

# Philosophy of Social Science: Normativity

Renjie Yang

COMPHI LAB for Data Science

March 2020

## 3 Key Issues in the Philosophy of Social Science

- 1 Normativity ←
- 2 Naturalism
- 3 Reductionism

# Outline

- ① The Issue of Social Norm
- ② Norms and Rational Choice
- ③ Reductionism and Naturalized Normativity

# Social Norms

- In the philosophy of social science, the paradigmatic examples of norms are the local rules of particular groups.
- “Place the fork on the left side of the plate.”
- “Shake hands with your right hand.”
- “Keep your eyes open during a conversation”
- State laws, university regulations, and clubs rules
- Different from moral norms, “don’t kill”.

## The Issue of Social Norms

- Norms are a kind of social phenomenon that seems particularly resistant to individualistic reduction.
- Norms of all sorts make demands on individual action. They sometimes require us to act against our self-interest.
- For both explanatory and ontological individualists, then, accounting for the character of norms and their relationship to individual action is a crucial problem.
- Whether norms can figure in theories and explanations that are like those of the natural sciences depends in part on how normativity is understood.

## Two Theories of Social Norms

- Instrumental rationality: If an agent wants to achieve a goal, and believes that doing A is the best means of doing so, then an instrumentally rational agent will do A.
- Winch(1958): because it invokes rationality, the principle of instrumental rationality is normative.
- The Theory of Planned Behavior: the analysis of intention also includes a “subjective norm,” which is “the perceived social pressure to perform or not to perform the behavior” (Ajzen 1991, 188)
- “Social norms are shared ways of thinking, feeling, desiring, deciding, and acting which are observable in regularly repeated behaviors” (Critto 1999, 1).

## Two Philosophical Objections

- Philosophers have often argued that the reduction of norms or values to facts is logically impossible.
- Hume in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1978 [1740], 469) argues that there is a significant difference in meaning between a statement of what is and a statement of what ought to be.
- A description can be true while the corresponding norm is false; even if many students cheat on exams, “we ought to cheat” is false.
- G. E. Moore (1993) criticizing philosophical views that attempted to use features of the natural world to define values: “is pleasure good?”

# Normativism

- The normativist believes that an adequate account of the social world must include norms.
- Normativists conclude from arguments like Hume's and Moore's that the social sciences should not be purely descriptive.
- The social sciences must not just describe patterns of belief or behavior; they must include genuine normativity in their theories.
- Normativism entails that the social sciences are deeply different from the natural sciences, and in this epistemological sense, normativism is antinaturalistic. It is also anti-naturalistic in the metaphysical sense.



## Stephen Turner's Response

- Normativists contend that many social phenomena are impossible to describe without normative language. Consider, for example, gift exchange.
- Marcel Mauss(1925): to receive a gift is to incur obligations to reciprocate. Gift exchange is conceptualized in terms of mutual obligations.
- A normativist will point out that the very idea of a gift is thus a thick normative concept. Any attempt to describe gift giving without mentioning the network of obligations will seriously distort the phenomenon.
- Stephen Turner(2010): is appealing to norms indispensable in the social sciences?

# Māori People



## Stephen Turner's Response

“Suppose you have some particular object, taonga, and you give it to me . . . Now, I give this thing to a third person who after a time decides to give me something in repayment for it (utu), and he makes me a present of something (taonga). Now this taonga I received from him is the spirit (hau) of the taonga I received from you and passed on to him. The taonga which I receive on account of the taonga that came from you, I must return to you . It would not be right on my part to keep these taonga whether they were desirable or not. I must give them to you since they are the hau of the taonga which you gave me. If I were to keep this second taonga for myself I might become ill or even die.” – Mauss 1925

## Stephen Turner's Response

- In his second description, Mauss goes on to say that the Maori believe that gifts are animated by the spiritual power of hau.
- After all, Mauss does not believe that hau exists. He must therefore redescribe the phenomenon in terms that do not commit him to the existence of spiritual powers within gifts.
- So he invokes beliefs about hau to explain the behavior, not real spiritual powers.
- Stephen Turner(2010): norms should be treated as representations, and thereby rendered explanatory. They are "Good Bad Theories."

# Outline

- ① The Issue of Social Norm
- ② **Norms and Rational Choice**
- ③ Reductionism and Naturalized Normativity

## Rational Choice Perspective

- Stable patterns of behavior emerge either as aggregate individual rational choices or as equilibria in strategic interactions.
- Some phenomena are not obviously just game-theoretic equilibria.
- Strategic interactions with multiple equilibria are apparently resolved with norms: inside-outside game, rules of the road, shaking hands, appropriate dress, technological standards
- In mixed-motive games like the prisoner's dilemma, defecting has the highest expected payoff, and social norms can solve this problem.

## Convention

- Conventions are arbitrary. The British Navy had a convention that ships always pass on the port side, but it could just as well be the other way around.
- Conventions are also patterns or regularities. If ships pass each other sometimes on the port side and sometimes on the starboard side, then they have no convention.
- While conventions might be verbally articulated and explicitly adopted, they need not be.
- From the perspective of game theory, conventions can be modeled as a game with two or more Nash equilibria: inside/outside; stag hunt.

## Convention as a Common Habbit

- In the classroom, each student sits in a given seat because of an individual habit.
- I shake hands with my right hand because it is a convention, not just because I am in the habit of doing so.
- Full-blooded conventions should establish something like rules, and individuals should be acting because of the convention.



## Convention as a Pattern of Behavior

David Lewis(1969): A regularity  $R$  in the behavior of members of a population  $P$  when they are agents in a recurrent situation  $S$  is a convention if and only if, in any instance of  $S$  among members of  $P$ ,

- 1 everyone conforms to  $R$ ;
- 2 everyone expects everyone else to conform to  $R$ ;
- 3 everyone prefers to conform to  $R$  on the condition that the others do, since  $S$  is a coordination problem and uniformity to  $R$  is a coordination equilibrium in  $S$ .

## Convention as a Pattern of Behavior

- In classrooms where everyone sits in the same place out of habit, each person may satisfy only (1) and (2), and then choose an empty seat.
- In classrooms where there is a convention to sit in the same place, the members of the class also have the preference to conform to the regularity on the condition that the others do too (condition 3), a convention is in place.
- How could conventions get started? Thomas Schelling(1969) suggested that salience can be the source of convention.
- A random or accidental event that puts the parties into a Nash equilibrium can make a strategy salient.

## Objections to Lewis' Account

- A convention, for Lewis, is nothing but a regularity of behavior brought about by the right sort of mutual expectations and common knowledge. Any explanatory force that a custom might have is carried entirely by intentions of the individuals.
- However, conventions provide a ground for assessing the correctness of behavior. Because Lewis' conventions are regularities, it is not clear how they make some actions correct and others mistaken.
- An obligation may persist even if it is rarely acknowledged. Something might be wrong even if all your friends are doing it.

## Repeated Interaction and Intrinsic Normativity

		Other Two Players	
		Red	Blue
Self	Red	10, 10	0, 0
	Blue	0, 0	10, 10

Francesco Guala and Luigi Mittone, 2013

# Repeated Interaction and Intrinsic Normativity

		Other Two Players	
		Red	Blue
The Lucky Player	Red	200, 200	300, 0
	Blue	300, 0	200, 200

Francesco Guala and Luigi Mittone, 2013

## Guala and Mittone vs. Lewis

- The result supports the idea that conventions require regularities of behavior.
- For Lewis, self-interest and only self-interest dictates cooperation. The subjects in Guala and Mittone's experiments seem to feel a compulsion to follow a convention even when doing so is no longer in their self-interest.
- We will cooperate even when we could individually benefit from defection. These situations invite explanation by norms.

## Guala and Mittone vs. Lewis

- The result supports the idea that conventions require regularities of behavior.
- For Lewis, self-interest and only self-interest dictates cooperation. The subjects in Guala and Mittone's experiments seem to feel a compulsion to follow a convention even when doing so is no longer in their self-interest.
- We will cooperate even when we could individually benefit from defection.
- Norms not only go against individual interest, they may also run contrary to the interests of the larger group. These situations invite explanation by norms.

## Bicchieri's Account of Social Norms

Let  $R$  be a behavioral rule for situations of type  $S$ , where  $S$  can be represented as a mixed-motive game. We say that  $R$  is a social norm in a population  $P$  if there exists a sufficiently large subset  $P_{cf} \subset P$  such that, for each individual  $i \in P_{cf}$ :

- Contingency:  $i$  knows that a rule  $R$  exists and applies to situations of type  $S$ ;
- Conditional preference:  $i$  prefers to conform to  $R$  in situations of type  $S$  on the condition that:

- ① Empirical expectations:  $i$  believes that a sufficiently large subset of  $P$  conforms to  $R$  in situations of type  $S$ ;

and either one of the following 2 conditions:

- ② Normative expectations:  $i$  believes that a sufficiently large subset of  $P$  expects  $i$  to conform to  $R$  in situations of type  $S$ ;
- ③ Normative expectations with sanctions:  $i$  believes that a sufficiently large subset of  $P$  expects  $i$  to conform to  $R$  in situations of type  $S$ , prefers  $i$  to conform, and may sanction behavior.



## The Litter Example

		Others	
		Pick Up	Litter
Self	Pick Up	2, 2	0, 3
	Litter	3, 0	1, 1

# The Litter Example

		Others	
		Pick Up	Litter
Self	Pick Up	3, 3	0, 2
	Litter	2, 0	1, 1

## Bicchieri's Account of Social Norms

- Why norms aren't followed, even when we know the rules?  
The key is the empirical and normative expectations.
- what if I am mistaken about the people in the park? the beliefs that constitute the empirical and normative expectations need not be true. Therefore unpopular or inefficient norms can arise and persist.
- What are social norms? Norms are a more complex regularity of belief and conditional preference.
- Why do people follow them? Because doing so is their favored option. Norm-following is instrumentally rational, and the behavioral patterns which emerge are equilibria of strategic interaction.

# Outline

- ① The Issue of Social Norm
- ② Norms and Rational Choice
- ③ Reductionism and Naturalized Normativity

## Normativity and Practice: An Interlude

- Interpretivist tradition: constructing norms from individual choices and action has a wrong starting point.
- An alternative approach to normativity favored by many interpretivists looks to the notion of practice to articulate social norms. Wittgenstein's discussion of rule-following(1953)
- For a practice theorist, following a norm is a practical ability. We recognize the pattern and are sensitive to the subtle cues of approval and disapproval from our fellows.
- Fixed patterns or past regularities raise troubles. Brandom and Rouse: a practice is not a set of past actions but an interlocking set of future attitudes toward a current action.

## Ontological Holism of Normativist

- Accounts like Lewis' or Bicchieri's, which draw on decision theory and game theory, ultimately rely on instrumental rationality. But the relationship between reason and action is normative.
- The normativist would reject any attempt at constructing norms from the overall pattern of belief, attitude, or behavior. "Ought" cannot be reduced to "is".
- In making these arguments, the normativist seems committed to a form of ontological holism. But that means norms explanatorily impotent.
- Winch and Charles Taylor: the rule-constituted character of human behavior blocks any attempt to assimilate the social and the natural sciences.

## Norms, Naturalism, and Supervenience

- The central argument of the normativist is that where there are genuine norms, there must be a difference between what is correct and what most people do, say, or believe.
- A proponent of either the rational choice or practice theoretic account of norms might agree with this point.
- Both approaches to norms can be understood as making norms supervene on individual beliefs, attitudes, and behavior.
- Ontologically anti-reductionist, but do not postulate the existence of norms that are outside of the causal realm: naturalistic normativism.

## Norms, Naturalism, and Supervenience

- Kincaid's suggestion: "some reference to individuals is a necessary condition for any full explanation of social phenomenon. (1986)
- The notion of supervenience provides a way for the accounts of norms to respect some of the points of the normativist arguments.
- At the same time, it permits a non-reductive individualist stance on the question of reductionism, treating norms as supervening on individual belief, attitude, and action.
- These views close the gap between "is" and "ought" in the sense that their accounts use only psychological, biological, or evolutionary resources.



# The Paradigm of Computational Philosophy

And that is the methodology we adopt in our COMPHI Lab!

## Reference

- Mark Risjord (2014) *Philosophy of Social Science: A Contemporary Introduction*, Routledge.
- wikipedia  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Māori\\_people](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Māori_people)