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Normativity

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Our lives are permeated by thinking about right or wrong, good or bad, and the like. Normativity is a pervasive and intricate part of human social being. In a broad sense, we deal with normativity whenever we apply standards of judgment or evaluation to some states of affairs. For instance, biological or cultural objects, such as a heart or a human-made blood pump, may fulfill their “proper” function (to pump blood) better or worse. Psychological states, such as beliefs or desires, may or may not meet their conditions of success (e.g., truth for beliefs, fulfillment for desires). Normativity, broadly speaking, is therefore an inherent aspect of the intentional, evaluative stance we take towards objects and situations. In a narrower sense, normativity implies shared or shareable and enforceable standards that guide and regulate our own and others’ conduct, behavior, reasoning, emotional expressions, etc. The paradigmatic case is moral normativity. Moral norms regulate how to deal with matters of justice, well-being, rights, and the like. But obviously, normativity is much more pervasive and encompassing. Human agents apply norms to all kinds of situations and actions. Practical issues are governed by norms of instrumental rationality; interpersonal coordination and group identification are regulated by arbitrary conventional norms (e.g., traffic, rituals, or games); how we express emotions is governed by affective normativity; and in our theoretical activities such as making inferences or forming beliefs, we are guided by epistemic norms.

History

Thinking about normative issues—most prominently about morality, law, and conventions—has a long tradition in philosophy, dating back at least to ancient Greece. Systematic empirical research on normativity, however, began roughly in the late 19th century with the separation of empirical psychology and philosophy ([Wundt, 1903](#)) as well as the advent of sociology as a scientific enterprise ([Durkheim, 1982](#)). The newly emerging field of the empirical study of normativity in the 20th century has seen different research programs and paradigms. Landmark studies of the development of normativity and morality are built on a Kantian rationalist–constructivist framework and focused on explicit normative reasoning and justification ([Kohlberg, 1963](#); [Piaget, 1932](#); [Turiel, 1983](#)). For instance, researchers were interested in whether people reason about moral issues based on generalizable, or even universal, principles or based on simple preferences, such as (not) doing something to avoid sanctions.

This initial period was followed by more intuitionist and sentimentalist approaches to human norm psychology that emphasize the role of moral intuitions and feelings that may outrun and contradict explicitly available reasoning and justification ([Bloom, 2013](#); [Haidt, 2012](#); [Nichols, 2004](#)). According to these views, people (often) make moral judgments based on gut feelings, and the degree of emotional involvement may explain why some matters are serious (“moral”), whereas others are non-serious (e.g., “conventional”). Today, the study of normativity is a vibrant interdisciplinary field that brings together many different perspectives, including investigations in psychology, biology, social neuroscience, sociology, experimental philosophy, and economics.

Core concepts

The empirical study of normativity investigates how agents represent, follow, and enforce various types of norms. Normativity understood this way is socially constituted and inherently linked to shared (or shareable) norms that have four main features ([Schmidt & Rakoczy, 2023](#)):

1. They set situation-transcendent standards of correctness as opposed to mere episodic or idiosyncratic preferences in the here and now ([Brandom 1994](#)). For instance, a given action is assessed as right or wrong according to a standard, not according to personal preference.
2. They come with normative force, have noncoercive authority or “oughtness,” and are intrinsically action-guiding and motivating. In contrast to physical force, normative force presupposes violability, that is, the possibility to act otherwise ([Brandom, 1994](#); [Korsgaard, 1996](#)). Nonetheless this force exhibits noncoercive bindingness and moves us by giving reasons (not causes) to act and think in certain ways ([Korsgaard, 1996](#)).
3. They are, in principle, shareable, general, and agent independent in the sense that they apply to any relevant agent including oneself in equivalent circumstances ([Korsgaard, 1996](#); [Nagel, 1986](#); [Wittgenstein, 2001](#)).
4. They are usually valid in context-relative ways. For instance, it may be expected and fine to hit someone in one context (e.g., boxing match) but not in another (e.g., daily life; [Schmidt & Rakoczy, 2023](#)).

The first two features give rise to reciprocal normative expectations about what we “should” do, as opposed to mere descriptive or statistical expectations about agents’ behavior ([Schmid, 2011](#); [Searle, 1983](#); [Smith, 1994](#)).

Questions, controversies, and new developments

Core theoretical controversies pertain to the following questions: How can norms be double sided in that they purport to describe reality and prescribe human conduct at the same time ([Smith, 1994](#))? Are there qualitatively different kinds of norms such as conventional versus moral ones ([Turiel, 1983](#)), or alternatively, do norms differ merely in terms of which types of emotion they usually come with ([Nichols, 2004](#))? Can the “ought” of norms be reduced to some form of “is” regarding agents’ and societies’ preferences, dispositions, etc. ([Brandom, 1994](#); [Hume, 2000](#))?

Core empirical issues include debates about the ontogeny and evolution of human normativity, often discussed within the context of humans’ ultra-cooperativeness ([Chudek & Henrich, 2011](#); [Tomasello, 2019](#)). Regarding ontogeny, moral nativism claims that humans come equipped with an innate, possibly modular norm psychology ([Bloom, 2013](#); [Sripada & Stich, 2006](#)). Radical moral empiricism, in contrast, has it that norms are acquired by general associative and reinforcement learning over development ([Heyes, 2024](#)). Various positions in between assume that humans may have more or less natural or innate capacities (for shared intentionality, cooperation, or sympathy, for example) that involve some sensitivity

for normative matters and that lay the foundation for normative learning [see [Social Learning](#)]. Regarding evolutionary and historical development, the emergence, transmission, application, enforcement, dynamics, change, and cultural diversity of norms have been subject to much recent debate, for example, in the context of gene culture coevolution ([Gelfand et al., 2024](#); [Horne & Mollborn, 2020](#); [Schmidt & Rakoczy, 2023](#)). Recently, neurocognitive research has begun to investigate the neural underpinnings of normative cognition ([Cowell & Decety, 2015](#); [Feng et al., 2015](#)).

Broader connections

From a metaphysical point of view, one of the most pressing open questions is how normativity fits into the natural world; that is, how we can explain how the normative is possible in naturalistic, causal, and nonnormative terms ([Brandom, 1994](#), [Sellars, 1953](#)). That is, to what extent do things like norms and oughts really exist as entities out there in nature, and can they be reduced to simpler notions or not? Another issue relates to how normative evaluation and intentional interpretation (ascription of mental states, often called theory of mind) are related [see [Theory of Mind](#)]. That the interpretation of an action (as intended in such and such ways) affects normative (in particular, moral) evaluation is obvious. However, research has highlighted that the reverse may also hold in many cases: which normative status we confer to an observed act may affect how we interpret its intentional structure ([Knobe, 2010](#)). Finally, normative concepts (*deontic modality*: e.g., what one “can” or “must” do) are related in complicated ways to other modal concepts (*epistemic modality*: e.g., what “can” or “must” be the case). One interesting speculation, backed by empirical data, has been that early in development, these different kinds of modality are not clearly separated yet but only become so over the course of cognitive development [see [Cognitive Development](#)] ([Shtulman & Phillips, 2018](#)).

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