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Comments on Paul Horwich's "On the Alleged Normative Import of Implicit Definitions"

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Let R be an epistemic rule of the simplest type: "Accept sentence s !" Assume that R is a basic rule we actually follow: Our accepting the sentence cannot be explained by our following more fundamental rules of sentence-acceptance. Assume furthermore that we feel rationally obliged to follow R ; that is, we all agree on the correctness of the epistemic norm N which says: We ought to accept s .

Assuming that there are correct basic norms, is there a way to *explain* their correctness? Paul does not think so, and he argues that a certain family of strategies for explaining the correctness of one particular class of basic epistemic norms does not work. The norms in question are those which concern the acceptance of ID-sentences, i.e. sentences which are, or seem to be, the implicit *definiens* of at least one of their words; or to put it differently: sentences the acceptance of which is, or appears to be, in some sense constitutive of the meaning of at least one of their words. The family of strategies in question is what Paul calls the *semantogenetic approach*. The basic tenet of this approach is as follows:

The correctness of those basic norms which concern the obligatory acceptance of an ID-sentence can be explained, namely by the fact that the practice of accepting such a sentence is meaning-constitutive.

Paul distinguishes between two strategies within this approach. The one strategy calls attention to the alleged guaranteed truth of ID-sentences:

(Truth Guaranteed): N is correct, because the *truth* of the accepted ID-sentence is guaranteed by the facts which constitute its meaning.

Paul argues that this strategy is mistaken; and I shall not address this issue. The "improved" semantogenetic strategy is silent about the truth of the sentence accepted, it merely claims that the rationality of our acceptance of it is secured:

(Rationality Secured): N is correct, because the *rationality* of the acceptance of ID-sentences is secured by an *ur*-norm (or some appropriate principle).

In a first approximation the RS-strategy suggests the following type of explanation for the correctness of N :¹

(1) All practices of sentence-acceptance which are meaning-constitutive are rational.

(2) Our actual practice of accepting sentence s is meaning-constitutive.

Therefore,

(C) Our actual practice of accepting s is rational, *i.e.* N is correct.

Paul's first general objection is against the first premise. He observes that it is ambiguous. In one reading, he says, it is true but too weak to yield the conclusion:

(1p) If P is a possible practice of sentence-acceptance which is meaning-constitutive, then we are rationally *permitted* to engage in P .

This is too weak, because the norm whose correctness is at issue says that we *ought* to accept s . – And against the stronger reading of the first premise, namely

(1o) If P is a possible practice of sentence-acceptance which is meaning-constitutive, then we are rationally *obliged* to engage in P .

Paul objects that it is absurd: We are clearly not obliged to do something humanly impossible. Hence the range of practices we are allegedly obliged to engage in would have to be restricted. Paul considers the following improvement:

¹ Paul says (2/4) that the improved strategy does not aim at an *explanation* of the correctness of basic norms but merely at a *unification* of our familiar epistemic norms in terms of truly basic *ur*-norms. So maybe the RS-strategy, as sketched by me, is not exactly what he has in mind. But it seems to fit in the semantogenetic approach and therefore is worth considering anyway. It attempts to explain the correctness of basic norms of sentence-acceptance; but it employs a normative statement of higher order (which itself is not a norm of sentence-acceptance, but a statement to the effect that certain norms of sentence-acceptance ought to be obeyed by certain groups).

- (1o1) If P is a possible practice of sentence-acceptance which is meaning-constitutive, and *a practice we actually engage in*, then we are rationally obliged to engage in P .

Paul objects that this ur-norm would be pointless, since it says that "just those meaning-constitutive practices *in which we actually engage* are obligatory" and "only requires us to do something which we are already doing".

Against this, a semantogeneticist of the RS-stripe may react as follows: Concededly, (1o1) is not a very good way of putting the first premise. Let's try to do better, by formulating it without mentioning ourselves:

- (1*) If P is a possible practice of sentence-acceptance which is meaning-constitutive, and G is a group which actually engages in P , then the members of G are rationally obliged (and hence: ought) to engage in P .

In this version of the first premise, it seems to be immune to both of Paul's objections. It clearly does not say that "**just** those meaning-constitutive practices *in which we actually engage* are obligatory". It rather says that any possible meaning-constitutive practice in which any group were to engage, would be rationally obligatory for this group. And it doesn't "only require us to do something which we are already doing", but rather it doesn't require us to do anything – it is silent about us.²

So a more promising way of spelling out the RS-strategy of explanation would be as follows:

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| <p>(1*) If P is a practice of sentence-acceptance which is meaning-constitutive, and G is a group which actually engages in P, then the members of G are rationally obliged to engage in P.</p> <p>(2) Our actual practice of accepting s is meaning-constitutive.³</p> |
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² Maybe, therefore, this statement is not a norm properly so called. So I shall not call it an *ur*-norm, which may suggest a more original, primitive or fundamental kind of norm than the norms it is supposed to help to justify; instead, I shall call it a *principle*. – Hence, maybe Paul is right in saying that there is no *norm*, properly so called, which the semantogeneticist could resort to. But this is no objection against the usefulness of a principle like (1*) for the purposes of the semantogenetic approach.

³ The second premise, more fully written out: "We are members of a group which actually engages in the meaning-constitutive practice of accepting s ". The conclusion may be formulated in a more clearly normative way: "We are rationally obliged to accept sentence s ".

Therefore

(C) We are rationally obliged to engage in the practice of accepting s ; *i.e.*, our actual practice of accepting s is justified, *i.e.* N is correct.

The first premise of this explanation seems, as I said, to be immune to Paul's objections. But is it correct? A semantogeneticist may offer the following consideration in favor of (1*):

Any ID-sentence is *significantly acceptance dependent*, that is: other things being equal, the sentence would be insignificant, or meaningless, if it were not accepted. But given that s is an ID-sentence in the language of group G and therefore s.a.d., we have reason to assume that, with regard to this sentence, acceptance yields obligation of acceptance:

(AYOA) If the G s accept s , then they are rationally obliged to accept s .

Support for this claim may be expected from a more careful elaboration of the following thought: If (AYOA) were *not* true, any helpfully clear-sighted member of G may correctly say:

(a) We, the G s, accept s & (b) s is s.a.d. & (c) we are epistemically permitted not to accept s .

But given (b), (c) is tantamount to conceding the epistemic possibility that s is meaningless. Mildly speaking, there is some tension in this conjunction. Can anyone accept a sentence – believe the proposition expressed by it –, and at the same time open the door to the epistemic possibility that the sentence may not be meaningful at all? Aren't we rationally obliged **not** to tolerate the alleged epistemic possibility that a sentence we actually do accept is meaningless? Isn't it even rationally *impossible* to hold a certain belief and, at the same time, admit that it may not have content – if only we were to make full use of our epistemic rights? After all, if it had no content, it wouldn't be a genuine thought at all, but merely some kind of mental mirage. Hence given that we mean something by an ID-sentence, we seem rationally compelled to accept it.

Along lines like these, I think, one may try to defend the first premise against Paul's objections. The revised first premise seems to be what is needed for the RS-strategy: it is

strong enough (it concerns obligation); it is not trivial (it does not cover just those first order norms we are actually heeding and trying to justify); and it is arguably correct (at least, in denying it we would wind up in a rational embarrassment).

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Paul's second general objection challenges the second premise of the RS argument:

(2) Our actual practice of accepting s is meaning-constitutive.

According to the semantogeneticist, the sentence s in question contains at least one word, " f ", which is implicitly defined by the whole sentence, which can be represented as "# f ". " f " may, for example, be a theoretical term, implicitly defined by the theory-formulation " Tf " which concerns the postulated, unobservable phenomenon, f -ness. In such a case, a natural way of stating the second premise in a more articulated form would be

(2*) Our actual practice of accepting " Tf " [$s = "Tf"$] is meaning-constitutive.

But (2*) does not capture (in fact: is misleading about) the important point that what is *genuinely* constitutive of " f "'s meaning is not the practice of accepting " Tf ", but rather something weaker than this. One who accepts the theory-formulation " Tf " commits himself in two ways: substantively, as to how things are, and formulatively, as to how the substantive commitment, if it is made, is to be linguistically expressed.

(Sub-T) There is a unique phenomenon x such that Tx .

(For-T) If there is a unique phenomenon x such that Tx , then Tf .

According to Paul (and many others), it is only the weaker, formulative, commitment which is genuinely meaning-constitutive. Given this decomposition of the commitments, (2*) turns out to be misleading; something like

(2**) Our actual practice of accepting *For-T* [$s \neq For-T$] is meaning-constitutive,

would be closer to the truth. But (2**) is not what the semantogeneticist was after. He wanted to explain the correctness of the norm "We ought to accept s " by the meaning-constitutivity of the acceptance of s . Yet it is not acceptance of s , but of a sentence considerably weaker than s , which is genuinely meaning-constitutive. The acceptance of the very sentence whose acceptance was meant to be justified cannot be justified in the semantogenetic manner.

Paul interestingly suggests that this method of decomposing our commitments, into the substantive and the merely formulative, is not restricted to the case of implicitly defined theoretical terms of empirical science but can be applied "across the board", and even beyond (if I may say so): to all sorts of implicit definitions and even to explicit definitions. Clearly, this would be a devastating result for the semantogenetic approach. For this would mean that this approach always starts on the wrong foot: the sentences whose acceptance is recommended by the norms the correctness of which the semantogeneticist wants to explain are not even of the right kind: they aren't at all sentences acceptance of which is meaning-constitutive.

The way in which Paul puts his proposal is very cautious and tentative. He says that "we might well suspect that the same considerations will apply across the board" (5/3). What I'd like to do, in the rest of my comments, is to consider some aspects of this suggestion.

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Let's first look at the case of logical terms like "and", "not" and "if". I shall try to develop the matter in as close an analogy to the case of scientific terms as possible, in order to see whether *the same considerations* apply. So let's assume for a moment that these logical terms, as meant by us, are *de facto* implicitly defined by a bunch of principles like non-contradiction, modus ponens and modus tollens. If we call the collection of the schemata of these principles LOG , we may say that we accept the theory-formulation " $LOG(\text{not, and, if})$ "; and the characteristic claim of the semantogeneticist would be:

Our norm that we ought to accept " $LOG(\text{not, and, if})$ " is correct, because our practice of accepting " $LOG(\text{not, and, if})$ " is meaning-constitutive.

Now how would the method of decomposition, as sketched for theoretical terms of empirical science, have to be applied to this case? Trying to develop the analogy as closely as possible would lead us to something like this:

- (Sub-LOG) There is a unique triple of entities x, y, z such that $LOG(x, y, z)$
- (For-LOG) If there is a unique triple of entities x, y, z such that $LOG(x, y, z)$, then
 $LOG(\text{not, and, if})$.

One difficulty with this, as Boghossian has noted, is that in order to undertake the formulative commitment, a concept of the conditional would already have to be available; and this is to say: one of the meanings to be constituted would be required for performing the meaning-constitution.

There seem to be other difficulties with such a proposal. First, it is not obvious that the *existence* of certain entities is something we commit ourselves to when we accept " $LOG(\text{not, and, if})$ ". Such an existential commitment is arguably involved when we accept an empirical theory containing terms for postulated unobservable phenomena. But does a *bona fide* user of "not" or "if" commit herself, by her very use of these terms, to the existence of any entities, presumably abstract ones, at all? Second, what would be, in this case, the rationale of decomposing the commitments at all? It should be noted that the conditional claim under consideration is not weaker than what is claimed by the theory-formulation itself. Conditionalizing a theory-formulation to a necessary truth is not a way of weakening one's commitments.⁴ Isn't this a considerable disanalogy to the case of theoretical terms where the Carnapian point of decomposing the commitments is exactly to distinguish a weaker one from a stronger one, in order to claim that only the weaker one is genuinely meaning-constitutive and knowable *a priori*? This consideration enabled us to explain how a *bona fide* user of the theoretical term and someone who is doubtful about the theory may both use the term in the same meaning (because they agree on something weak) and yet differ about the theory itself (because they disagree on something stronger). In the case of our logical terms (the ones we actually use, not the ones we toy or experiment with for special purposes), there seems to be no equivalent for this motivation of committing oneself merely to a conditional claim. – In brief, my question here is this: If the alleged "formulative" commitment is not a

⁴ And conditionalizing a claim to a necessary falsehood is no way of committing oneself to anything. (If the "substantive" antecedent of the "formulative" conditional is false, it is necessarily false. Acceptance of the resulting vacuously true conditional would not be meaning-constitutive, according to Paul's argument in section 3.)

weakening of the commitment to the theory-formulation, what could be gained by undertaking merely the one and shying away from undertaking the other?

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As to the envisaged application of the method of decomposition to the case of explicit definitions, Paul seems to suggest that our practice of accepting

(BUM) The bachelors are the unmarried men.⁵

cannot be justified by pointing out that "bachelor" has been explicitly defined in terms of "unmarried man". For whoever uses "bachelor" in accordance with this explicit definition is thereby merely committed to:

(For-EX) "Bachelor" and "unmarried man" are freely intersubstitutable.⁶

He is thereby not committed to the "substantive" categorical claim:

(Sub-EX) All instances of "The *fs* are the *fs*" are true.

What is genuinely meaning-constitutive of "bachelor", according to Paul, is exclusively contained in (For-EX). So the correctness of the norm that we ought to accept (BUM) cannot be explained by pointing out that acceptance of (BUM) is meaning-constitutive. Acceptance of (BUM) is not meaning-constitutive at all, according to Paul (if I understand him aright). If an explicit definition is a sentence acceptance of which is genuinely meaning-constitutive, then (BUM) is not an explicit definition; if an explicit definition can be given by a sentence like (BUM), then acceptance of an explicit definition itself is not meaning-constitutive. – Something like that seems to me to be what Paul wants to object against the semantogenetic approach of *explicit* definition.

⁵ I assume that (BUM) is not meant to contain existential presuppositions, and read it as equivalent to "All bachelors, whether or not there are any, are unmarried men, and *vice versa*".

⁶ I am not sure whether Paul would consider this to be a *conditional* commitment. Of course, it can be rendered as a conditional:

If *s'* is the result of substituting in *s* an occurrence of "bachelor"/"unmarried man" by an occurrence of "unmarried man"/"bachelor", then *s* \Leftrightarrow *s'*.

But it is not the Carnap conditional of the "theory" which says that the bachelors are the unmarried men.

Permit me to say, before I utter my qualms, that I am not sure that I have understood what Paul is driving at here. I guess that no quibbling about the term "explicit definition" itself is surreptitiously at issue. (Is such a definition a truthvalueless inference-ticket à la Ryle? Or is it a sentence with a truthvalue?). Anyway, maybe only due to a misunderstanding on my part, this suggested transference, to explicit definitions, of the application of the method of decomposing commitments into the substantive and the merely formulative strikes me as completely far-fetched. Let me end by just listing some striking disanalogies to the original case of implicit definition of theoretical terms in empirical science.

- (1) In the original case, the formulative is a conditional, having the substantive as its antecedent. This cannot be easily carried over to the case of explicit definitions. Consider a different version of the formulative commitment which does better in this respect:

If all instances of "The *fs* are the *fs*" are true, then the bachelors are the unmarried men.

This is fine as far as it goes. But it does not go far enough. It is weaker than what Paul seems to consider being the genuine formulative commitment: free intersubstitutivity of "bachelor" and "unmarried man". This fine conditional could be accepted by someone who accepted its antecedent and mistook its consequent as a metaphysical necessity. The difference between "bachelor"/"unmarried man" and "water"/" H_2O " seems not be accounted for.

- (2) In the original case, the substantive commitment could naturally be rendered as an existential claim; this does not seem to apply to the case of explicit definition.
- (3) In the original case, the substantive commitment could be rationally considered to be false in the actual world. This does not seem to apply to the case of explicit definition.
- (4) In the original case, the commitment to the theory-formulation is stronger, in an obvious sense, than the formulative commitment. Again, this does not seem to apply to the case of explicit definition.

(5) In the original case, the substantive commitment can be coherently denied by someone who understands the (implicitly) defined term. This does not seem to apply to the case of explicit definition. (How could someone not accept all instances of "The *fs* are the *fs*"?)

(6) In the original case, the decomposition of commitments was motivated by the desire to account for the fact that people may meaningfully disagree on the substantive issue. No such fact obtains in the case of explicit definition. (We cannot meaningfully disagree on instances of "The *fs* are the *fs*". And if someone were bold enough to claim that we can, he could not explain the meaningfulness of such a disagreement by referring to the agreement concerning the intersubstitutivity of "bachelor" and "unmarried man".) So in the case of explicit definition, again, there is no equivalent of the original explanatory motivation for decomposing the commitments at all.

Given these disanalogies, there is reason, I think, to have some reservations about Paul's suggestion that *the same considerations* which apply to the case of implicitly defined theoretical terms of empirical science can be applied across the board.