in the privileged description³—and they disappear when priority is given to causal explanations.

Furthermore, these normativist perspectives usually rely on *tu quoque* gestures directed at alternative naturalistic accounts to demonstrate that these also embed normativism, either willing or not willing. According to this normativist perspective, appeals to “reason,” “belief,” “meaning,” “truth,” and so forth automatically favor normativism, as these notions are supposed to be normative as such. However, this kind of move is suspicious, because it immunizes normativism from criticism in a rather peculiar and unconventional way.

Hence, according to Turner there are compelling reasons to be skeptical about normativity. Turner’s favorite example concerns legal validity: there are no normative facts that determine legal validity in terms of obligation other than the mere beliefs of citizens.⁴

Since normative notions do not belong to the usual causal accounts—Turner calls this “the normal stream of explanation” ([27], p. 188)—they seem to belong to some spooky, occult, or bogus parallel reality. The most famous versions of such fanciful realities involve “the realm of the transcendental,” “the space of reasons,” “Frege’s third realm,” “the Platonic heaven,” and so forth. Since according to Turner norms do not seem to belong to the standard causal relations among empirical facts, sometimes normativists are apparently compelled to invoke such parallel realities as the proper place for normativities. Turner considers such realities as nothing more than philosophers’ fictions, or simply flights of fancy, implicitly undertaking inflationary and extravagant metaphysical commitments; as such, they should be dismissed in the explanation of social facts (and of normativity).

Finally, Turner argues that, according to what we know, normativities clearly possess a particular and contingent history and localization; norms change for different societies and epochs, ultimately shattering the philosophical dream of a universal normativity embedded in human customs, in language, and in praxis. We acknowledge sociological, anthropological, and historical information about many “local” normativities which are sometimes incompatible with each other. The evidence of this “diversity,” as Turner calls it, places transcendent/universal normativity on the defensive, redefining it as supporting a kind of “fundamentalism.” This idea “involves the claim that all views other than our own are wrong, and justifies this claim on the basis of our own preferred grounds, such as reflective, self-validating analysis of our own views” ([27], 47). This view can be rejected as both

³ As Maksymilian Del Mar nicely put it: “[a] [...] tendency to posit a privileged description of that which needs to be explained, with the effect that the explanation too is privileged” ([9], p. 307).

⁴ In principle, this approach can also be applied to the formal sciences, thus paving the way for a conventionalist explanation of logical and mathematical validity. Hence, it can serve as the basis for new conventionalist and naturalistic programs in the formal sciences. Furthermore, such an approach could be considered a promising option for current naturalistic trends in philosophy of logic.

parochial and imperialist, thus manifestly wrong. Indeed, according to the naturalistic and reductive perspective of social science, Turner argues, we can dispense with the normative altogether and opt for his sociological reductive approach. Hence, this naturalistic trend in the social sciences shapes a completely different approach to normativity, one which is both disenchanting and focused on the relevant facts.

Turner focuses on the idea, widespread among normativists, that the normative does not reduce to the causal. His main claim is that social science succeeds in the reduction, overcoming the normative/causal dualism: with Weber, he understands “beliefs” as the “causes of behavior” in the context of subjectively meaningful action, and thus we can understand normative notions and normativity entirely as “believed in” phenomena. People behave normatively insofar as they believe in the relevant norms.⁵ Furthermore, Turner takes the explanatory success of social science as presenting a serious challenge to normativism as the appeal of the latter supposedly depends also on the putative impossibility of any naturalistic/causal explanation. Granting this point to Turner, we may ask: Is this irreducibility all there is to the importance of normativity and of normativist accounts? Is this all there is about the related relevant irreducibilities?

In what follows, I will first show how the role of normative language does not conform easily to Turner’s general account (section 2). Then, I will focus on some problems concerning the role of explanation in Turner’s argument based especially on Sellars’ account of the conflict between the scientific and manifest images of humanity in the world (section 3); my focus on explanation unearths certain controversial theoretical commitments about knowledge which are implicit in Turner’s argument. Next, section 4 raises other issues involved with recent ways of understanding belief and belief change, which bear relevant implications for the overall anti-normativist argument. Finally, section 5 presents my conclusions.

2 Normativity and Normative Language

Intuitively, a first concern can be raised about the function of normative language. In fact, Turner stresses that normativity is often supposed to play an explanatory function. However, this explanatory function seems to be controversial, especially if we look at the understanding of normative language. For example, an explanation usually involves the relevant facts, and indeed, this puts descriptive language on a kind of theoretical pedestal. In particular, we use descriptive language to state the facts, thus serving as the starting point for explanatory endeavors. However, this acknowledgment puts interesting constraints on the understanding of normative language.

Normative language, in fact, is not easily reducible to description: with normative vocabulary, we do other things than describing or explaining facts; hence, normative

⁵ This entails believing that certain rules are in force.

language is not supposed to explain social facts normatively. Furthermore, a putative descriptive interpretation of normative language would involve extravagant metaphysical consequences, such as the claim that normative concepts/terms describe normative facts. However, if normativity is taken to work this way, by describing normative facts and exploiting them to explain social facts, Turner is certainly right in denouncing the exploitation of mysterious facts that do not belong to the natural order of causal transitions.⁶

However, we are fortunate enough to have at our disposal other conceptions of normative language that do not play explanatory or descriptive functions. Normative vocabulary can be understood, for example, as one that allows us to specify or elucidate what is done or said in terms of some type of correctness, or to assess the performances of other people based on some shared criteria. This can be done by expressivist or non-cognitivist interpretations of normative language, according to which normative language does not describe or represent.⁷ These can be used as starting points for a different understanding of the claim that normative language is irreducible. Normative language, and with it a large section of normativity, is irreducible because the function of such a language does not conform to description and explanation.⁸ This irreducibility of normative vocabulary raises a direct counterargument to Turner: if normative language is not understood as describing or explaining, then his understanding of normative accounts as devoted to explaining social facts is already potentially undermined. Turner says that normativism claims to be explanatory to argue that it is not: indeed, this is an open issue within the normativist camp, where we can distinguish between those who deny the explanatory role of normativity, such as the expressivists (and non-cognitivists alike), and those who claim that normativity can provide genuine explanations. We may agree with him on this claim about the explanatory ambitions of some normativists provisionally, until we talk about explanation.

A similar point can be made about normativity more in general. Wilfrid Sellars, one of the most prominent figures in the normativist camp, famously wrote that “in the dimension of describing and explaining the world, science is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not” ([22], §41). He also contrasted the scientific image (SI) of humanity in the world with the manifest image (MI), characterized by persons, norms, and institutions [24].

Here Sellars understood norms and explanations as belonging to different spheres. Hence, if we assert that the irreducibility of the normative to descriptive language is relevant and that normativity fundamentally belongs to the MI, we must approach this topic with reference to the Sellarsian conflict between these two images. Making a distinction between a realm of ordinary practice and more specialist fields is

⁶ The problem I am most interested in is the putative connection between normative language and normative facts. In a broader context, a defense of the peculiarities of normative language would take much more space, involving, for example, its prescriptive character and an account of imperatives.

⁷ Peter Olen has nicely emphasized how this non-cognitivist trajectory can be a valuable alternative to the conceptions of normativity criticized by Turner. See ([13], pp. 141, 148).

⁸ See [16][17] for this understanding of our vocabularies in terms of the specific pragmatic functions they play.

something that we easily find in many places in philosophy and does not automatically compel us to take Sellars' view into account. However, Sellars' perspective on normativity remains relevant, especially in light of his scientific realism and naturalism, and I think this aspect, *prima facie*, highlights the importance of Sellars' viewpoint in the context of a naturalistic challenge to normativity, such as Turner's.⁹

Admitting such a distinction between the two images opens the way to alternative options that can reshape in many ways the relation between normativity and scientific explanation. The alternative soon coming to mind is, for example, admitting causal explanation for the SI and perhaps other explanations for the MI and conceiving of them as belonging to distinctly different endeavors. Hence, the problem is: Do other types of explanation exist and work?

3 Normativity, Explanation, and the Two Images

The idea that social science can explain away the normative overlooks the distinction between the two images, at least slightly: this explanation is a jump from one image to the other, and seems to be committed to the disappearance of the MI (i.e. its being explained away) as an autonomous context. Indeed, the normative properly belongs to the MI,¹⁰ to the personal perspective of participants to practices, communities, and institutions, and not to the external, objective, detached (third person) perspective of the scientist. This point vindicates an autonomy for normative talk outside the realm of science by its agreement with the "Scientia mensura" principle above—the MI is outside the realm of description and explanation; hence, normativity and normative language are properly placed in the core of the MI and have no scientific explanatory ambitions, and again this is a point I concede to Turner, at least if explanation is bound to be causal.

So, let us focus on the issues concerning explanation. Is explanation only causal? Are there other genuine types of explanation? As a matter of fact, there exist some interesting alternative candidates for explanation. For one, we could say that normative explanations, if they are explanations at all, must be understood as conceptual like "conceptual analyses," or "explications" in Carnap's sense [5], [8], or relations of conceptual derivation ([6]; [13], p. 141). Dionysis Christias, in answering Turner's concerns about this worry, writes as follows:

⁹ See [6] for a nice display of Sellars' framework's capacity to manage Turner's criticism of normativity. See also [7] for a recent systematization of Sellars' naturalistic perspective and of the place of normativity in it.

¹⁰ Arguably, we do not have a single MI, but rather many MIs, as many human cultures can count as MIs. Thus, in a sense, we are confronted with an entire bunch of MIs in which we find different images of humanity and the world (along with different norms, institutions, etc.). This is true in an important sense, but not enough to weaken Sellars' point, because Sellars explicitly worried about this possibility and conceived of the MI as an idealization of the common traits of all the MIs. Rather, this is an idealization that is explicitly modeled on Weber's ideal types, and thus, it is spot on in this context. See ([24], p. 5). Many thanks to Stephen Turner for highlighting this worry.

According to Sellars, a crucial distinction should be drawn [...] between logical or conceptual irreducibility—that is, the impossibility of defining or translating the content of a concept in terms of another [...]—and causal or explanatory irreducibility, where a concept can be causally reduced to another if the latter can causally explain the former, without making any essential use of descriptions or judgments with normative content ([6], p. 150).

[...] although Turner rightly insists on the possibility of a successful explanatory reduction of normative concepts to nonnormative concepts, he does not see that neither does that fact undermine the radical conceptual/logical irreducibility of normative to non-normative discourse nor does it compromise the *objective purport* of the normative point of view ([6], p. 162).

Hence, a normative explanation is a kind of conceptual explanation, and in this sense, it is true that the normative can be understood as doing some explanatory work. Furthermore, the fact that this normative explanation is not reduced to a causal and scientific explanation is not a problem; more importantly, it does not undermine the legitimacy of normativity and of normative talk. We can provide examples of these conceptual explanations.

One example of conceptual derivation is very popular and non-controversially non-empirical:

1) If Don is a bachelor, then he is an unmarried man.

(1) is clearly conceptually explanatory as it explains “bachelor” in terms of “unmarried man” even though the explanation does not work in causal terms. Something similar can be done with most of our concepts, which also bear empirical relations:

2) If Fido is a dog, then Fido is a mammal.

We can see this point as extending for example to “material inference” in general along the Sellars-Brandom line since those inferences explicate concepts (see [4], pp. 97-102, and [21]).¹¹ Thus, there is a viable approach to explanations which are not causal but are nonetheless good for other purposes. This means that, at the end of the day, we can attribute some genuine explanatory ambition to normativism, even though we are not facing any serious scientific explanatory ambition. We can read this as rebutting Turner’s claim (i.e. it is false that normativity is explanatory in general) while also accepting his other point that normativity is not explanatory in a substantial way (i.e. from a scientific point of view).

Normative language and normativity play a chief role in the most refined regions of the MI where the high-level (nonscientific) representations of our lives, practices, and institutions take place. This is compatible with Turner’s idea that normativity in the end amounts to a kind of GBT, since the MI is out from the realm of scientific explanation—there is indeed a clear sense in which saying that normativity belongs

¹¹ These inferences are called “material” or “materially good” since they are good not only in virtue of inference rules but also in virtue of the content of the concepts involved. Thus, the inference “if Fido is a dog, the Fido is a mammal” is good thanks to the concepts “dog” and “mammal.”

to the MI and saying that normativity is a GBT essentially make the very same point. A relevant question here is the following: Is normativity just like any other GBT? Or is it somehow special? (See below.)

But there are also other issues in the vicinity. Thus far, in fact, the reduction of normativity to sociological facts depends also on the understanding of knowledge that one endorses, in which we notice a significant contrast between Sellars and Turner. Turner seems to defend a conception of knowledge as limited to empirical facts¹² as these are in the realm of causes—what is not empirical is often dismissed as fictional qua external to the realm of causes. Sellars, by contrast, considers knowledge as extending beyond the realm of empirical facts, accommodating a more liberal pluralism about types of knowledge ([23], §79; [6], p. 163). So, several questions become quite pressing: Can we have moral knowledge? What about aesthetics and abstracta?

Therefore, Turner's attempt at global reduction of the normative appears legitimate if and only if we endorse a view of knowledge limited to empirical facts and a solely causal view of explanation.

So, we just noticed that Turner apparently endorses a view of knowledge limited to empirical facts. However, a view like this—skipping the quick attractions of empirical facts and causal explanations—is more troublesome than it may seem. This view can be challenged with examples that clearly promote a more pluralist epistemology. Consider the following reasoning:

1. If during a war children die, then war is wrong (mixed factual/moral conditional premise);
2. Children die in war (factual premise);
3. War is wrong (moral conclusion) (for examples like this see [26]).

This reasoning is usually understood as a counterexample to the claim that truth is plural. However, I think it also works implicitly as an argument against the view that knowledge is limited to empirical facts since if the reasoning is valid, and it is valid, then we have truths that extend beyond the realm of empirical facts such as moral or normative ones; hence, knowledge does not only concern empirical facts. Mainly, the argument works by means of the fact that truth transmits from premises to conclusions in a deductive inference. If successful transmission occurs (i.e. the inference is valid), this entails that the premises are true. If these premises are true, then we know that we have moral truths (as these premises are and/or embed moral truths). If we have moral truths, then it is safe to assume that these are examples of moral knowledge. Hence, this can count as a counterexample to any idea of knowledge as being limited to empirical facts.

If things stand this way, we have reason to deny the exclusive causal and empirical approach preferred by Turner and to admit a wider Sellarsian view about the legitimacy of the two images, non-causal types of explanation, and non-factual truths (truths of logic and mathematics, for instance). With such vocabularies, we do something else, like evaluating, and so forth. In this way, we may have normative

¹² Even though Turner does not make this claim in a sufficiently explicit way. It can be mostly inferred from what he says about everything that is apart from empirical facts.

truths without the need for normative facts, so we can safely opt for non-factualism about normativity (see also [13], pp. 141, 148). This is a valuable alternative to Turner's argument.

4 Belief between Causality and Normativity

There is another aspect that appears relevant for the proper assessment of Turner's argument, and it deals with belief, a notion playing a crucial role both for normativism, which usually considered belief a thoroughly normative notion, and for Turner's causal explanation of normativity, which understands beliefs as the causes of behavior in the context of subjectively meaningful action. Beliefs, I argue, do not reduce to brute doxastic facts as simple causal facts among many others, even granting the role that beliefs play in social science explanation. Turner's Weberian view of belief, as anticipated, holds that it causally explains subjectively meaningful action. In his words:

[...] we can explain what people are doing when they are promising, following the law, speaking correctly, and so forth without deciding whether a promise is valid, a law is genuinely a law, or whether the use of the term is genuinely correct. To explain what people actually do we need only appeal to the beliefs that people have about what is correct, genuine, and the like. Judging is unnecessary for the explanation-giver ([27], p. 186).

To the contrary, what I call the normative view on belief is as follows: maintaining beliefs in the face of the many structural features that we commonly attribute to belief involves normative features and procedures. Beliefs aim at truth and are discarded when they are proven false; they must also be mutually compatible, and the presence of beliefs which are incompatible with our remaining web of beliefs demands a suitable reworking; furthermore, belief is propositionally contentful since propositions are notoriously the objects of propositional attitudes. When I say that we would call such features normative, I am not claiming that there is an unnatural realm of normativity: the normativity of belief nowhere shows that it is not a product of natural evolution.¹³ Is Turner's view capable to accommodate these aspects? Let us proceed step by step.

¹³ Rather, I would say that normativity amounts to a kind of technology that we developed over millennia.

4.1 *Belief Aims at Truth*

For example, it is important to note that beliefs, unlike other mental states (e.g. desires, imaginings, etc.), are usually considered somehow flawed when they are false [20]. If I believe that crossing the road at point A is safe, and then discover that there is a chasm that opens under this part of the road, it would be foolish and irrational to keep believing that A is safe, and even more to cross it. Due to such an insight, many philosophers see truth as a kind of norm or correctness condition for beliefs. The way I put it (i.e. that belief aims at truth) is a way to indicate that this is a genuine normative dynamic even without committing myself to the existence of an actual norm of some kind, as implied by certain statements, such as “truth is a norm of belief.”¹⁴ I think defending a norm like this is not necessary to acknowledge the fact that, in our doxastic behavior, we aim at beliefs that are true, and hence useful and reliable in coordinating with others and in planning action, which then prompts us to discard beliefs when they show up as false for the very same reasons. These insights are often understood as suggesting that beliefs play a relevant functional role in our cognitive economy, and the very idea of a functionalist understanding seems to embed constitutively some central idea of normativity, such as the distinction between function and *malfunction*.¹⁵ If, according to the mainstream approach, we aim to represent how things are with our beliefs, then false beliefs are defective as such, that is, false beliefs are erroneous/defective beliefs.

4.2 *Belief Change as a Normative Dynamic*

Another relevant issue, as already anticipated, depends on focusing on belief change. In recent years, the AGM¹⁶ model has been a relevant program that has attempted to formally understand belief change. According to this approach, certain constraints play a relevant role in understanding how and why we change beliefs when confronted with crucial evidence and new information in general [2]. Such principles invite, at least *prima facie*, a normativist reading of this doxastic dynamic. There are in fact normative constraints on belief change (the main types of change

¹⁴ Deflationary insights about truth push me in the general direction of denying that truth is a norm. However, I think the point I am highlighting here can also be appreciated by those who endorse different views on truth.

¹⁵ I am aware that this sounds a bit like a *tu quoque* argument. This may depend on the fact that functionalist accounts are generally understood in naturalistic terms; thus, it would be a way to say that naturalistic accounts, if they are functionalist, have the ability to embed normativity. There is surely something to such a notion. However, the naturalistic interpretation of functionalism is not mandatory, as we find varieties of functionalism that are explicitly normative rather than naturalistic. Sellars’ functionalist semantics is a case in point [25].

¹⁶ AGM is an acronym that stands for Carlos Alchourrón, Peter Gärdenfors, and David Makinson.

are contraction, expansion, and revision); in general, two basic normative constraints are “minimum loss of information in belief change (ML),” meaning that information is eliminated or removed from the belief set only when strictly required by evidence, and “consistency preservation (CP),” meaning the necessity to keep our belief set consistent. These constraints appear to be unavoidable principles implicit in what we do. We can map the main three types of belief change and their working rules, which function according to those two general principles:

In the AGM framework, there are three types of belief change. In *contraction*, a specified sentence p is removed, i.e., a belief set K is superseded by another belief set $K \div p$ that is a subset of K not containing p . In *expansion* a sentence p is added to K , and nothing is removed, i.e. K is replaced by a set $K + p$ that is the smallest logically closed set that contains both K and p . In *revision* a sentence p is added to K , and at the same time other sentences are removed if this is needed to ensure that the resulting belief set $K * p$ is consistent ([11], sect. 1.2).¹⁷

These operations place constraints that hardly appear causally explainable. Such dynamics involve the normative procedures of belief change even in those cases when agents do not know anything about logic or epistemology. These are procedures embedded in doxastic and reason-giving practices—meaning what people actually do about their beliefs—and cannot be simply dismissed as “formal redescrptions” or “modelling” of actual behavior (for this defensive strategy, though in a different context, see [28], pp. 11, 21-24).¹⁸ Although it is true that these attempts try to model what we do and specify the logic behind our doxastic behavior, they capture the specific constraints that we find compelling both in actual believing and in its rational reconstruction. Having beliefs, then, involves changing them when required and avoiding incompatibilities among them; these features and dynamics seem to genuinely involve normativity and cannot be rejected as only the view from a normative lens. Hence, in principle this could be a problem for the reductive program Turner promotes. It is not a normative lens we are adopting to describe the facts; rather, it is what believing and changing beliefs really involves and demands.¹⁹ These dynamics apparently point to a normative core that is integral to social coordination since we need to mutually check our beliefs to successfully coordinate with our peers.

An alternative take on such dynamics could work by interpreting the two main constraints (i.e. ML and CP) as located beyond the level of norms—concepts akin to regulative ideals. In this case, the normative element emphasized so far would be

¹⁷ See also [2].

¹⁸ This is a slippery terrain, though. Studies in the psychology of reasoning have shown evidence of the generalized irrationality of agents, which is often exploited to undermine the normative nature of rationality and reasoning. A pioneering study here has been surely [31]. Turner seems to be aware of this and appears to be ready to endorse some conventionalism about logical and mathematical validity. See [12] for a wider overview on the debate about the rationality of reasoning.

¹⁹ I am not ruling out the possibility of a future scientific explanation of these features and dynamics, but just highlighting what is our current way to understanding them. Furthermore, it should be noted that consistency is open to sociological explanations as well, so sheer conventionalism turns out to be on the table also from this point of view.

nothing more than a kind of working idealization that is internal to doxastic practices.²⁰ However, it remains to be seen whether an interpretation like this is ultimately helpful for anti-normativism because this interpretation could be accommodated in a normativist framework by intuitively understanding the level of regulative ideals as a normative metalevel. Thus, the challenge of understanding belief change as a non-normative phenomenon is still on the table, and I think it is a valuable one for full-fledged anti-normativist views.

4.3 Belief Change and Defeasible Reasoning

Someone could point out that these doxastic changes and revisions can be, in principle, explained in a causal way, as we can generally do for learning. However, I think we can find here genuine intuitions about these changes being governed by norms. Certain examples can help to see why. Belief revision, which is something that sometimes also happens through inference,²¹ is not always an empirical causal phenomenon but can also be a logical one, as emphasized by the dynamics involved in defeasible reasoning: certain logical relations between premises and conclusions that usually hold may be defeated in certain circumstances. Consider the following example:

If I strike this dry match M, then M will light;
 If I strike M, and M is wet, then M will not light;
 If I strike M, and M is placed into a strong magnetic field, then M will not light;
 If I strike M, M is placed into a strong magnetic field, but it is also inside a Faraday Cage, then M will light;
 If I strike M, M is placed into a strong magnetic field, M is inside a Faraday Cage, but there is no oxygen in it, then M will not light.²²

The same premise, “If I strike M,” can be used to infer multiple conclusions depending on the other collateral premises given in the context. One way to understand the role of such premises as invalidating conditions or defeaters is by understanding them in terms of incompatibility. In fact, striking M to light it is incompatible with doing it in a strong magnetic field, and so forth. This way of putting things clearly emphasizes a normative dimension: not only are these inferences good if their conclusions follow from true premises, but also if there are no other premises that are incompatible with a certain conclusion, which would defeat them otherwise. I see this as a challenge to causal views on belief change since certain inferential moves

²⁰ Many thanks to Davide Fazio for suggesting this interpretation.

²¹ As inferences can be both valid/invalid and sound/unsound, the notion of inference seems to point in the direction of normativism. This is also the same for causal inference, which can be valid and sound (or invalid and unsound) along with other inferences.

²² This is modified version of an example provided by Robert Brandom. See for example ([4], p. 169).

would be nonstandard and puzzling from a simply causal point of view as these inferences are vulnerable not only to inference rules, but also to relevant exceptions to them (and incompatibilities among them).

4.4 On the Role of Belief in Causal Explanation and Normativity: The Gene Kelly Argument

Furthermore, we also face some evident limits, even though the causal role of belief in explanation, as in Turner's perspective (i.e. beliefs play a direct causal role in the explanation of subjectively meaningful action), is indeed a promising approach to highlight how the representational role of belief is important for action explanation. True enough, beliefs that aim to represent how things are can, in principle, be useful in explaining behavior as people act based on what they truly believe. However, this generalization is problematic and bears interesting counterexamples.

The most relevant is what I call the Gene Kelly argument. Usually, according to a causal understanding of belief, if Alfred believes that it is raining, it would explain why he would suddenly open his umbrella. So far, so good. However, the intuitive force and goodness of this explanation also seem to rest on other implicit premises, such as Alfred's desire to stay dry and his belief that he would get wet without the umbrella. In fact, we can imagine a person, such as Gene Kelly, who wants to get wet and decides not to open his umbrella. The upshot of this counterexample is that belief explains actions along a certain set of beliefs and intentions, and not in isolation. Hence, the very generalization that belief causally explains a meaningful action must be taken with a pinch of salt.

However, this also has relevant implications for the normativity of belief, as beliefs should be consistent with other beliefs (and with other intentional states) in one's belief set to explain a person's behavior. In fact, this required consistency and compatibility among beliefs contained in one's belief set place clear normative constraints on the understanding of the causal role of belief. This point is captured by the following principle: If one believes that performing a certain action (e.g. opening one's umbrella) would bring about a certain event (e.g. staying dry), together with a desire or intention about this event, and without contrary desires or intentions, such a belief will typically cause an intention to perform that action [20]. This means that the very causal conception of belief seems to embed and presuppose relevant normative constraints at the beginning.

4.5 Belief as Propositionally Contentful, and a Different Take on Its Causal Role

Finally, belief is propositionally contentful, i.e. belief that P has (propositional) content P, and this feature also bears relevant implications. If the contents of beliefs are propositions, this seems to shed some light also on the causal role of beliefs. For example, normatively characterized beliefs can explain (conceptually) the explanatory (causal) role of Weberian beliefs in social science. They do so in virtue of being contentful, meaning in virtue of their propositional content (e.g. “Christopher believed in the legitimacy of the Cuban government”). This belief, according to Turner’s Weberian view, explains why that government was legitimate in terms of Christopher’s held beliefs. This can be easily explained by the normative view of belief in terms of the content of the proposition “the Cuban government is legitimate,” which undeniably is a structural part of the belief. Intuitively, we cannot explain causally those aspects of belief that concern its content, but only the fact that a belief with a certain content is held. Being contentful, for states like beliefs, means for example being compatible or incompatible with other contentful states, so that they seem to involve considerations about consistency and compatibility among them: for example, if I believe that “the Cuban government is legitimate” then believing this proposition rules out my believing that “the Cuban government is illegitimate,” together with many other propositions. Of course, we can explain causally why Christopher had this belief, but does this suffice also for its content (i.e. for its normative properties like being consistent with the contents of other beliefs)? This question marks an asymmetry between the normative and the causal views on belief and the sociological conception of belief fostered by Turner appears parasitic on the common sense normative one. This is problematic for the causal view unless we subscribe to a causal account of propositional content, but then we become vulnerable to the Myth of the Given, deriving content out of causal stimuli alone.²³

5 Conclusions

By highlighting the availability of a sociological account of the normative, Turner denounces normativism as explanatorily idle and normativist accounts as GBT. GBT are not explanatory, and the reductive sociological approach purportedly shows it is false to claim the normative cannot be reduced to the causal. Turner is undeniably brilliant in highlighting how social science provides a tenable alternative

²³ See [22], and also [14] and [19] for a recent overview. Even though we must notice that Turner in recent years is at work to recruit cognitive neuroscience in the attempt to reconsider folk-psychological talk more in general (so, this is an ongoing endeavor). See especially [29] and what Turner says about the “*verstehen* bubble.”

view on normativity, one that can reshape the debate between normativism and anti-normativism in a substantial way. Some of the implications that he draws from this are, however, too hasty, and problematic.

Normative language is not reduced to descriptive language. Hence, understanding normativism as an explanatory endeavor is problematic from this point of view, that is, either we defend a view according to which normative language plays a descriptive or explanatory function, thereby accepting the problematic implication that it deals with putative normative facts, or we opt for an expressivist alternative, in which normative talk serves other functions and does not represent normative facts. Therefore, considerations about the function of normative language can fruitfully interact with Turner's argument, and the options on the table highlight some interesting ways out. In agreement with Olen, I think an expressivist (i.e. non-representationalist) understanding of normative language is enough to eschew any commitments to normative facts.

However, the explanatory goodness of normativity can be further explored. In fact, another important issue emerges in connection with the nature of explanation, as Turner seems to push a general causal account of it. If we go back to Sellars' distinction between the two images, we can acknowledge varieties of explanations that are legitimate but do not work in causal terms (conceptual analysis, explication, etc.). Furthermore, a view that claims to explain away the normative and the MI seems to be committed to a solely empirical perspective of knowledge and to a causal view of explanation, even though we have evidence of tenable alternatives, as previously demonstrated. We can provide examples of explanations that are not causal and examples of knowledge that are not limited to empirical facts. This can be the starting point for some interesting reconsideration of the actual implications of Turner's argument on normativity.

Furthermore, belief seems to be normative in a more substantial way. Here, there is the issue connected with the causal/explanatory role of belief in social science: How does it relate with the normative concept of belief? The latter affirms that belief aims at truth and must be compatible with our general belief set, and the dynamics of belief change show that these normative features are embedded in our doxastic behavior. Furthermore, this normative conception can accommodate the idea that belief is identified in terms of its propositional content (no matter how this is understood) and this view explains the goodness of belief's causal role that Turner adopts in his sociological explanation, but not vice versa; the causal account does not explain the normative view of belief, especially its contentful dimension. This point can in principle vindicate a kind of genuine normativity acknowledged as embedded in our doxastic behavior, which is central not only for our epistemic practices but also for social coordination.

Again, the causal role of belief in sociological explanation is potentially exposed to defeaters (which, as shown, can be understood normatively in terms of compatibility/incompatibility), and this can be understood as further evidence in support of the normative view. Moreover, the causal role of belief—like the one involved in Turner's sociological explanation of normativity—is also exposed to counterexamples. This is because such explanations in terms of belief are vulnerable to the presence of other beliefs and desires, and this connection seems to support the normative

view by emphasizing once again the need for consistency and compatibility among one's beliefs and intentions.

With this, we conclude that the actual strength of Turner's argument lies in its provision of a causal alternative to the typical normativist accounts. This alternative, traditionally deemed simply impossible, certainly places on the defensive many typical philosophical arguments for normativism, especially transcendental ones,²⁴ and obliges the theorist to be much more concerned about what we know about the relevant empirical data and causal mechanisms and how those help reshape our view of normativity. However, even if we grant a relevant place to this sociological conception in our current understanding of normativity, we must note that the normativity of belief emphasizes some limits to the thorough exploitation of this naturalistic account in promoting full-fledged anti-normativism. This is even more evident in the acknowledgment of the normative role of belief in the provision of the causal role of belief exploited by the sociological account. In other words, if belief was not somehow normative, we could not use it to causally explain subjectively meaningful actions.

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²⁴ This is an urgency already emerged even in the normativist camp. As Robert Brandom wrote: "Kant's transcendental machinery—the distinction between Understanding and Reason, the free noumenal self expressed somehow as a causally constrained phenomenal self, and so on—can no longer secure this distinction [between the Realm of Nature and the Realm of Freedom] for us. It is just too mysterious as an *explanation* of freedom" ([3], p. 187). The awareness of the troubles connected with transcendental philosophy is one of the strongest motivations for various forms of pragmatism about norms.

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