**Epistemic Norms as Social Norms**

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Among other topics, epistemology studies how the folk—individual agents and communities of agents—ought to form beliefs. In social epistemology, for example, a familiar set of issues focuses on how agents in communities ought to share beliefs that they form, and how agents ought to look for suitable informants. Relatedly, there are normative issues concerning the production of beliefs in communities: how agents (individually or in groups) ought to form beliefs, especially beliefs that are suitable for sharing. Both sets of issues call attention to the possibility that many of our epistemic norms are social norms. We believe we stand to gain understanding of our lives as epistemic agents by investigating whether and to what extent our epistemic norms are social norms.

**What are Epistemic Norms?**

How are we using the phrase ‘epistemic norm’ in this chapter? By way of background, we find it useful to distinguish, following Kvanvig, two dimensions: the *evaluative* and the *normative* (Kvanvig 2014: 118):

THE EVALUATIVE DIMENSION concerns value—a scale for better and worse results. It has to do with whether what we have managed is good—and how good—with respect to some set of epistemic values. Commonly, our epistemic evaluation revolves around forming true beliefs, or, relatedly, understanding ourselves and our world. Let us take the veritistic perspective for illustration. One then evaluates the results of one’s belief formation in terms of whether the resulting belief is true—or whether the resulting set of beliefs is comprised of many truths and relatively few falsehoods.

THE NORMATIVE DIMESION: has to do with the ways in which we go about inquiry, belief-formation, review and revision, and belief-distribution. Were these processes fitting—the ones one *ought* to have used? By what processes *ought* we form and revise our beliefs? Did we inquire as we ought? Did we revise as we ought? Did we share as we ought?

As we are using the term, epistemic norms fall within the normative dimension, as opposed to the evaluative, dimension.

Of course, the two dimensions are related. What processes are normatively fitting for critters like us is a matter of what processes are, on the best extant information, “well calculated” to produce evaluatively good results: knowledge, warrant, and true belief, among other goods. As information accumulates over time, one gets a better understanding of what these evaluatively good or better processes are—and one seemingly can do no better that use those informedly calculated to have the best results. Arguably our processes of scientific belief formation are evaluatively better now than they were, say … four hundred years ago. As a community, and as trained epistemic agents within our community, we have gotten better. This turns on our refining our understanding of fitting or acceptable processes, and on *our holding ourselves in community to such standards* (Kvanvig 2014: 121). Thus, we are already in the neighborhood of social norms, the norms we share.

As we understand norms here, norms are then rules, or normative sensibilities, that influence what we do and think. Roughly speaking, norms are psychologically real. And we write of sensibilities here, because there should be no presumption that the relevant normative sensibilities can be fully articulated. Epistemic norms are the normative sensibilities by which folk regulate their epistemic practices. Like the rules of grammar, epistemic rules guide epistemic activity without necessarily being fully articulated in the minds of those who are guided by them.

Note that one might have formed one’s belief in utterly normatively fitting ways—deploying the best attainable norms at the time—and yet have failed in that instance to have attained the relevant epistemic evaluative good. One might have failed to have gotten the truth on that matter, or one might be Gettiered and not know as a result. The evaluative and normative dimensions can yield differing results.

Epistemic norms as our normative sensibilities are then not necessarily the same as objectively valid principles of epistemic inquiry, belief-fixation and belief sharing. In some cases they may be the same. In many cases they are not.

Aware of the ideal, both evaluative and normative, it follows that any given time, our best-informed processes (and our epistemic norms) are to some extent (yet) to be refined. So, from the point of view of what maximizes evaluative good, extant processes (and associated evaluative perspectives) our epistemic processes are always wanting to some degree—they are always objectively criticizable (were we to know more than we now know).

We improve our processes over time, and do evaluatively better, by using extant processes (with their extant warts). At the same time, extant processes (warts and all) might yet be maximally normatively fitting in being responsive to the best information presently possessed, and one cannot get better information without using those processes.

Given this use of ‘norm’, those that write of knowledge (or truth, or understanding) as “the *norm* of belief” are making a mistake—conflating the evaluative dimension with the normative dimension. There are more or less “fancy” ways of making this mistake. One can conflate norms with what one’s normative sensibilities would be were one to have all information relevant to their refinement. If one insists that such idealized refinements-in-the-limit were one’s norms even now, then one understands the change in normative sensibilities across time as “the historical unfolding” of “*the* one norm”—the norms in some Hegelian limit—as is suggested in ([Brandom, 1994](#_ENREF_3)).

It seems helpful to think of the production and dissemination of epistemic results as parallel to other contexts in which some valued good is produced and shared within a community. Just as food may be produced or acquired well or poorly, and just as the results of that acquisition may then be shared, so epistemic results may be produced well or poorly, and may be shared within a community. To a first approximation, the production of belief is a matter of inquiry or belief fixation (or re-fixation—revision). This has been the principle focus of traditional epistemology and much philosophy of science. The sharing is a matter of assertion or testimony, and the reception of testimony. This had been somewhat neglected in much of traditional epistemology. But it has come to be a subject of much concern over the last two decades (see the relevant sections of this handbook).

Epistemic norms (as we are conceiving of them here) are thus the extant epistemic normative sensibilities possessed by agents that influence the production and dissemination of an important epistemic good. Such norms reflect (more or less well) the information available at the time—information bearing on what has apparently been reliable, in what combinations, with what weaknesses, and how such weaknesses may be patched.

At root, these sensibilities are individually held. They guide our intellectual lives as individuals. But they also clearly come to be more or less shared or similar across individuals within epistemic communities. We train children and initiates into the norms of our epistemic communities—as is reflected in home, elementary school, university, and various professional contexts. We teach some of these norms in critical thinking and research methods courses. We hold ourselves and others to such norms—and coordinate as a community thereby. Could our epistemic norms be social norms?

**What are Social Norms?**

We believe there is good reason to think that many of our epistemic norms—many of our psychologically real epistemic sensibilities, our epistemic normative attitudes—are social norms, in a broad sense of the term.

What then are social norms? Simple examples involving driving on the right in the United States, not belching at dinner in the United Kingdom, passing the port to the left among Oxford dons, not littering in public parks (in many but not all countries), and not interrupting the speaker to raise an obvious objection during presentations at philosophy conferences. In philosophy we are also expected to respond to objections to our preferred theories when writing a paper. Whether we should read all the footnotes when reading journal articles, or whether we should cite all the relevant research, may or may not be extant norms within philosophy. Some norms are universal across cultures: keep promises and tell the truth, for example.

There are many accounts of social norms in the literature. We find an account from Geoffrey Brennan, Lina Eriksson, Robert Goodin, and Nicholas Southwood (2013) useful. Their account is in terms of normative *principles* and normative principle involving *normative attitudes*.

A normative *principle* is an abstract rule such as *one ought to X in conditions C*. The principles involved in a social norm need not be objectively valid. Indeed, many are not.

Normative *attitudes* are then normative beliefs or judgements, normative expectations, reactive attitudes, and dispositions to have reactive attitudes that involve a normative principle. I have a normative principle corresponding normative attitude when:

* I judge that one must X in C;
* I disapprove of those who do not X in C;
* I judge that it is appropriate to disapprove of those who do not X in C
* I demand that others X in C;
* I acknowledge the legitimacy of criticisms and demands from others that I do X in C;
* I see myself (and others) as entitled to sanction those who do not X in C.

A normative principle is then a *norm* within a group when enough people have normative attitudes corresponding to the principle, and enough people know that others in the group have those attitudes. Here is Brennan et al’s definition of a norm:

A normative principle P is a norm within a group G if and only if:

1. A significant proportion of the members of G have P-corresponding normative attitudes; and
2. A significant proportion of the members of G know that a significant proportion of the members of G have P-corresponding normative attitudes.

Norms are then norms of groups, a “social” norm. We will then call these (group) norms “social norms in the broad sense.” A norm of a group—a social norm in the broad sense—is then a widely embraced (and widely known to be embraced) normative principle, embraced via a collection of principle involving normative attitudes.

Individuals in the group are frequently motivated to act in accord with the norm, to act in accord with the principle. They may be motivated by their agreement with the principle, or by the existence of the norm (with the known prevalence in the group of the principle corresponding normative attitudes), or by the threat of sanctions (of various kinds, including disapproval) for failure to act in accord, or a number of other reasons.

Even so, not all norms are followed. In many parts of the world it's a norm not to pee in the swimming pool. Because it is so hard to verify violations, people often help themselves, even though they themselves think one ought not pee in the pool.

When individuals are motivated by agreement with the principle, Brennan et al call the (group) norm a *moral* norm (though it need not correspond to an objectively valid principle of morality—moral norms are the elements of the moral code of a group). When individuals are motivated by the existence of the (group) norm and the presumption that members of the group follow the norm (“this is what we do around here”), Brennan et al call the (group) norm a *social* norm (we will call this their narrow sense of ‘social norm.’) When enough members of the group act in accord with the (group) norm, whether “moral” or “social”, then the norm is also a *social practice*. Not peeing in the pool is not a social practice. Passing the port to the left, on the other hand, is.

**Why Think Epistemic Norms are Social Norms?**

We all have our own epistemic normative sensibilities, our personal normative attitudes. We then have our own normative attitudes corresponding to epistemic normative principles about how to inquire, how to form, revise and sustain beliefs, and how and when to share. With Brennan et al’s broad sense of social norms on the table, we now ask whether own personal epistemic norms could also be social norms? Could our personal normative attitudes be widely shared in a group, and known to be shared?

Within a community that relies on each other epistemically, individuals are often alike in their personal epistemic normative sensibilities. This is no accident. One not only acquires information from others—beliefs—one learns from others how to inquire.[[1]](#endnote-2) One learns how to evaluate one’s own and others’ learning. One regulates both one’s own belief formation and one’s reception of other’s beliefs accordingly. Further, one regulates others as one makes clear to them when one thinks that they have not formed beliefs acceptably. One thereby suggests that they have let the epistemic team down. Of course, one also sometimes expresses one’s epistemic sensibilities in systematic instruction. Finally, one preferentially associates with those one understands to conform to epistemic sensitivities that are (as best one can tell) at least as good as one’s own. Minimally, such agents then do for one what one would do for oneself were one able to be more places at once. Commonly, if those agents’ sensibilities are better than one’s own, they do for one something epistemically better than what one would have done. In such cases, we expect the community of relevant experts to police their epistemic house—to insure fitting quality control themselves.

Epistemic norms as social norms serve goods that individuals in a group have reason to pursue. Shared epistemic norms allow for a coordinated community pursuit of epistemic goods. To the extent that epistemic practice in a community is regulated by shared norms, people can readily rely on results gotten elsewhere in the community. In effect, the results gotten through the conforming community practices constitute an epistemic stock of reliably produced belief. One’s conforming compatriots will have formed beliefs in a way one would have sought to produce beliefs for oneself (and others) were one able to be more places at once.

It will be important to inculcate the norms in initiates, to be attentive to which folk fail to conform, to marginalize those who do not conform, to mark those who are particularly adept in their conforming practice. In so doing, agents are not merely insisting that others are “like us”—following the same fashions—rather, they are insisting that others coordinate and cooperate in the production of an individual and public epistemic good. Sanctions serve compliance with the norm.

There are at least three strands in the dynamic by which agent’s epistemic sensibilities come to be more or less shared, thereby making our personal epistemic norms not only personal but social.

The first is a matter of how normative sensibilities can be transmitted. Folk learn from others how to learn. This can be done by explicit instruction—we initiate new community members (we school children, instruct university courses, and oversee labs). We articulate general practices, and caution folk concerning common pitfalls. But, significant transmission of epistemic sensibilities also may be managed by example rather than by general instruction. We evaluate our own and others’ practices—and often enough do so in a public fashion. In countless episodes, we critique our own practices, the practices of others, and that of our initiates (think, for example, of conference presentations, commentaries, and class discussions). In these episodes we present—and are presented with—a rich diet of object lessons and feedback.[[2]](#endnote-3) In all this we hope to impart practices that have benefited from ongoing refinement—practices that are informed by past successes and failures within the community. Both in early epistemic training and in advanced contexts, people take the lessons and the more or less gentle nudges to heart. The training that is associated with becoming a member of a scientific community or sub-community that [Kitcher (1993)](#_ENREF_14) discusses is itself just an advanced stage of the training that is a part of becoming a member of more general kinds of everyday epistemic community.

The second component of the dynamic by which epistemic norms come to be shared turns on feedback from the world: some practices may produce more or less successes (or frustrations) than others. This can condition the normative sensibilities of individuals. Information about these matters may be communicated within the community (as was already noted). Thus, there will be a tendency for epistemic practices to be informed by epistemic successes, and for direct and communicated sensitivity to successes and failures to make for an imperfect tendency for sharing of the relatively successful norms. We do not merely get “on the same page” with others in our epistemic community, we tend to get on the same informed page. The result is a kind of “cultural ratchet” given a general characterization by Tomasello:

Human artifacts and behavioral practices commonly become more complex over time (they have a “history”). An individual invents an artifact or way of doing things, and others quickly learn it. [The artifacts and the associated practices spread through the group.] But if another individual makes some improvement [in such artifacts and the associated productive practices], everyone tends to learn the new improved practices. [A different class of artifacts come to be common.] This produces a kind of cultural ratchet, as each version [each class of artifacts and practices] stays solidly in the group’s repertoire until someone comes up with something even newer and more improved. ([Tomasello, 2009, pp. x-xi](#_ENREF_20)).

The third component of the dynamic by which epistemic norms come to be shared turns on selective association. Again, think of an epistemic community as a collection of folk who interact with each other epistemically. Beliefs are transmitted, and considerations thought to be pertinent are communicated. If one has reason to believe that some agents within one’s community do not form beliefs as one thinks fitting—in a way at least as fitting as one would seek for oneself—one would presumably hesitate to draw on the epistemic results gotten by those agents. This would amount to a graded cutting of epistemic ties with those agents. One would decline their attempts to transmit beliefs. One might still raise considerations that one thinks fitting—nudging them towards one’s own sensibilities. If this has no effect, one might ultimately selectively disassociate from those agents. The reverse is also true of course. To the extent that others thought that your own alternative epistemic practice was less than fitting, they would likely minimize their dependency on you. Neither party would want to be dependent on flows of beliefs from the other. As a result of selective association, folk in a given epistemic community would come to have personal epistemic sensibilities that are similar.[[3]](#endnote-4)

Of course, selective association is commonly a graded and targeted phenomena. For example, one often notes that the shortcomings (violations of one’s epistemic sensibilities) found in some group or subgroup are associated with some specific domain or topic. The partisans who follow particular teams may be particularly apt to violate one’s sensibilities regarding how to gauge probabilities when forming beliefs about who will win an impending matchup. In this case, one’s epistemic disassociation will be selective. Or, one’s neighborhood conspiracy theorist may yet be accounted a good source of information regarding matters where conspiracy is not an issue. With respect to these unaffected topics—perhaps auto repair, or Italian cooking—the person may be fully integrated into one’s epistemic community.[[4]](#endnote-5)

Similar processes may lead to various kinds of epistemic divisions of labor within a heterogeneous, structured, epistemic community. Suppose that one judges that the relevant community does not form beliefs in a given domain in ways at least as good as those one would seek for oneself, and suppose that those in the relevant community agree that their general practice is not as good as one’s own. One then will likely be recruited as a source concerning the relevant topic. The transmission of beliefs concerning that domain will come to have a decided directionality.

We conclude that there are many reasons for thinking that our epistemic norms—our epistemic principle involving normative attitudes—are not just our own, but widely shared and known to be so shared. We conclude there are reasons for thinking our epistemic norms are social norms.

**Preferences and Expectations: Tools for Rational Reconstruction**

The argument for our thesis so far has been pitched at the level of descriptive sociology, or what we might call “social phenomenology.” In the remainder of the paper we want to broach another avenue for discovering whether and to what extent our epistemic norms are social norms (in the broad sense): rational reconstruction. A rational reconstruction uses game-theoretic techniques within the framework of rational choice theory to see why a certain equilibrium might emerge or persist. Social norms (in both the broad and the narrow sense) are often a part of such rational reconstructions. So is there a case that we might uncover through modeling possible combinations of preferences and expectations that would show why epistemic norms as social norms would emerge and persist?

Before we address this question head on, we will review some of Christina Bicchieri’s taxonomy of social kinds. She distinguishes different kinds of social facts in terms of different clusters of preferences and expectations. Understanding those different kinds of clusters will then help us understand how social norms work in rational reconstructions. So in the rest of this section we will lay out her taxonomy. In the next section we’ll make an initial stab at modeling our preferences and expectations in the epistemic domain.

Bicchieri (2006, 2017) works within the framework of rational choice theory. The idea is to explain the behavior of individuals in terms of their preferences and expectations. Bicchieri distinguishes the following social kinds in terms of different kinds of preferences and expectations: habits, customs, fashions & fads, and coordinating conventions, social norms and moral norms. When Brennan et al define ‘norm’, they are thinking of clusters of normative principle involving normative attitudes, whether people are motivated by those normative attitudes or not (though in most cases they are). When Bicchieri defines her categories, she is thinking of cluster of preferences and expectations that motivate and explain behavior.

What are the kinds of *preferences* and *expectations* that form the basis of Bicchieri’s taxonomy of regularities in behavior? A preference is a disposition to act a certain way in a specific situation. If I regularly choose chocolate instead of vanilla ice cream, then I prefer chocolate over vanilla. This is still true even if I like the taste of vanilla better, but do not choose it, for I have a mild allergy to vanilla.

Expectations are beliefs. The relevant expectations are beliefs about other people. She distinguishes between *empirical* and *normative* expectations. Empirical expectations are beliefs about what other people do in certain situations. They are first-order beliefs about behavior. Normative expectations are beliefs about what other people believe ought to be done in certain situations, including their tendency to sanction violations. They are second-order beliefs about the normative attitudes of other people, about whether other people approve or disapprove of the behavior. Here’s the contact with Brennan et al’s account of norms.

Preferences can be socially conditional or unconditional. A preference is socially unconditional when one’s choice is not influenced by knowing how others act (empirical expectations) or what they approve or disapprove of (normative expectations). A preference is socially conditional when one’s choice is influenced by knowing how others act in similar situations (empirical expectations) and/or what other people approve or disapprove of (normative expectations). People with conditional social preferences care about what others (who matter to them) do and/or approve/disapprove of.

Bicchieri then distinguishes between habits, customs, fashions & fads, coordinating conventions, social and moral norms, based on the relevant clusters of preferences and expectations.

* Habits. When an individual finds a solution to a need and repeatedly uses that solution, the solution is a habit. Whenever it rains, I take an umbrella. My preference is not conditional on what others do. Social expectations are irrelevant here. If you didn’t take an umbrella, I’d still take one to stay dry.
* Customs. When everyone in a group has the same need, and finds the same solution, the solution is a custom. When it rains, we all take umbrellas. And though we all take umbrellas, our preferences are still not conditional on what others do. Social expectations are still irrelevant here.
* Fashion/Fads. Humans tend to imitate the successful as well as to imitate the majority. Imitating the successful or the majority are often effective (though not foolproof) learning strategies. We also like to fit in, to belong, and to do as others do. Here we act on a conditional preference to do as others do. If a famous person uses a red umbrella, or if most people do, then we are apt to use not just any umbrella, but a red one, when it rains. Social expectations now play a leading role.
* Coordinating Conventions. We often have a mutual need to coordinate. You and I want to communicate, so we need to coordinate on one of many different ways to use words for meanings. You and I need to drive to work safely, so we need to coordinate on whether to drive on the right or to drive on the left. I prefer to drive on the right if I believe others drive on the right (a socially conditional preference, based on an empirical expectation). A coordinating convention is a behavioral rule—drive on the right—that is followed because it solves our mutual problem. Coordinating conventions solve coordination games. Once in place, conventions are self-reinforcing. In other words, once they are in place, there is no temptation to defect. For if I defect, I lose out on the benefit of coordination. If I quit using a shared language to communicate, no one will understand me. If I drive on the left instead of the right, I might just get killed. Our preference to coordinate and our social empirical expectation about what others do drives our behavior.
* Social Norms. Not only do we have empirical expectation (beliefs about what other people do). We often have beliefs about how other people think we ought to behave. These are beliefs about norms in Brennan et al’s sense: beliefs about the rules or principles that people in the group believe we ought to follow. We then have normative expectations—beliefs about the normative attitudes of other people in our reference networks. Importantly for Bicchieri, these beliefs go along with beliefs about the possibility of sanctions. We know if we violate these expectations, we may lose esteem, status, access to resources, and so on. We then at least have a conditional preference to conform to the rule. Women in many countries and cultures wear a *hijab* because they believe that’s the norm, and they at least have the conditional preference to conform. Oxford dons pass the port to the left because of their conditional preference to do what others expect them to do. Left to their own devices, they might prefer to do otherwise.

**Social Norms Solve Cooperation Games**

Many social theorists are interested in social norms (and especially the motivating role of conditional preferences and normative expectations) because of their potential to solve cooperation games. A cooperation game is a mixed-motive game. [[5]](#endnote-6) Here there is a good to be attained by cooperating—a good in which all members of the groups can partake to the extent that it is produced—and an individual cost to be paid in coordinating. In these games, the marginal benefit gotten by the individual from the individual’s own contribution (cooperating) is less than the cost to the individual of the individual’s cooperation.

The Prisoner’s Dilemma is the classic example of a mixed-motive game. In the Prisoner’s Dilemma, the dominant strategy for each player is defection. If the other player cooperates, you are better off by defecting. If the other player defects, you are better off defecting. Thus, no matter what the other person does, you should defect. But since this reasoning applies to both players, both should defect. But—and this is why it is a cooperation game—it would be better if both players cooperated instead of both defecting. There is then a motive to cooperate as well as defect.

Other examples of mixed-motive games include public goods games. In a public goods game, each player is issued a stake and can choose to contribute all or part of it to a public pool. For each unit contributed to the public good pool, the individual—and all other players—get back something less than a unit. Hence there is a temptation not to contribute, for if everyone else contributes but you don’t, you get a bigger payoff. As a result of the temptation payoff, individuals are tempted to “free-ride”—to partake of the public good that the others provide, while not contributing themselves. At the same time, the return that each player gets from the contribution of any player in the game insures that if all players contribute, they all come out better off than they would were they not to have contributed.

To “solve” a mixed-motive game would then require adding another motive to the game—another payoff—that would make cooperation instead of defection the best choice for the players. In the Prisoner’s Dilemma, if there were a social norm against defection (“don’t be a rat!”) then the players of the game would have different preferences; they would have the conditional preference to conform to the norm, either perhaps because they endorse the legitimacy of the principle (“friends don’t rat on friends”) or because they fear sanctions. Once the norm is in place—once players have the “right” social conditional preferences and empirical and normative expectations about others in their reference network—we’ve changed the incentive structure, and thereby “solved” the game by changing the game (changing the payoff structure) so that cooperation (not defection) is the best strategy for all players. The temptation payoff no longer looks so rational after all. Social conditional preferences and social normative expectations can then transform a mixed-motive game into a coordination game—and they serve to specify which equilibrium (within that coordination game) folk are to choose (Bicchieri 2006: 33-4).

Could we then model epistemic norms as social norms that solve cooperation games, or even as solutions to coordination games? Is that one thing that epistemic norms do for the folk?

**Modeling Epistemic Games: Initial Thoughts**

Returing to epistemic norms in our sense, we find that Bicchieri’s approach encourages us to think about what is gotten by coordination and cooperation within epistemic communities—and what is then afforded by the regulation of self and others by the shared epistemic sensibilities. How do epistemic standards or epistemic normative sensibilities come to be shared in epistemic communities—how and why do communities of interdependent agents develop shared normative epistemic sensibilities, facilitating epistemic cooperation, issuing in behavior furthering individual and community goods? What do the folk get from having various normative sensibilities—what goods do they serve and what problems do they solve—and what shapes their normative sensibilities? Her framework invites a rational reconstruction of the emergence and persistence of our epistemic norms as social norms that would help us understand what they do for the folk.

It is not a straightforward matter of showing that our epistemic norms solve a coordination or a cooperation problem, or if they do, what exactly those problems are. It takes effort to run through a number of models and see what the results might be.

Here’s why it is not a straightforward matter to see our epistemic norms as solutions to a cooperation game. In its fundamentals, and thus to a first approximation at least, the epistemic choice situation—the epistemic game—does not seem to have the payoff structure of a mixed-motive game such as the public goods game, provided we think of the simplest epistemic gain as where everyone is after true belief, and only true belief, and so everyone’s individual epistemic norms are solely tailored towards true belief. In a public-goods game, one contributes at an initial loss from one’s original endowment, and one’s marginal return on one’s own contribution is less than what one has contributed. One can come out ahead, provided enough others contribute similarly, but for any set of contributions from others, one does best by not contributing oneself. In contrast, when one contributes by conforming to epistemic norms (thus producing a belief that is likely true, let us say) and by sharing that belief, it is not as though one does so at an *epistemic loss* to oneself. One has the epistemic gains of one’s production, gotten via conformity to epistemic norms. Further, unlike sharing food or money, an instance of epistemic sharing does not leave one with fewer truths for oneself. If the norm is indeed significantly truth conducive, conformity to it is on balance a personal gain in terms of narrowly epistemic (that is strictly veritistic) value.[[6]](#endnote-7) Further, it is not as though, one gives something away (the true belief), only to get back part of it back from some community stock (from the set of true beliefs jointly produced). One need not loose part of produced belief by sharing it with others. One still has the belief. Sharing a true belief is more like sharing fire than sharing your lunch. From the epistemic point of view—thinking here solely in terms of veritistic value—one has no incentive to defect from norms for the production or sharing of beliefs.[[7]](#endnote-8)

There also is reason to doubt our epistemic norms solve a coordination problem. The kinds of coordination that epistemic norms provide do not seem best understood in terms of coordination games. One faces a coordination game when the payoff for one’s own choice turns on one’s somehow coordinating on *one of several* *alternative* Nash equilibria—none of which dominates the others for the individual players.[[8]](#endnote-9) In the epistemic case, the choice problem seems instead to have to do largely with agents coordinating on a practice that of itself is near enough dominant for each of the agents. That the practice would be for each individual satisfactorily close to being better than alternative practices *independent of what others do*.

However, these misgivings concerning how to model the epistemic game turn on several simplifying assumptions. Notably, they denominate payoffs solely in terms of veritistic epistemic gains and losses. Our epistemic life and choices are conditioned by wider payoffs, and there are reasons to think that these make for temptations for cutting corners, for example.

Focusing only on veritistic payoffs—epistemic norms do not seem to involve highly conditional preferences. This suggests that at least some significant aspects of the choice dynamic associated with epistemic norms is not to be modeled in terms of Bicchieri’s social norms or coordinating conventions. Of course, this could be consistent with thinking that a more comprehensive picture of the choice situation faced by epistemic agents in groups could be modeled in terms of Bicchieri’s social norms or coordinating conventions.

The above results should come as no surprise. For focusing on the pursuit of truth alone, we individually have reasons for relying on our own belief-forming processes (etc.) independent of what others will do, or think we ought to do. Thus, to some extent, our epistemic coordination or cooperation need not rest on conditional preferences to coordinate or conform to normative expectations.

Of course, we all know our epistemic activities are influenced by a host of other considerations—not just the pursuit of truth. To fully understand out epistemic norms—and to what extent they emerge and persist as solutions to coordination or cooperation games—will require considerable reflection—armchair and empirical—on the various incentives epistemic agents bring to inquiry, belief and interaction. When we think through the costs and benefits of our epistemic activity in wider terms, there is reason to think that our epistemic norms regulate (“transform”) mixed-motive games. If you want that sandwich for yourself, you’ll keep your true belief about where it is locked away well hidden. If you want to know how something works, but can’t be bothered to inquire on your own, you’ll slack until someone else fills you in. If believing your tribe is in the right is more valuable to you than facing the facts, you’ll rationalize away the counterevidence as best you can. There are plenty of temptations to defect from norms legislating the impartial pursuit of the truth. Adding in the various temptations and payoffs, one at a time, will lead to a number of interesting models that promise to deepen our understanding of the emergence and persistence of epistemic norms as social norms, both in the broad and narrower senses.[[9]](#endnote-10)

Even so, focusing on the pursuit of truth alone, shared epistemic norms can be at least partially understood as what Bicchieri terms customs: A custom is a pattern of behavior such that individuals (unconditionally) prefer to conform to it because it meets their needs. The custom then arises and conformity to it is motivated by the individuals’ payoffs of their own individual behaviors. So focusing on truth alone, our epistemic norms are at least customs, and for similar reasons, given our desire to imitate the successful as well as the majority, they may also fall into the (somewhat strangely labeled category) of fashions and fads. Perhaps “traditions” or “practices” might be a better label (for persistent, long-standing “fashions” within a group).

It is relatedly noteworthy that Bicchieri recognizes that norms such as norms of hygiene may have characteristics of social norms or coordinating conventions, as well as characteristics of customs. We might take a cue from this remark:

There are many collective behaviors that *may look like customs* but are instead influenced by social expectations. These collective behaviors depend on expectations about what others do or expect one to do in a similar situation. Such behaviors display various degrees of interdependence, depending on whether expectations are normative or empirical, unilateral or multilateral (Bicchieri 2017, emphasis added).

Even customs generate normative expectations. Shared solutions sometimes generate social norms.

**Conclusion**

Bicchieri’s approach serves as a springboard by focusing one’s attention on the gains and losses faced by agents in the epistemic game—gains to be gotten by one’s individual practice, and gains to be gotten by a more or less coordinated practice within one’s community. It helps us understand how shaped and shared normative sensibilities help individuals in groups to attain such goods.

As far as “social phenomenology” goes, we believe we have made a case for supposing that our epistemic norms (as sensibilities about how we ought to inquire, form and sustain belief, and share information with others) are social (in the broad sense). We believe modeling what epistemic norms might do for us should prove illuminating. But as we’ve just noted, it is not straightforward given a simple view of the payoffs. But with more elbow grease, we should find reconstructions that make sense of our normative sensibilities, for there is reason to think that epistemic norms have features that are characteristic of social norms. They allow for the coordination within a community of interdependent agents, a coordination that allows us to cooperate so as to get more of a pivotal good than we could have gotten alone. Further, we do transmit these norms to new members of our community, and in various ways, we marginalize folk who fail to conform. Our social expectations make a difference.

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1. The rudiments of an understanding of the motivated shaping of others in such a community are discussed in ([Dogramaci, 2012](#_ENREF_6)), who argues that instilling one’s rules in others allows one to depend on them for information. (See also Graham, 2015). [Tebben and Waterman (2015)](#_ENREF_19) argue that more is needed than Dogramaci provides. In particular, they seek an account for why agents in such a community would pay the costs of policing others. This is, in effect, to raise the problem of second order free riding. In norms regulating cooperation games (see below) there will be a need for such policing, because there is a temptation to defect from the rule that is the community norm. Their concern seems fitting, but only insofar as epistemic norms regulate a situation aptly understood as a mixed-motive game. The important question of whether this obtains is pursued here. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Here the anthropological literature on conformist transmission and success-biased transmission is worth our attention ([J. Henrich & Boyd, 2001](#_ENREF_12); [N. Henrich & Henrich, 2007](#_ENREF_13)). A closely related literature has to do with the evolution of direct social learning and related capacities such as those for skill rankings deference displays.

   Deference to individuals judged to have high domain-specific skills affords individuals the advantage of opportunities for receiving information from others possessing it, and means that those individuals need not “re-invent” the wheel, acquire information anew. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. It should also be acknowledged that wider cultural phenomena can condition these processes of transmission and selective association in morally objectionable and epistemically very undesirable ways—witness epistemic injustice, a matter of groups being accorded disadvantages in an epistemic community for reasons having no objective connection with the epistemic capacities of their members ([Fricker, 2007](#_ENREF_7)). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. The components of the dynamic here discussed are also associated with the literature on “cultural evolution.” For an overview of this literature, and its conceptual and empirical challenges, see ([Lewens, 2015](#_ENREF_16)). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. For a useful discussion of various types of games, and of a representative set of cooperation games, see [Camerer and Fehr (2004)](#_ENREF_5). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Note that we are here thinking of the coin of the epistemic realm—the goods to be gotten epistemically, and the costs to be incurred—as veritistic: true beliefs are a gain, false beliefs are a loss. One might seek to factor in a richer understanding of epistemic value, but we use simple veritistic value for purposes of our unabashedly exploratory development here.

   One should take care not to over-read the above observations. When epistemic choices are understood in terms of a broader set of values, one’s choice situation may come to look more like a mixed-motive game on the order of a public goods game, as we note when concluding. Compare Henderson & Graham 2017b. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. For a development of these considerations, consult Henderson & Graham, 2017a, 2017b. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. A Nash equilibrium is set of strategies (one for each player) such that each is the best response (has highest expected utility) to the other player’s strategies. No player has any incentive to unilaterally change his strategy. A dominant strategy is a strategy that is better than any alternative, no matter what strategy the other players use. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. We begin such reflections in Henderson & Graham 2017b. For related discussions of epistemic norms as social norms, see Faulkner 2010, Reynolds 2017 and Graham 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)