

Geoffrey Brennan, Lina Eriksson, Robert E. Goodin, Nicholas Southwood:
Explaining Norms
Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013, x+290 pp.

The aim of this book is nothing less than “explaining what norms are; explaining how and why they emerge, persist and change; and explaining how and indeed to what extent they themselves are capable of explaining our actions, attitudes, and modes of deliberation.” Given the number of recent books focused on norms and normativity, this is a bold task, but apart from my reservations – which I will venture later – I must say that on the whole the book is successful. The authors concentrate mainly on norms as resulting from social configurations, putting forward important classifications of such norms (while managing to avoid an overload of classificatory concepts) and the result is an illuminating exposition of the phenomenon of norms.

What do the authors say that norms are? After rejecting some alternative proposals (norms as practices and norms as desires), the authors present their own answer: norms are *clusters of normative attitudes*. Their explanation runs as follows:

A normative principle P is a norm within a group G if and only if:
(i) A significant proportion of the members of G have P-corresponding normative attitudes; and (ii) A significant proportion of the members of G know that a significant proportion of the members of G have P-corresponding normative attitudes.

This accords with my own convictions (and in my recent book I made the very same proposal; see Peregrin 2014). And I am convinced that this is the approach which facilitates the proper understanding of norms.

After the above clarification, the first part of the book moves on to present a distinction between what the authors call *formal* and *non-formal* norms, a distinction which I find highly insightful – not to be confused with that between explicit (or written) and implicit (or unwritten) norms. Formal norms, according to the authors, are characterized: i) by being accompanied by secondary norms (which are norms determining how primary norms are followed), ii) by being enforced in specific ways (whereas non-formal norms cannot be enforced in an institutional way), iii) by being constituted by specific kinds of normative attitudes

(while formal norms must be acknowledged individually, informal ones can be acknowledged simply as whatever is issued by an acknowledged institution), and iv) by making demand upon specific kinds of phenomena (while formal norms are aimed at actions, non-formal norms may concern also attitudes etc.). The authors finish this part of their book by considering the two principle kinds of non-formal norms: moral norms and what they call social norms (social norms differing from moral ones only by their greater arbitrariness or conventionality).

In the second part of the book, the authors try to elucidate how norms might emerge, persist and possibly fade away. They give suggestions about how norms may conceivably bootstrap themselves into existence, about which mechanisms may sustain them, and discuss the manners in which they might be abandoned. A key topic for this part of the book is explaining norms by “rational reconstruction”, i.e. in terms of identifying the purpose(s) they serve. The authors point out that unless the purpose can be identified also as a reason capable of persuading some agents to adopt the norm, then “rational reconstruction” can perhaps give us an answer to the question *why* the norm exists, but not yet to the question *how* it came into existence. It follows that we must be very careful in assessing exactly what various (for example game-theoretical) models of the emergence of norms are qualified to disclose – and which questions are beyond their scope.

The second part of the book then continues with a chapter devoted to the process in which norms make social life “meaningful”, in particular by creating social roles and individual identities and in conferring meanings on various kinds of social actions. According to the authors, identities are just creatures of social actions but what social roles are is somewhat unclear (I do not understand why; I would think that roles are constituted by rules no less than identities; indeed I do not see any clear break between the two). In the final chapter of this part, the authors discuss some illustrative cases of the persistence of bad norms and offer suggestions as to why such things can happen.

In the book’s third and last part, attention is focused on specifically how norms may be used to explain human conduct and social reality. The authors categorize three ways in which a norm can be seen to influence human behavior: *norm following* (where an actor does something for the reason that a norm directly tells her to do it), *norm conforming* (where the actor conforms with the norm not directly because of it, but rather because she has other reasons, that are, nevertheless connected to the norm), and *norm breaching* (where the norm makes the actor, in a typical case, do something which goes against the norm). In the final chapter of the book they turn their attention to the psychological aspect of the acknowledgement of norms.

Let me now highlight some places where I feel the authors could have made more of their book. This should be seen as sympathetic criticism – I agree with their “norms as clusters of attitudes” approach, only I think that they not always managed to pursue it to its full consequences.

The first problem I see concerns the explanation of the normative attitudes that are so crucial for the authors’ theory. What is their nature? Initially the authors do not say much about this, save citing H.L.A. Hart’s notion of “reflective critical attitude to certain behavior”. At the very least, I think it should have been clarified whether these attitudes are propositional. (To use the authors’ own example, whether a normative attitude towards wearing headscarves is a *conviction that* one should or should not wear headscarves.) Later in the book it slowly emerges that the authors do want to identify normative attitudes with propositional attitudes, indeed with *judgments*. Thus, on pp. 57-8 they write:

The obvious thing to say, then, is that moral norms and social norms are different in virtue of being constituted by clusters of *different kinds of normative attitudes*. Moral norms are clusters of *moral judgments*. Social norms are clusters of normative attitudes of some other kind – *social judgments*, as we might say.

I think this is problematic: on pain of a vicious circle, such an identification would be acceptable only if judging were not itself a norm-governed activity. But I cannot imagine any account of judging not based on norms.

In Chapter 5, the authors consider how norms can emerge, concentrating on “how, in the absence of any secondary rules, primary rules are imposed, interpreted, applied, and altered”. Their unsurprising answer is that such rules must somehow bootstrap themselves into existence. But my point is that, given such bootstrapping must be responsible for there being any rules whatsoever, then there must be normative attitudes that are not propositional attitudes, attitudes that help propositions and propositional attitudes, as specific creatures of norms (in this case of norms of broadly conceived logic) into existence.

A further problem concerns the authors’ response to the question of the *function* of norms, of the explanation why something such as norms ever emerged within the evolution of us humans. They reject the *prima facie* obvious answers, namely that norms facilitate coordination and/or cooperation, as not giving the “core function” of norms, and they suggest instead that the core function of norms is “to make us *accountable* to one another”. Although this answer need not be wrong, I think it is essentially incomplete. In fact, it seems to me to beg the question: in order to be able to explain what the function of

norms is, we would have to know what the function of accountability is (and, unlike cooperation or coordination, the usefulness of which is straightforward, the usefulness of accountability is not). And this is not something the authors really explain.

The most problematic part of the book – by my lights – comes in the beginning of part III, where the authors extensively discuss “internalizing norms”. This whole discussion gives the impression that they are abandoning what they had earlier taken a norm to be (*viz.* a complex of attitudes) and shifting towards the understanding of a norm as some kind of *judgment*. (Note that this is something over and above the identification of an individual normative attitude with a judgment, to which the authors had subscribed before – now it is the whole *cluster* of normative attitudes, amounting to a norm, which mutates into a judgment.) For otherwise it would be quite difficult to make sense of what they say: “An individual can be said to have internalized a norm when she is ... disposed ... to treat the norm as a non-instrumental reason to act in accordance with a norm.” A cluster of attitudes does not seem to be the sort of item that could meaningfully serve as a reason. (As Davidson (1986, 310) famously claimed “nothing can count as a *reason* for holding a *belief* except *another belief*”.)

In my view, if a norm is a cluster of normative attitudes, then “internalizing a norm” would seem to amount to adopting the relevant normative attitude (plus perhaps some kind of acknowledging that others assume the same normative attitude). Then it would seem possible that members of the community in question need not initially be capable of grasping the ‘normative facts’ in terms of judgments or propositions. In an initial state, their “internalizing of norms” would amount to practical participation in a “normative setting”; and then later they could reflect on this and acquire real, propositional beliefs about the setting, which could subsequently take part in their reasoning.

But despite these reservations, I think this is a good book, recommendable to anybody interested in norms and normativity.

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References

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