

A Response to a Question Regarding "Normative Functionalism"
Joseph Margolis, Temple University

I do have some definite views about normativity, but I confess to not being at all sure about the intended meaning of the expression "normative functionalism." I see some possible ways of construing the expression. But I'll just speak about normativity and perhaps it will have some bearing on the other!

In one of his posthumous papers, titled "Logic" (1897), which seems to have influenced Robert Brandom some, Gottlob Frege tenders the following suggestion: "Like ethics, logic can also be called a normative science."¹ (In context, it's clear that he also means to include the "science" of aesthetics.) I'm struck by the fact that Charles Peirce says something very similar, though I don't know whether Peirce had ever seen a version of this particular remark by Frege: it's not impossible. In any case, my own thought is that, although what Frege says (and what Peirce similarly says, in speaking about the normative sciences: logic, ethics, and aesthetics), is true enough, it needs also to be said that the normative cannot be construed uniformly across such a range of conceptual "spaces." Indeed, both authors give us reason, by what they add, to signal that they are aware of important differences among the "sciences" being compared.

Frege remarks that "all the sciences have truth as their goal," but singles out "a quite special way" in which logic "is concerned with the predicate 'true'" (128). He assigns a normative function (I suppose one could say) to the predicate "true," though, as he explains the matter, the predicate can be dropped since "its" normative force is really borne by the "assertoric form [and force] of the sentence [as used]" (128-129). He concludes, along these lines, that "logic is the science of the most general laws of truth," by which (perhaps with some qualifications peculiar to Frege: regarding geometry, for instance, even more than the natural sciences), he means the "normative" force of logical necessity in purely deductive contexts (which is, in fact, precisely what Peirce claims). But if we take the normative — of logic — to signify the unique function of the idea of formal necessity, then the idea of normativity will (however important) be very spare indeed. We might capture its meaning approximately by, say, appealing to the analogy of a game like chess: one cannot play the game without playing by its constitutive rules; but chess has no prescriptive force beyond what, conditionally, holds true in accord with its constitutive rules; read this way, would-be chess moves are "in the true" (so to say) iff they conform with the constitutive rules of the game. (That is all the necessity they need.) Logic, then (perhaps minimally conceived), enjoining us to favor rational thought and discourse under all possible conditions — hence, necessarily taken in the strongest possible formal sense, universally — counts as the unconditioned norm (of this conditional form of play). Otherwise, it has no distinctly prescriptive function.

But, of course, the interesting fact about logic, viewed this way, is that we do prize logical necessity, understand it and its conditions, and can actually make progress in

¹ Gottlob Frege, "Logic" (1897), in *Posthumous Writings*, eds. Hans Hermes, Freidrich Kambartel, and Friedrich Kaulbach, trans. Peter Long and Roger White (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 128.

extending the scope of "the science of logic" — for instance, with regard to deontic and epistemic logic — in accord with the exemplary canon (say) of first-order predicate logic. But if we say that "true" (in the sciences and cognate uses) is, apart from logical truth, "normative," we have no comparable assurance that we can formulate, in any operatively sound sense, the conditions (or criteria) of that normative notion; and we are even more uncertain when it comes to ethics and aesthetics (or other cognate notions). I concede that, on the assumption that the constitutive conditions of truth (in the sciences, etc.) can be formulated in more than pragmatically tolerable and changeable terms (which I more than inclined to doubt), the prescriptive force of the norms of truth would, of course, conform with the constitutive constraints of the predicate's function. The irony is that the match between constitutive and prescriptive norms, in logic, may be construed (if you please) as discovered rather than as merely constructed (although, even here, logician's like W.V. Quine would demur); whereas it's unlikely that knowledgeable theorists would subsume the prescriptive function of truth under its constitutive constraints. The game of truth (in the sciences) is not like the game of chess.

Furthermore, on my view, there are no constitutive norms of ethics or aesthetics to be discovered: they are entirely (however plausibly or reasonably, perhaps in a special sense) socially constructed; say, in the *sittlich* sense; so that, as in ethical or moral matters, there is no simple way to distinguish their constitutive and prescriptive functions. They belong to the sphere of practical life (as we say), so that the two sorts of function are usually intertwined, strictly or laxly, in the constructivist sense — "constituted," we may perhaps say, in accord with some more oblique use of the term, by the processes of cultural evolution rather than merely as produced by some sort of fiat). In any case, ethics (and, even more assuredly, aesthetics) does not proceed in any way analogous to the way in which the constitutive and conditionally prescriptive norms of chess are called into play.

My own intuition is that the important questions about all of these different kinds of norms (and others that may be added) make sense only in the context of an adequate theory of what it is to be a human person or self. That's a huge topic for another occasion (or a lifetime). But it may be of some value to begin to see how diverse the concept of a norm may be and of how we may proceed to flesh out a reasonable account of any "species" of norm we care to examine.

Contact details: josephmargolis455@hotmail.com