EPISTEMIC NORMATIVITY AND SOCIAL NORMS

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For a scientist, a norm is what *usually* occurs, what’s normal or typical, not necessarily what *should* occur. For a philosopher, on the other hand, a norm says what *ought* to occur, not necessarily what *does*. Paradigmatically norms in the philosopher’s sense apply to what we say, do and think. *Epistemic* norms in this sense govern what we ought to say, do or think from an *epistemic point of view*, from the point of view of promoting true belief and avoiding error. Many are prescriptions. Of those that are, some prescribe inquiry. For example: If the question whether P is important, then one ought to inquire into relevant evidence. Others prescribe thresholds for belief. For example: One ought always and everywhere to believe on the basis of adequate evidence. Still others prescribe how to examine and reflect on evidence or grounds; these are the norms or prescriptions of critical thinking.

Our grasp of epistemic norms often grounds our evaluations and assessments of what people say, do or think. If I know you have formed the belief that P on the basis of poor evidence, I might criticize you; I might say that you shouldn’t believe that P on such a feeble basis; I may call you irrational or irresponsible. If I know the question whether Q is important, I might insist that you inquire further.

What is the metaphysical status or ground of epistemic norms? Are they sui generis, non-reducible, a kind all their own? Are they constitutive norms, constitutive of belief, inquiry, reason or reasoning? Are they instrumental norms, recipes for achieving our own, individual ends? Are they performance norms, articulating the structure of successful performances? Or are they moral norms, norms that prescribe what we owe to ourselves and to each other? Or perhaps they are functional (natural) norms, norms of well functioning constitutively associated with the functions of perception and cognition? What kind of normativity is epistemic normativity?

Many are interested in these questions for their own sake, given their intrinsic interest. But many are also interested for other reasons. For they hope to understand justification, intellectual virtue, responsible belief, propositional knowledge, and other epistemological concepts in terms of epistemic norms. Understanding the nature of epistemic norms is then part and parcel of the epistemological enterprise. And then some see the question the other way round: given an understanding of justification, for example, we’ll then be in a better position to understand epistemic norms.

I am open to the possibility of a plurality. Maybe some epistemic norms are sui generis. Maybe some epistemic norms are constitutive of belief or inquiry: maybe something is not a belief unless it is supposed to be true, or well evidenced; maybe something is not inquiry unless it aims at the true or knowledge. Maybe some epistemic norms are purely instrumental: if you want to obtain the true on some topic, then you should take the means towards that end, such as inquiring into evidence, getting a good night’s sleep, or going to college. Maybe some are moral: maybe we are morally obliged to believe only on adequate evidence, or to inquire on topics relevant to our well-being or the well-being of others. I’ve argued elsewhere that some epistemic norms—especially those governing the normal functioning of our perceptual belief-forming capacities—are functional (natural) norms associated with the function of perception and cognition.[[1]](#endnote-1) I am also open to possible overlap: various epistemic norms might instantiate more than one kind of normativity. We should thus not simply assume that once we have identified *a* kind of normativity that norms with epistemic content instantiate that we have identified *the* kind. The possibility of such a plurality explains why our topic is both so interesting and so difficult.

In this paper I argue that some norms with epistemic content are *social* norms. This is not to reductively identify epistemic normativity as such with social normativity. Rather it’s to argue that some standards, prescriptions and prohibitions with epistemic content fall among our social norms. Some of those very same standards, prescriptions and prohibitions might also fall within other categories of normativity. Some epistemic norms might be social as well as functional, moral as well as instrumental, performance as well as sui generis. Regardless, *some* norms with epistemic content have the property of being social norms; that’s my thesis.

This possibility is clearly connected to the purpose of this volume—understanding the nature and extent of epistemic evaluations—for social norms (as we shall see) live and die with the frequency and force of *evaluations* (the positive and negative assessments) we make of each other’s behavior, preferences, thoughts, and attitudes. It’s partly because of what we think, feel and say about each other and ourselves that certain norms are *social* norms, and so it’s partly because of what we think, feel and say about each other that certain *epistemic* norms are social norms. Or so I’ll argue.

Since the analytical category of social norms isn’t entirely familiar to an epistemological audience, I’ll spend a good amount of time expounding the category as theorized by social science. In section 2 I’ll argue that some norms with epistemic content prescribing what to say, do, and think are social norms; I’ll argue that there are social norms with epistemic content. In section 3 I discuss why, from an evolutionary point of view, we should expect social norms like these to arise; it should then be no surprise that certain *epistemic* norms are *social* norms. The conclusion summarizes the paper and draws a methodological moral.

I have tried to be clear and concise. Even so, I cover a good deal of territory, some of which should be unfamiliar to many of my intended readers. And so I’ve organized the paper so that you can take a break from reading at the end of each section without losing the flow of the paper.

1. SOCIAL NORMS

In this section I define the analytical category of social norms. To telegraph, social norms not only involve *prescriptions* for what to say, do or think, but also involve actual *regularities* in what we say, do or think. And so social norms include not only what ought to occur, but what also does occur; social norms are *effective*. They are norms in both the philosopher’s and the scientist’s sense.

Before defining social norms, let me begin with an example. Imagine you wanted to get a group of people to behave a certain way. Suppose you are the chair of an academic department and you want your colleagues to wear business professional attire. You could offer additional research money as a reward. (Why not?) Or you could threaten an unpleasant teaching load. (It’s happened before.) If you have the resources to investigate and the power to reward and punish, you could then rely on good old-fashioned self-interest.

A related approach would involve getting nearly everyone in the group to *prescribe*, *police* and *enforce* the rule. And if nearly everyone in the group also *internalizes* the rule so their *preferences* change—so that they *want* to behave that way—even better. Then your colleagues will not only wear ties because of the costs and benefits, but because they *want* to wear ties or positively *value* business professional attire.

This second way of getting people to do things—or keeping them doing it if they are doing it already—happens all the time. Humans reliably prescribe, enforce and internalize norms that produce or sustain regularities in human behavior. Social scientists call regularities so produced or sustained *social norms*.

* 1. *Social Norms Defined*

How shall we define social norms? Building on a general consensus in social science research, Philip Pettit helpfully defines social norms in three parts. Here is the first: “if a regularity is a norm in a society, then it must be a regularity in which people generally conform; lip service is not enough on its own…If we want to identify a society’s norms, then…the best way is surely by studying what people [in that society] do.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Regularities that are *norms* are, at a minimum, *regularities*; social norms articulate what’s *normal*, what’s *usually* done. Social norms are then (at least) norms in the scientist’s sense; they say what does occur, not necessarily what should. But they are not just regularities. For when a regularity is a social norm, it is also commonly known that it’s a regularity in behavior: we know what we do.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Here is the second part: “if a regularity is a norm, then people in the society generally approve of conformity and disapprove of deviance: they may believe, for example, that everyone ought to conform, that conformity is an obligation of some sort.” Social norms are then “norms” in the sense that they *prescribe* behavior, what (people believe) *ought* to be done. Pettit remarks that this “second requirement hardly needs defending, since a regularity would clearly fail to be a norm of a society [or subgroup] unless it commanded general commendation in the society [or subgroup].” Social norms are thus widely shared *prescriptions*, prescriptions that live and die in our positive and negative appraisals, our tendencies to appraise and criticize interpersonally what we think, feel, do and say, our *evaluations*. And this too is a matter of common knowledge: we know what we’re supposed to do. Social norms are then not just descriptions of what we do, but prescriptions as well.

Most social norms are (at least weakly) categorical in that they prescribe what is to be done, thought or felt regardless of the individual’s own preferences, desires, or aims. An individual in the population cannot simply opt out of the norm for lack of a corresponding desire.[[4]](#endnote-4) And as we’ll see, they are often experienced as motivating independently of the subject’s other preferences, desires, or aims.

It’s worth noting that the first two parts are separable. There are regularities that are not prescribed. Most people eat breakfast in the morning—or at least eat something every day—but not because prescribed or generally commended. They do it because they’re hungry. And then there are behaviors widely prescribed—or at least widely recommended or positively favored—but not followed. Let’s call these social standards. We might all advise regular exercise and a healthful diet. But as we all know, diet and exercise is easier said than done.

Pettit’s third part connects the first two. Pettit first notes that the first two parts aren’t sufficient on their own.

It is surely not going to be enough for normative status that a regularity commands general conformity and that conformity attracts approval, deviance disapproval. For what if there is no connection between these two facts; what if the approval and disapproval are epiphenomenal, playing no role in ensuring the conformity? In such a case I think it is clear that we would hesitate to regard the regularity as a norm.[[5]](#endnote-5)

What’s missing is the connection between the two. What’s missing is the role the second part—the patterns of approval and disapproval, our evaluations of ourselves and each other—plays in producing or sustaining the first part—the actual regularities in behavior. A social norm is genuinely a norm when genuinely *normative*, when the general belief that it *ought* to be done *motivates* compliance, in one way or another. And so here is the third part: “the fact that nearly everyone approves appropriately of conformity and disapproves of deviance helps to ensure that nearly everyone conforms” in non-deviant, explanatory ways.[[6]](#endnote-6) Social norms are regularities *because* norms, regularities because *normative*. Social norms are then norms in both the descriptive and the prescriptive sense.[[7]](#endnote-7)

It’s here that evaluations of conforming and deviance play a role in generating the regularity. We evaluate whether someone’s behavior conforms or deviates from the rule. ‘He shouldn’t have done that!’ ‘That’s not the right thing to do!’ ‘That’s not how things are done!’ ‘Can you believe what she did the other day?’ ‘Well done!’ ‘That’s how we do things!’ We also evaluate ourselves. ‘I shouldn’t have done that.’ ‘This is what I am supposed to do, and that is why I am doing it!’ We evaluate conformity to social norms all the time; we live in a sea of normativity. When these evaluations in turn produce or reinforce the prescribed behavior, social norms result. I’ll discuss some of the ways this happens momentarily.

Here is a summary definition:

A regularity R in the behavior of members of a population P, when they are agents in a recurrent situation S, is a [social] norm [to the extent that], in any instance of S among members of P:

1. Members of P conform to R [and this is common knowledge].

2. Members of P prescribe conforming to R (believe each of us ought to do R) and disapprove of failures [and this is common knowledge].

3. The fact that nearly everyone approves (believes on ought to conform) and disapproves (believes it is wrong not to conform) helps to ensure that nearly everyone conforms.[[8]](#endnote-8)

*1.2 How Prescriptions Motivate Regularities*

That’s the definition of social norms. But how do they work? How does a prescription—a pattern of approval and disapproval for a pattern of behavior—produce or sustain a behavioral regularity? What are the “proximate” mechanisms in human psychology and human social life that take us from what we think we and others ought to do to getting us and others to do it? How do evaluations motivate? After all, I might think that you ought to contribute more money to public education, and most of might think that too, but unfortunately that hasn’t substantially increased donations to public schools, colleges and universities. So what are the mechanisms that take us from prescriptions to regularities, to regularities-*because*-prescribed?

Social scientists have focused on two interrelated mechanisms: rewards and punishments, on the one hand, and internalization, on the other. I’ll discuss rewards and punishments first.

So suppose we approve of conformity to R and disapprove of deviance. Then when we note conformity, we positively evaluate the behavior. Prescriptions lead to positive evaluations that lead to rewards that then in turn motivate compliance. And when we note deviance, we negatively evaluate the behavior. Prescriptions lead to negative evaluations that lead to punishment, punishment that in turn produces and sustains the regularity.

Punishment usually plays a bigger role. Here are some of the ways we punish. First, we refuse assistance. If caught breaking a norm someone may refuse to help you in various ways. Second, we shun violators or even kick them out of the group. We may stop interacting with violators, or even ostracize them. Third, we gossip. Gossiping is a powerful tool enforcing social norms.[[9]](#endnote-9) Gossiping can ruin a good reputation, something we care about.[[10]](#endnote-10) Gossip can lead to refusal to aid, or even ostracism.[[11]](#endnote-11) Fourth, we physically harm violators, or at least threaten to do so. Sometimes we get very mad at norm breakers, to the point of violence. Though this happens less frequently in societies where the police enforce such norms, the feeling persists. Fifth, we institutionalize various penalties. Sober and Wilson describe a 13th century practice in the Jewish community in Spain.[[12]](#endnote-12) If you didn’t pay your taxes one year, then a “blot” was placed on your family record. When you wanted to get married, your record was consulted. If it contained a blot, you weren’t allowed. Not paying your taxes can cost you a great deal. In most modern societies, social institutions enforce all sorts of social norms.

Adam Smith saw disapproval itself as a form of punishment. For we want others to think well of us; we aim to please. Failure to conform prompts disapproval, something we don’t like. A negative assessment is then itself a kind of punishment.[[13]](#endnote-13) And it’s very effective, for sometimes just thinking about what others would think is more than enough to keep us in line, a point Pettit emphasizes. Other people then don’t even have to know what we’re contemplating, let alone threaten to punish. One possible source of our desire for approval comes from how our psychic wellbeing depends on self-esteem, and how self-esteem partly depends on the judgments of others, on being esteemed.[[14]](#endnote-14) No wonder we care so much about what others think. For just this reason Smith saw approval as a reward as well. We feel good just thinking about how others are apt to think positively towards us. We also gain status and other rewards from conformity. Others may be more likely to help us, or form coalitions with us, in the future. And so even though punishment does most of the heavy lifting, rewards play a central role as well. The positive and negative attitudes other people take towards us—real or perceived—make a difference to how we behave. Evaluations—positive and negative—often drive or sustain behavior.

So prescriptions produce and sustain regularities through fear of punishment or the promise of reward. But that’s not the only reason. Humans also reliably *internalize* social norms. We internalize norms through socialization, from our parents and others. When we internalize a norm, we find it intrinsically motivating; our preferences change. We conform because we think it’s the right thing to do, because we are supposed to do it. We want to do it. We may even deeply value compliance. Many internalized norms even come to be in part “constitutive of the selfhood or identity of individual adherents.”[[15]](#endnote-15) Internalization then leads to compliance as an ultimate end, and not just as a means to avoid punishment.[[16]](#endnote-16) When internalized reward and punishment may drop away, or only play a sustaining role. When internalized, I conformed to the norm *because it’s the right thing to do*, because I positively value compliance, not (normally or just) because of the consequences of my actions or because of my other aims or desires. Internalized norms are then experienced as categorical, as what must be done, and not simply as what we should do given other aims or desires.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Internalized norms are intimately connected with the social emotions: guilt, shame, embarrassment, love, envy, and pride. These emotions make a huge part of the proximate psychological mechanisms driving positive and negative evaluations of compliance, evaluations that motivate compliance; strong social emotions are a central proximate psychological mechanisms ensuring conformity.[[18]](#endnote-18) Even thinking about failure may evoke strong feelings of embarrassment, anxiety, guilt or shame.[[19]](#endnote-19) You might even feel sick at the very thought of breaking a norm. “Social norms have a grip on the mind that is due to the strong emotions they can trigger.”[[20]](#endnote-20) Jon Elster practically builds shame into his definition of social norms. For Elster, social norms are regularities sustained by the internalized emotion of shame: “shame is not only a support of social norms, but *the* support.”[[21]](#endnote-21)

You can appreciate the importance of the social emotions in ensuring compliance by thinking about those who lack such emotions: sociopaths. They not only lack empathy—itself a very important social emotion—but guilt and shame. They lack internal motivations for compliance with social norms and are largely moved only to avoid punishment. They comply to stay out of trouble, not because it’s the right thing to do. Though categorical in content, sociopaths don’t experience them categorically; they experience them instrumentally at best.

I said that when we internalize a norm, we comply because we value compliance. But since internalization promotes reliable compliance, it certainly helps one avoid punishment, for you’re less likely to be punished for violations if you don’t commit them in the first place.

Internalization also promotes third-party punishment. Because you care about compliance when you’ve internalized the norm, you’ll care when someone else violates the norm, even if the violation doesn’t harm you. If someone cuts to the front of a line and you’re just sitting nearby, you might just get upset, and you might even walk over and confront the violator. You’re bound to feel punitive attitudes.[[22]](#endnote-22) We also internalize norms for punishing non-punishers. The internalization of norms thereby promotes the punishment sometimes required to insure reliable compliance.

Summing up, prescriptions “Do X!” lead to evaluations “He did/didn’t do X” and then to punishments and rewards that, in turn, motivate compliance and thereby produce or sustain a regularity in behavior. Prescriptions are also internalized. They in turn produce or sustain the regularity though self-prescription and evaluation without the need for external sanction, where social emotions like guilt and shame often play the role of internal sanction.

*1.3 Some Examples*

To make all of this a little more concrete, let’s walk through a few examples. Since I opened with neckties, consider dress codes. Different populations and subgroups obviously regularly dress in various ways. In business contexts most people dress business professional. In Muslim societies, most women dress head to toe. But in Western societies women usually wear considerably less. The regularities in behavior are there to see. And these regularities are clearly prescribed. Business people approve of business professional attire, and disapprove of those who fail to dress for success. Show up in jeans and a tank top and you’ll get frowns, if not ridicule. Muslim men and women clearly prescribe complete coverage for women, whereas Western men and women care considerably less. And in each of these cases the patterns of approval and disapproval motivate compliance. We dress the way we do because we think we should dress like that, and because we’re also aware that others think we should dress like that. Sometimes we think we should dress like that exactly because we think others think we should.

These are just a couple examples. There are countless social norms governing human life, varying in a number of ways, from group to group. If you were a student in my class, I might ask you to write down the norms governing classroom behavior. If you were in an audience at a conference, I might ask you to break an obvious social norm for conference presentations just to show you’d grasped the general idea. Can’t think of an example? Just recall the last time someone’s behavior at a conference made you feel very uncomfortable, or produced the thought that he really shouldn’t have done that, or even led to endless gossip afterwards at the bar.

The existence of social norms, like language, is a human universal.[[23]](#endnote-23) Some strike us as smart, some strike us as some are silly, and some strike us as downright stupid. Though universal, they differ widely. Think of norms governing what foods to eat, and when and where to eat them. Think about dress codes. Think about social norms for caring for children, or relatives, or the elderly. But though they differ widely, at a higher level of abstraction human cultures prescribe and proscribe a lot of the same kinds of behavior. Most prohibit killing, assault, and incest. Most promote sharing, reciprocation, and helping.[[24]](#endnote-24) And most promote egalitarianism and social equality.[[25]](#endnote-25)

The phenomenology of social norms should be entirely familiar to every normal, well-functioning human being. Internalized and enforced norms are a fundamental part of human life; we’re social creatures to the core. We’ve all enforced and internalized a variety of social norms. It’s human nature.

In this section I have defined the analytical category of social norms and explained just how (believed) prescriptions about what ought to be done cause and sustain regularities in our behavior. Evaluations and assessments grounded in our beliefs about what *ought* to be done thereby explain what *is* done. And so when asking about the point or purpose of evaluations we should understand what evaluations and assessments do: they express our commitments to what ought to be done, and in so doing create and sustain regularities in behavior.[[26]](#endnote-26)

2. EPISTEMIC SOCIAL NORMS

*2.1 Provide True and Relevant Information*

With this understanding of social norms now on the table, I want to ask whether any norms with epistemic content—norms prescribing what to say, do or think that are primarily understood in terms of promoting true belief and avoiding error—are social norms. In this section I’ll first argue that a cluster of norms governing what we say are social norms. Then I’ll argue that certain other norms governing what we believe and do follow from the norms governing what we say.

The cluster of norms I’ll argue for fall under the umbrella of telling the truth. Now clearly we do not prescribe tell the truth in the literal sense of requiring everyone to utter truths non-stop all day and all night. That would be silly, and is clearly not what is meant when we prescribe truth telling. Here are two norms that I think we clearly have in mind when we do prescribe truth telling. These are two ways of being truthful and relevant in communication:

1. If someone needs information whether P, and you have it, provide it.
2. If you are going to communicate anything at all, do not provide false or misleading information.

Now I think these norms, as stated, are probably too general and abstract to count as social norms in actual communities. Actual social norms tend to be more concrete than these, with restrictions as to subject matter, time and place, the social status of the actors, various features of context, and the intersection of other social norms, among many other factors.

Working up sketches of actual social norms through detailed case studies that fall under these more general abstract characterizations would take the skill and research methods of the social scientist that, unfortunately, I lack. Instead I will argue as philosophers often do: from the armchair. I will rely on my own and widely shared background knowledge, both from common sense and as reported from empirical science, to persuade you—if you need any persuading at all—that these two norms, albeit abstract, are social norms. My goal is to persuade you that some norms with epistemic content are social norms. I can do that by persuading you that (1) and (2) are reasonable abstractions over some of our actual social norms.

And to do that I will collapse them into one norm: *when communicating information, provide true and relevant information*! So when I say “provide true and relevant information!” I mean either (1) or (2) or both. And to avoid making the qualifications I have just made over and over again, I will drop them in what follows; they should be understood as having been made where appropriate.

So take the prescription: *provide true and relevant information*! Is that prescription a social norm? (i) Do we regularly *provide* true and relevant information? (ii) Do we *prescribe* providing such information? (Do we generally approve of providing good information, and disapprove of failure? Do we believe we ought to be good informants?) (iii) Do we regularly provide good information (at least partly) *because* we prescribe providing good information?

Since social norms are represented in at least some rough and ready manner by the members of the population that they apply to—it’s common knowledge what we do and what we’re supposed to do—many of us know whether providing true and relevant information is a social norm in our society. We may just not know it under that description or give it much thought. We may simply presume, presuppose, or be disposed to believe that it’s a norm. But once we theorists know the criteria for being a social norm we should be able to figure out from what we already know whether some behavior is a social norm, for many social norms. So how about it? Do we regularly provide true and relevant information; do we prescribe providing true and relevant information; and does the fact that we prescribe providing true information cause, or at least sustain, the activity of providing true and relevant information?[[27]](#endnote-27)

I think the answer is pretty clearly yes. To the extent that we do provide true and relevant information, to the extent that we think we should, and to the extent that our thought that we should partly causes or at least sustains our behavior, *provide true and relevant information* is a social norm.

Firstly, though we might not provide true and relevant information every time we talk, we do *regularly* provide true and relevant information. The overall informativeness of communication is not substantially in doubt.

Secondly, I think it’s clear that we *prescribe* providing true and relevant information; we believe, presume, presuppose, or are disposed to bleieve that we *ought* to be good informants. Many of us care deeply about providing true and relevant information. We express our commitment to this on a number of occasions; our evaluations and assessments reveal our commitment to the norm. Our evaluations of what others say shows we prescribe providing true and relevant information. We teach the importance of truth telling. We praise people for their honesty. We admire those who (seem to) know a lot, and can inform us about items of interest. We also regularly criticize people who deceive or otherwise mislead. Our commitment is also revealed in our social emotions. We sometimes feel horribly let down or betrayed by those who deliberately fail to tell us the truth. We even judge ourselves. If later I realized I gave you bad directions I might feel embarrassed. If I actually lied to you I might feel guilty. If I get called out for lying or speaking incorrectly, I might feel ashamed.[[28]](#endnote-28) Our commitment drives our third-party evaluations and punishments. I’ll negatively evaluate others who provide poor information. I’ll feel punitive attitudes towards those who lie to others. I may even punish them. These prescriptions are clearly experienced categorically, as not depending on what we want or desire. Even if there’s nothing in it for me, I know I’m supposed to provide true and relevant information.

Thirdly, our commitment to providing true and relevant information in turn drives or at least sustains a good deal of our behavior. We (at least in part) *provide* such information *because* we *prescribe* providing such information. Having internalized the norm, I regularly provide true and relevant information without a second thought. You ask me for directions to the bookstore, and I turn and point in the right direction. I don’t calculate what’s in it for me, or ask for something in return. You may even be a complete stranger, and it may be obvious that I’m never going to see you again. It is nearly automatic, habitual behavior on my part. If I see you intentionally mislead another for no good reason, I might think you are a jerk. I might even steer clear of you in the future. Our commitment drives our behavior, evaluations, punishments and rewards, which in turn feeds back into driving or at least sustaining our behavior.

And so just thinking about whether providing true and relevant information is a social norm reveals that it meets the criteria for social normativity. We’re pretty good at telling what our social norms are, and we’d all agree, I believe, that providing true and relevant is among our social norms. To see that it’s so you need only understand the analytical category of social norms and reflect on your own experience as a competent and reflective member of your own society.

Further support comes from social science. In the literature, it’s presented as a paradigm case. In his book *Social Action*, Seumans Miller provides the following examples: refrain from violence, remain faithful to one’s spouse, avoid incest, keep promises, and tell the truth. He then uses telling the truth as a central case throughout his discussion.[[29]](#endnote-29) Bowles and Gintis emphasize the social norm that one ought to tell the truth a number of times in their book *A Cooperative Species*. Pettit treats truth telling as a central case when contrasting differing social science explanations for the emergence of social norms.[[30]](#endnote-30) Whether providing true and relevant information is a social norm isn’t an open question in the social science literature on social norms.

One way of thinking of the cluster of social norms that fall under truth telling is to compare information sharing with food sharing. A first social norm for food sharing might prescribe hunting for food in the first place (that’s the job of the hunters). A parallel norm for information would prescribe *acquiring* good information. I haven’t discussed such a norm so far, but various social norms for inquiry surely exist, varying along a number of dimensions. Take the prescription *if someone needs information whether P, provide it*. That prescription might require you to go out and acquire the information if you haven’t already got it. So it might prescribe inquiry, inquiry you haven’t already done. Recall those times when your students asked a question you couldn’t answer, and you told them you would find the answer and let them know the following week. This norm obviously varies by subject, skill, occupation, and opportunity. There is a division of labor here. Physicians are supposed to inquire into relevant therapies; I am not. A second social norm for food sharing might prescribe sharing good food to the hungry. The parallel would be to provide good information if you have it. A third social norm for sharing food might proscribe sharing bad food. The parallel would be to refrain from lying or misleading. In both cases of food sharing and information sharing, the first prescribes extra effort to be helpful, the second prescribes being helpful when you can, and the third proscribes harming.

*2.2 Belief and Inquiry*

I just made a case—albeit sketchily and from the armchair—for thinking norms governing what to say fall within the class of social norms. We provide true and relevant information, at least in part, because we positively evaluate truth telling and negatively evaluate providing false or misleading information.[[31]](#endnote-31) I now argue that certain norms prescribing what to *believe* and *do* also fall within the class of social norms, albeit just as sketchily and from the armchair.

Which norms? I have in mind the norm *believe on adequate evidence* and the norm *inquire into relevant evidence*. What counts as adequate and what counts as relevant will frequently vary with the context, in a number of ways. [[32]](#endnote-32) I won’t discuss the variance. I’ll focus on the general claim that we prescribe believing on adequate evidence and inquiry into relevant evidence. Instead of arguing the same way I argued for the conclusion that *provide true and relevant information* is a social norm, I shall argue instead that these norms follow from that very norm. To do so, I’ll take a page out of Grice’s playbook.

Recall Grice’s classic discussion of the principle of cooperation in conversation. On the one hand, Grice wanted to explain the rationality of conversation, and on the other hand he wanted explain how speakers are able to mean so much more (and sometimes something very different) than what their words mean.[[33]](#endnote-33) Grice broke the principle of cooperation into a series of “maxims” and “sub-maxims.” The four main maxims are quality, quantity, relation and manner. The quality maxim prescribes communicating what is true. Its two “sub-maxims” are say what you believe and say what you have good evidence for. Grice sees these two sub-maxims as means towards saying what is true; if you set out to say what it true, you’ll best achieve that end by saying what you believe and what you have good evidence for. Making things up or simply presenting what you think but really have no reason to believe isn’t a good way of communicating truth.

But notice well that they are also means to satisfying the social norm *provide true and relevant information*, for the norm has the same content as Grice’s maxims. And so to satisfy the social norm, you should say what you believe and say what you have good evidence for. The “sub-maxims” are also then “sub-social norms” for the very same reason.

But that’s just a part of the answer, and doesn’t yet take us to our conclusion. For these “sub-norms” still only prescribe what to *say*, and do not as such prescribe what to *do* (inquire into evidence) or *think* (believe only on the evidence). And so it doesn’t strictly follow from epistemic social norms governing what to say that there should be epistemic social norms governing what to do and think. So what takes us from the norms governing what to *communicate* to the norms governing what to *do* and *think*?

Take the three parallels with food sharing: (i) *when someone needs information whether P, provide it*; (ii) *when someone needs information whether P, and you have it, provide it*; and (iii) *when communicating, don’t communicate false or misleading information*. How are we to satisfy these norms?

To satisfy the first, we’ll often need to *acquire* and *store* true information (if you are to provide information you don’t have, you’ll have to go get it). To satisfy the second, we’ll at least have to *store* true information (you can’t give someone something you don’t have). To satisfy the third, we’ll at least have to tell the difference between true and false information.

How do we do all of this? We satisfy the first by inquiring well and believing on sufficient evidence. And so, oftentimes, we’ll have to inquire, especially when it’s on a topic where we’re supposed to provide true and relevant information. Think again of physicians. We satisfy the second by believing on sufficient evidence. And we satisfy the third by believing on sufficient evidence, so that if we believe P, we have a basis for thinking P is true, and not-P is false.

So to satisfy all three, we should at least believe on the evidence. And one way to make sure we believe on the evidence is to inquire into evidence. So to satisfy these three norms, one should believe on the evidence, which further means one should, when the evidence falls short, inquire or withhold belief.

These norms are very broad—perhaps even unrestricted—in their scope. For as Stephen Grimm notes among others, any particular individual believer might be called upon to provide information on nearly any topic. There’s always the possibility that someone else in our informational economy might benefit from a true belief on the topic the individual believer happens to form a belief about. And for any belief we form we might put it in our common pool of information by sharing it with someone else, who might just go on and share it with yet another, and so on. For any topic, someone might need true information on that topic, and we’re in no position to know in advance who that person might be and how important it might be.[[34]](#endnote-34)

And now we can see the point of prescribing inquiry into evidence when forming a belief and believing on the evidence, for good inquiry and good evidence are obvious means towards building up our own individual of pool of true beliefs, which then flows into the common pool. Norms for inquiry and belief contribute to the common pool of good information. So Grice’s maxims cover not simply what you are going to say, they also cover what you believe and do, for they cover all the beliefs you might add to the common poll of information.

*2.3 Source Monitoring*

A point about our psychology should deepen our appreciation for the role of such norms. I have in mind our poor ability to recall our sources, as well as our evidence. When you form beliefs you often forget the source of your belief. You might form a belief on the basis of testimony, but later think it’s something you found out on your own. Or you might have found something out on your own, but later thought someone must have told you about it. You might have read about something in one newspaper only to think later that you read about it in another newspaper. Someone might tell you a joke, and then you forget who told you; the next day you tell that very same person that joke, certain that he or she has never heard it before. These are just a few cases of what’s called “source monitoring,” where it turns out we’re pretty bad at monitoring (recalling) the source of our beliefs. We not only forget sources, we often forget reasons or evidence for our beliefs. I might take a lecture course on evolutionary history and come to believe in the unity of life, but later forget nearly all of the evidence provided for that belief. Often the evidence itself is hard to remember. So for many of our beliefs we’ve forgotten the source, or the evidence, or both.

But this means when called upon to provide true and relevant information, and so when trying to say what’s true, we’re often won’t be in a position to follow the two “sub-maxims” “say what you believe” and “say what you have good evidence for” as two separate sub-maxims, for insofar as we follow the second, we’re often actually saying what we *had* good evidence for, provided that we formed our beliefs on good inquiry and adequate evidence. And so to follow the “maxim” *say what’s true*, we say what we believe; we rarely follow the “sub-maxim” *say what you have good evidence for* as a separate maxim.

If that’s so, then we can further appreciate the point of epistemic norms governing inquiry and belief on sufficient evidence. These norms govern the formation and revision of belief. Since we’re apt to forget our source and a good deal of our evidence, it’s important that we originally form our beliefs on good and sufficient evidence, and so it’s important that we inquire into relevant evidence and rely on good processes and methods of belief-formation. And so if we prescribe providing true and relevant information, and the information you are going to provide is the information you have, then you had better be good at acquiring true information in the first place. Hence norms prescribing belief on the evidence, and norms prescribing inquiry, are also at least social norms. Compare again the social norm of sharing quality food. This in turn enjoins caring and storing, hunting and gathering, but also caring, storing, hunting and gathering *well*: obtaining and storing *good* food in *adequate* amounts. And like sharing food, the norms for gathering, storing and providing true and relevant information are pro-social, cooperative norms, norms for helping one another.

Before moving on let me repeat my qualification at the beginning of this section: everything I’ve said is really too abstract to correctly characterize our actual social norms. Our actual norms vary greatly, from context to context. Only case studies from social science can articulate with any precision the distinctively social norms govern what we say, do and think. But even so, arguing from the armchair we can, I think, believe with a high degree of confidence that these abstractions approximate our epistemic evaluations that drive a good deal of what we say, do and think.

I hope by now I’ve shed some light on the role of our epistemic evaluations in generating and sustaining epistemic activity. Our assessments express our commitments to epistemic prescriptions, prescriptions that drive and sustain the regularities in behavior they prescribe. We’re such good informants (to the extent we are) because we internalized the norms to provide good information and the norms to acquire and store good information in the first place.

I imagine that many readers might consider stopping now, finding themselves reasonably convinced that I’ve made at least a prima facie case for thinking that some norms with epistemic content prescribing what to say, do and think are (at least) social norms, and that thinking of them in terms of social norms illuminates at least one thing epistemic evaluations do. In the next section I want to dig deeper—in fact a lot deeper—into understanding the point and purpose of cooperative social norms in general (and so epistemic evaluations in particular). Hopefully that will provide you some incentive to stay with me a little longer.

3. THE EVOLUTION OF COOPERATIVE SOCIAL NORMS

Why should we be like this? Why should we prescribe and internalize pro-social, cooperative norms for providing true and relevant information? You might think the answer is just a piece of commonsense: we need true and relevant information to get along in the world, and so we prescribe and enforce norms for providing true and relevant information. But from the point of view of rational choice theory, this should be puzzling: Why should I provide you true and relevant information, and why should I internalize and enforce norms for providing such information, when I might be better off just keeping the information to myself, and not being bothered by such norms, especially policing and enforcing such norms? And from the point of view of evolutionary theory, it should be equally puzzling: Why should humans evolve to prescribe and internalize norms, especially pro-social, helping norms, when they might be better off from an evolutionary point of view just helping themselves?[[35]](#endnote-35)

So why should humans have psychologies that internalize and enforce norms *for the good of others*? Evolutionary social scientists have discussed a number of possible mechanisms for helpful, cooperative behavior: reciprocity (if I help you, then you’ll help me), kin selection (helping my children and relatives helps my genes survive in succeeding generations), indirect reciprocity (if I help others then I’ll develop a reputation for being helpful, and others will cooperate with me), and mutualism (we can’t get what we want without working together, like lions hunting down a stag, so we’re better off working together). Though some of these clearly explain some forms of cooperative human behavior and some aspects of our pro-social psychologies (kin selection surely explains parental affection), none seems to explain the scope of cooperation among non-relatives in large groups, or the existence and prevalence of social norms, especially pro-social, cooperative social norms. The best explanation now available adverts to group selection for pro-social, cooperative social norms. A number of authors have advanced group selection as the best explanation, especially Elliot Sober and Donald Sloan Wilson in their book *Unto Others*.[[36]](#endnote-36)

Before turning to group selection, here’s a quick review of evolution. Remember that evolution just means modification (change) with descent. Any thing that reproduces—that maintains itself through self-replication or through making new copies of its type—can evolve. Organisms do that by making babies. But so do artifacts, behaviors, and even cultures. Humans reproduce artifacts on the model of previous artifacts. It’s called manufacturing. Individuals reproduce behaviors on the model of earlier behaviors. It’s called learning. And cultures reproduce—self-maintain or spawn new cultures—on the model of earlier cultures. It’s called socialization, acculturation, and colonization.

Natural selection is one way evolution occurs. Natural selection involves three ingredients: variation (so there might be *selection* among the variants), heritability (so the selection might produce change in the frequency of a trait *with descent*), and fitness consequences (so that the heritable trait might have *consequences* that explains its selection over variants). Traits evolve by natural selection by increasing the odds of survival and reproduction over alternative traits in the population.

I imagine most people think it’s either the gene or the individual that’s the unit of selection. But in fact selection can occur at many levels: the gene, the individual, the group, and even groups of groups.[[37]](#endnote-37) A gene for a trait can evolve by increasing the fitness of the gene relative to other genes within the same individual. Then the gene is the unit of selection. Or a gene can evolve by increasing the fitness of the individual relative to other individuals in the group.[[38]](#endnote-38) Then the individual is the unit of selection. Or a gene can evolve by increasing the fitness of the group, relative to other groups in the total population. Then the group is the unit of selection. Group selection occurs when groups vary in their phenotypic properties, phenotypic variation is heritable, and some phenotypes survive and reproduce better than others. These group-level traits are group-level adaptations because they cause groups to survive and reproduce better than alternative traits that pass out of existence.[[39]](#endnote-39) Selection can even work on groups of groups in a larger population.[[40]](#endnote-40)

That’s group-level selection for group-level adaptations. Does group selection apply to human groups? Have human groups varied enough so that selection between human groups occurred because of their varying traits? Let’s see if human groups could have varying, heritable traits with consequences for the survival and continued existence of the group.

If you’re looking for substantial phenotypic variation, look across cultures and ethnicities.[[41]](#endnote-41) A major part of culture involves social norms. And social norms, as noted, are a varying, motley crew, even though their existence is a cultural universal. And so humans phenotypically vary *across* groups partly because of varying social norms; different norms across groups produce *heterogeneity* in behaviors across groups. But *within* groups social norms have a different effect, for within a group they produce *homogeneity* in behavior, for social norms regulate behavior; people within the group will behave similarly in similar contexts. Social norms thereby simultaneously produce *within-group homogeneity* (people within a group behave similarly in similar contexts) and *between-group heterogeneity* (people across groups behave very differently in just those contexts).

The norms are then the varying traits we’re looking for. Here’s variation between groups, and it might have heritable consequences; one group may be more likely to survive than another because of its social norms. Why not?

What about heritability? Are norms heritable? Does a descendant group resemble an ancestor group in how it prescribes and regulates the behavior of its members? Sure. It happens all the time. Heritability is a non-accidental correlation between “parents” and “offspring” caused by any mechanism. For humans, customs and traditions get handed down from one generation to the next. New members undergo acculturation. Through social learning cultures are transmitted from our parents, other elders, and our peers.[[42]](#endnote-42) “Western” norms get reproduced in Western cultures. Likewise for “Eastern” norms in Eastern cultures. Likewise for any human group, population or culture.

We now have variation and heredity. What about consequences? Could human groups evolve because of their varying, heritable social norms? Sober and Wilson imagines two groups: the squibs and the squabs.[[43]](#endnote-43) The squibs follow social norms that require helping fellow squibs, social norms that at times may incur great cost to perform, perhaps even sacrificing one’s own life to save the lives of fellow squibs. They also prescribe punishing those who don’t help other squibs, and additionally prescribe punishing those who don’t punish. Freeloaders and cheaters are caught and punished. The squibs follow and enforce pro-social, cooperative social norms. The squabs, on the other hand, don’t follow norms that require helping fellow squabs. Instead they think people should solve their own problems. They may even ridicule those who provide costly help to others. Now imagine these two groups in conflict. Who’s likely to win? Suppose they go to war for territory or resources. Which group will pull it together, work in concert, and even risk life and limb? Which, on the other hand, will pull apart, scatter to the four winds, and run like hell? It’s obvious, isn’t it? The squibs will crush the squabs. The squabs don’t stand a chance.

Sober and Wilson conclude that in principle we should expect pro-social, cooperative social norms to evolve when human groups compete; they should arise through evolution by natural selection for their contribution to the survival of the group. The function of those social norms would then be to help the group, just as our organs function to help our own individual survival. Social norms may be silly, stupid or smart. But it’s the smart ones that you should expect to evolve when groups compete. Group-level selection for pro-social, cooperative norms produces functionally adaptive social groups. Darwin agreed.[[44]](#endnote-44)

So if human groups have varied and competed over time you’d expect pro-social, cooperative norms to emerge, norms prescribing, in many cases, pro-social behavior. Indeed, you would expect all currently existing human groups to prescribe a number of pro-social, cooperative norms.[[45]](#endnote-45)

And this is exactly what we find. Sober and Wilson randomly selected twenty-five cultures from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, North America, Oceania, Russia, and South America. They found that human behavior is not just loosely, but tightly regulated by social norms in most cultures around the world.[[46]](#endnote-46) These social norms prescribe behaviors that are sometimes very costly for individuals to follow, where the norms are enforced by various, and often low-cost, forms of punishment.[[47]](#endnote-47) Many of the norms are downright stupid (like female circumcision), and probably only continue to exist because they are so easily enforced and maintained.[[48]](#endnote-48) But all cultures also possess pro-social, cooperative social norms.[[49]](#endnote-49)

So here’s an argument that we’ve evolved partly because of our pro-social, cooperative norms, like the squibs and unlike the squabs. First, social norms as such do not automatically help the group. Some are silly, some are stupid, and only some are smart.[[50]](#endnote-50) But second, all currently existing human groups have some form of pro-social, cooperative norms. Third, group selection can select out groups that lack group beneficial traits, like pro-social, cooperative norms. So it must be that all existing human groups derive from groups with pro-social, cooperative social norms that were selected for their group beneficial effects. Existing groups “must have been winnowed by a between-group selection process.”[[51]](#endnote-51),[[52]](#endnote-52)

Sober and Wilson conclude that *social norms function largely (although not entirely) to make human groups function as adaptive units, even when their members are not closely related*.[[53]](#endnote-53) Social norms build groups. Cooperative social norms build better groups. And so you’d expect surviving social groups to prescribe exactly what we find: pro-social, cooperative social norms.[[54]](#endnote-54) And providing true and relevant information—even when not asked for—is one of many ways of doing just that. It’s a special case of cooperative, pro-social behavior.

So what’s the point and purpose of social norms? Building groups. What’s the point and purpose of pro-social, cooperative social norms? Building better groups. So what’s the point of our epistemic evaluations, evaluations of what we say, do and think? Creating and sustaining social norms, prescribed regularities in behavior, regularities for acquiring and sharing good information. We epistemically evaluate what we say, do and think not just for our own good, but also for the good of others.

And so it turns out, in a sense, that epistemic social norms are instrumental norms, norms partly conceived as means for achieving good outcomes. Though not only my instrument for achieving my good outcome, they are often our instruments for achieving our good outcomes. Experienced categorically, we prescribe and internalize epistemic social norms for the good of others.

4. CONCLUSION

Here’s our main question: since epistemic norms are norms, what kind of norms are they? What is their metaphysical basis or ground? This question could be read reductively where epistemic norms, necessarily and by their very nature, have a certain kind of normativity. I haven’t asked this question that way. Instead I’ve asked whether some epistemic norms—not necessarily all—enjoy the property of being social norms, where social norms are regularities in behavior (and so norms in the scientist’s sense) that are prescribed (and so norms in the philosopher’s sense) and regularities in part because prescribed (and so normative in the sense of motivating). And I’ve argued that, in fact, some epistemic norms are indeed social norms. This view leaves open the possibility that epistemic norms enjoy other kinds of normativity as well. And so if you, dear reader, insist that epistemic norms enjoy some other kind, or even reduce to a special kind, I haven’t disagreed. And this view about epistemic norms, interestingly, partly explains the point and purpose of our epistemic evaluations, for those evaluations express the prescriptions that partly constitute the social normativity of some of our epistemic norms, prescriptions that in turn partly motivate compliance.

I want to end on a moral. Often in philosophy we ask, partly by reflecting on cases, whether this or that act or activity is permissible or appropriate or not. We then conclude, at times, that’s its permissibility or impermissibility is due to a norm. We then jump to the conclusion that the norm in question is this or that *kind* of norm, without investigating the possible range of different kinds of norms or normative statuses, and so we illicitly conclude without adequate discussion that we’ve discovered that the act or activity is governed—perhaps even constituted—by *this* *kind* of norm. Though the conclusion reached may be the correct one, I’m not satisfied with the way the conclusion was reached. As I hope I’ve illustrated in this paper, it’s best, or so I believe, to first allow for the possibility of different kinds of norms, to carefully define one of the many kinds, and then carefully argue that the act or activity is governed or not by that kind, leaving open the possibility, to be settled by further argument, whether it’s the only kind. [[55]](#endnote-55)

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**ENDNOTES**

1. Graham 2010, 2012, 2014; Burge 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Pettit 1990. See also Bach and Harnish 1979; Axelrod 1986; Miller 2001; Hechter and Opp 2001; Bicchieri 2006; Tuomela 2007; Henderson 2012.

   Pettit 1990: 728. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Miller 2001: 138-9. Common knowledge is tricky to explicate. I shall not attempt to do so. But at least it involves most of us believing (or at least presupposing or being disposed to believe), and being aware that others believe (or at least presupposing or being disposed to believe that others presuppose, etc.), what is “commonly known.” [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For discussion of being “weakly” categorical, see Foot 1972 and Slote 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Pettit 1990: 730. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Pettit 1990: 730. The disjunction “produce or sustain” is important. Some social norms are regularities that emerge for reasons independent of our prescriptions and proscriptions, our attitudes of approval and disapproval. They then become social norms when our attitudes play a sustaining role. Pettit calls explanations of social norms that arise this way *behavior*-based, for the behavior arises before the attitudes. On the other hand, other norms arise from our attitudes. Pettit calls explanations of norms that arise this way *attitude*-based, for the attitudes generate the behavior. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Of course there are other uses of ‘norm’ or ‘ought’ by philosophers. Moral realists, for example, won’t agree that we *ought* to do something just because it’s socially prescribed. There are, after all, a number of social norms that prescribe stupid or immoral behavior, e.g. revenge killing. Social norms, for these moral philosophers, are not ipso facto “truly” normative. I am grateful to Billy Dunaway for some discussion of these matters. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Pettit 1990: 731. I have slightly revised Petitt following Miller 2001: 139. Pettit does not explicitly include a common knowledge requirement; Miller does. Explicating common knowledge is notoriously difficult. Sometimes ‘mutual belief’ is used to capture the intended idea instead. There is a rather large literature discussing the best explication of the idea, e.g. Smith 1982. I presume the intended idea has an adequate explication. If not, one may weaken the notion as required.

   There are a number of possible ways to complicate the definition. For example, one might replace “to the extent that” with a number of relevant variables, such as the prevalence of the conformity, the entrenchment of the conformity, how important it is in the view of the participants, and so on. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Wilson et al 2000; Kniffin & Wilson 2005: 281. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Fehr 2004: 449. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Enquist & Leimar 1993: 751. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Sober & Wilson 1998. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Smith 1759: Part III, Section I. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Charles Horton 1902; George Herbert Mead 1967; Bowles & Gintis 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Miller 2001: 139. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Bowles and Gintis 2003: 13-14, 2011: 169 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Sripada & Stich 2006; Bicchieri 2006: 43. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Frank 1987; Eckman 1992; Damasio 1984; Elster 1988; Wilson & O’Gorman 2003; Boehm 2012; Bowles & Gintis 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Gintis 2003; Henrich & Henrich 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Elster 1989: 100. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Elster 1999: 145-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Sripada and Stich 2006: 281. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Brown 1991, Sober & Wilson 1998. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Cashdan 1989. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. See Boehm 1999. I am grateful to Christina van Dyke for help with this section. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Social norms are related to, though importantly different from, conventions. Social norms are inherently “prescriptive” while conventions are not. And conventions are inherently “arbitrary” while social norms are not. Many conventions become social norms, but not always. I hope to discuss these and other differences in further work. For discussion of the differences between social norms and conventions, see Miller 2001: 125-130 and Bicchieri 2006: 34-42. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. These issues are clearly related to the recent interest in the “norms” of “assertion,” partly sparked by Williamson 1996. I think the issues here are complex. Williamson, for example, argues that the knowledge norm *constitutes* assertion as the kind of speech act it is. I have two remarks. (1) Many social norms clearly prescribe what to assert. *Tell the truth* is one of them. Should we conclude that *tell the truth* is a constitutive norm from the fact that it is a social norm? No, for many social norms govern acts without constituting those acts (e.g. norms prescribing when, where, and what to eat don’t constitute eating). (2) Though this literature is clearly relevant to our question, this literature (in large part) does not self-consciously set out to discover *social norms* (as here defined), for this literature only addresses the prescriptions governing speech acts, and does not address whether the prescriptions are followed (the first and third parts of our definition of social norms). Many authors in the literature even seems to allow for the possibility that the norm(s) (qua prescriptions) are not even followed for the most part (like speed limits on most Southern California highways). They seem happy to identify *standards* while being indifferent to *norms*. (But see Fricker 2006 and Faulkner 2010). I hope to address these issues elsewhere. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. See also Faulkner 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Miller 2001: 140, 154, 155, 157, 187-8, 268. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Pettit 1990. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. This fact is clearly relevant to the epistemology of testimony (to the epistemology of beliefs based on our capacity to comprehend assertive speech acts). I have discussed the relation briefly in Graham 2012b and 2013, and at length in Graham-ms. See also Fricker 2006, Faulkner 2010, and Goldberg 2011. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Compare Williams 1996 and Sosa 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. In particular, he set out to explain how we’re able to perform indirect speech acts by performing direct speech acts. He called these *implicatures*. Grice proposed the principle of cooperation to explain how speakers implicate more than they directly assert. Subsequent work established that the principle not only covers indirect speech acts (implicatures) but also direct speech acts. The principle (partly) explains how speakers and hearers are able to communicate using language in the first place, not just how speakers are able to sometimes communicate more than what they directly mean. For discussion, see Bach & Harnish 1979; Recanati 1993; Bach 1994; Rysiew 2007; Soames 2008. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. And so Grimm concludes we ought not be “cavalier when we form beliefs” about any question. As “a potential source of information for others, we [ought] to treat any topic or any question with due respect.” Grimm 2009: 259. In his paper, Grimm asks what explains our epistemic evaluations. He discusses the answer provided by the “teleological” (self-interested, instrumentalist) account. According to it, as individuals we positively value true beliefs that either satisfy our curiosity (inquiring minds want to know), and so value them for their own sake, or because having true beliefs instrumentally contributes to the satisfaction of some other desire we happen to have (if you want to have fish for lunch, it helps to know where it’s sold). So if you want to know whether P, and you have good evidence that P, then you are set: believe P. But if you lack enough evidence, then you’d better go take a look: inquire whether P. Epistemic norms governing belief on the evidence and inquiry into evidence are then species of instrumental norms.

    Though unsurprisingly popular (it reduces epistemic normativity to Humean, instrumental normativity), it faces a familiar challenge from trivial truths. Take the name of the third person to walk into the Safeway in Spokane on Lincoln Avenue on May 10th, 1972, for example. I am not at all curious about the answer, and getting it right won’t satisfy any other desire of mine. Prima facie there seems to be no value, at least none for me, in getting it right. Cases like these easily multiply. If the teleological account is correct, there is no basis for criticizing my belief or lack of inquiry.

    The problem is, we do criticize such beliefs and inquiries. We epistemically evaluate and assess beliefs about, and inquiries into, trivialities, regardless of the individual’s interest in getting things right. Our epistemic assessments of our own and each other’s beliefs and inquiries, as rational or justified, are not restricted to those topics that the individual believer cares about.

    Grimm relatedly thinks the view understates the normative force or “bindingness” or “categorical” nature of our epistemic evaluations. But if the teleological account were true, there’s no reason why someone who formed an unjustified belief on a trivial topic, or a topic that had no practical import, really *should* reconsider their view, for just as there’s no value to the subject in getting things right, there’s no disvalue in getting things wrong either.

    I concur with Grimm that to understand both the unrestricted and binding character of our epistemic evaluations we should shift “away from the standard first-person question about the value of true belief” and move instead see epistemic normativity in terms of a “deeper sort” of normativity. I’ve argued that the normativity in question is at least social normativity, a “deeper sort” of normativity. Social norms are not restricted to the individual and are experienced as binding, as categorical. Grimm claims the deeper sort is “moral” normativity. He does not, however, explicate what he means by “moral” normativity, and he does not offer criteria for evaluating his claim. Rather, he relies on the fact that moral norms are unrestricted and binding to explain those features of the epistemic norms in question. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Here’s Richard Boyd (2006: 1555): “The scale and complexity of human societies present an important evolutionary puzzle. In every human society, people cooperate with many unrelated individuals. Division of labor, trade, and large-scale conflict are common. The sick, hungry, and disabled are cared for, and social life is regulated by commonly held moral systems that are enforced, albeit imperfectly, by third-party sanctions. In contrast, in other primate species, cooperation is limited to relatives and small groups of reciprocators. There is little division of labor or trade, and no large-scale conflict. No one cares for the sick, or feeds the hungry or disabled. The strong take from the weak without fear of sanctions by third parties.” [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Sober & Wilson 1998. See also Sober & Wilson 2000 and 2002. Others advancing a similar line include Peter Richerson and Robert Boyd (1985, 1990, 1992, 2005), Joseph Henrich and Natalie Henrich (2007), Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (2011), Martin Nowak (2011), and E.O. Wilson (2012). As you can see, it’s popularity is on the rise. For some sympathetic but critical discussion, see Sterelny 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Price 1970, Sober & Wilson 1998, Wilson 2006, Okasha 2007, Godfrey-Smith 2009, Nowak 2011. Group selection fell out of favor after Williams’ (1966) devastating critique of Wynne-Edwards (1962) enthusiastic defense. As a result, a generation of biologists assumes that group selection is so rare that one might as well ignore it. It’s commonplace to find biologists and others saying that this is still the state of the art (e.g. Levy 2004: 45-55, following Dawkins [1976]). [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Individual selection occurs when individuals vary in their phenotypic properties, phenotypic variation is heritable, and some phenotypes survive and reproduce better than others. Then the individual is the unit of selection, and the trait is an individual-level adaptation. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Sober & Wilson 2000: 262 [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. The relative fitness of the gene in the total population is then determined by the net effect of these nested levels of selection. Which one matters most turns on the actual strength of the various forces of selection: different strengths at different levels leads to different outcomes. This idea gets called “multi-level selection” theory: selection and selective-forces exist at multiple levels: gene, individual, family, social group, and even groups of groups. Sober & Wilson 2000: 259. It’s commonly thought that genes are the units of selection for they are the units of replication. But that doesn’t follow. As units of replication they insure heredity: offspring resemble parents because of their genes. But this leaves open questions about why various traits have evolved. Though genes code for traits that benefit the genes themselves or the individuals they build, they can also code for traits that benefit groups (Sober & Wilson 2000: 189).

    Multi-level selection theory recognizes that individuals might possess traits that sometimes come into conflict: individual adaptations for finding food and group-level adaptations for scanning for predators and making alarm calls, for example. Foraging for food helps you; scanning and making calls helps others. And since birds can’t do both at the same time, the two traits sometimes conflict. A gene for sharing food might conflict with a gene for keeping it to oneself, especially the most valuable kinds. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. If you’re looking for substantially varying traits at the group level, don’t look to our genes (Richerson and Boyd 2005: 35-42). Genetically, humans across cultures are pretty close (Feldman et al 2003). Sure we have different skin colors, bone structures, immunities to malaria, and varying degrees of lactose tolerance. But even so we’re still pretty similar.

    Does our genetic similarity pose a problem for group level variation? No. Despite genetic similarity, our phenotypic traits vary considerably. And that should be no surprise, for human behaviors are not caused directly by our genes. Our behaviors are caused by a complex interaction of a number of factors, including complex psychological and sociological processes (Sober and Wilson 2000: 261; Wilson and Wilson 2007: 44). Genetic similarity allows considerable phenotypic variation. This in part explains our success as a species, for it allows us to adapt successfully in virtually all of the world’s environments (Bowles and Gintis 2011: 169). Richerson and Boyd 2005: 240-1. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Lundsen and Wilson 1981; Boyd and Richerson 1985, 2005; Henrich and Henrich 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Sober & Wilson 1998. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. “It must not be forgotten that although a high standard of morality gives but a slight or no advantage to each individual man and his children over the other men of the same tribe, yet that an increase in the number of well-endowed men and advancement in the standard of morality will certainly give an immense advantage to one tribe over another. There can be no doubt that a tribe including many members who, from possessing in a high degree the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy, were always ready to aid one another, and to sacrifice themselves for the common good would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection. At all times throughout the worlds tribes have supplanted other tribes; and as morality is one important element in their success, the standard of morality and the number of well-endowed men will thus everywhere tend to rise and increase.” Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 1871. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Richerson and Boyd 2005: 196. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Sober and Wilson 1998: 165. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Sober & Wilson 1998: 167. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Sober & Wilson 1998: 171. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. “Despite the cultural diversity….there is one sense in which the twenty-five cultures in our sample do not seem to vary. In every case, many of the social norms appear designed to forge groups of individuals into well-functioning units. This conclusion emerges so strongly from the ethnographies and seems so embedded in the minds of the people themselves that a functional interpretation appears warranted. In culture after culture, individuals are expected to avoid conflict and practice benevolence and generosity toward all members of a socially defined group” (Sober and Wilson 1998: 171-2). [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Boyd and Richerson 1990, 1992, 2005. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Sober and Wilson 1998: 173. This is how many of the enthnographers themselves see the matter: “A surprising number of ethnographers in our survey not only describe the social norms of a culture, but also suggest that the norms are maintained by an ongoing process of between-group selection. In other words, it is obvious to the ethnographers and often to the people themselves that social norms function to keep the group together and that if the norms fail, the group will dissolve and be replaced by other groups with a more robust social structure” (Sober and Wilson 1998: 173). For further evidence, see Appendix A. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. The enthnographic survey makes up Sober and Wilson’s first case. They also discuss a well-documented case of one group supplanting another because of it’s pro-social social norms. One of the most extensively studied group conflicts was between the Nuer and the Dinka tribes in East Africa, where the Neur eventually won. Evans-Pritchard wrote a classic account of the conflict in 1940. Raymond Kelly synthesized subsequent research in his 1985 book, *The Neur Conquest*. Without going into the details, the Neur largely replace the Dinkas over times because of their pro-social, social norms. So not only do all cultures now enjoy pro-social, social norms, norms that build them into functionally adaptive units, there’s historical proof. See Sober and Wilson 1998: 186-191. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Sober and Wilson 1998: 171-3 [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis concur: “Cultures…universally promote altruistic norms that subordinate individual to group welfare, fostering such behaviors as bravery, honesty, fairness, willingness to cooperate, and empathy with the distress of others.” Gintis 2003: 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. For very useful comments, I am grateful to Robert Audi, Ernest Sosa, Linus Huang, the editors, and the anonymous referees. I have also benefited from discussions with audiences at the University of Reading, England, the University of California, Irvine, National Chung Cheng University, Taiwan, Yonsei University, South Korea, the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, and The Jowett Society, University of Oxford. This paper is dedicated to the memory of my friend, Jonathan Adler. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)