

Attitudinal Social Norms

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1. Introduction

Two of the most systematic and well-developed theories of social norms analyse such norms in terms of patterns of individual attitudes. On Bicchieri's view (2006, 2017), social norms most centrally involve a pattern of preferences among the members of a relevant population, conditional on their normative and empirical expectations of other members. According to Brennan, Eriksson, Goodin, and Southwood (2013; hereafter I will refer to this group of authors as BEGS), social norms most centrally involve patterns of normative attitudes among the members of a given group, grounded in a social practice of that group. This paper argues that the existence of attitudinal social norms speaks in favour of Bicchieri's preference-based view, and against BEGS's normative attitude-based view. I will first present some reasons to think that there are attitudinal social norms — social norms that demand not just behaviour, but also a variety of attitudes. I will then argue that with a very minor modification, Bicchieri's account can properly capture such attitudinal social norms and that the BEGS account cannot.

2. There are Attitudinal Social Norms

The examples used in the philosophical literature on social norms almost always concern norms that demand various kinds of behaviour. Individuals are required, for example, to take revenge for offences (Elster 1989, 114), to marry off their daughters at an early age (Bicchieri 2017, 5), or not to urinate in public swimming pools (BEGS 2013, 20). In some cases, however, there are social norms that require individuals to have (or lack) certain attitudes. I provide two considerations in favour of the existence of such attitudinal social norms.

The first is that social norms are norms and, further, that other norms commonly and relatively uncontroversially place demands on the attitudes of individuals. Epistemic norms, for example, may require that individuals believe in accordance with their evidence. Norms of practical rationality may demand that we intend the believed necessary means to our ends. In criminalising attempts, legal norms proscribe sets of things that include the intention to commit certain crimes (see Yaffe 2010). Social norms have a number of features that set them apart from other norms, but they are nonetheless norms. Consequently, absent a positive argument to the contrary, it would seem that social norms can make demands on people's attitudes as well as their behaviour.

The second consideration is that we can give examples of social norms that require individuals to have certain attitudes. Consider the phenomenon of grief. In many groups there are social norms that require people to grieve in response to the death of certain persons such as relatives, loved ones, or heads of state. Failing to grieve for such persons may result in the disapproval of other members of the group, and perhaps in other sanctions. Grief is a complex phenomenon, and I'm not supposing that it simply *is* an attitude; grieving for a person may also involve a variety of behaviours. However, grief involves attitudinal components as well. Nussbaum, for example, takes grief to involve a eudaimonistic judgment (2001, 76) and Prinz a valenced perception of bodily changes (2004). Further examples can easily be given, including social norms requiring anger, shame, or love (for one's children, for example).

One might challenge this argument and deny that social norms ever require grief. One could acknowledge that grief consists in both behaviour and attitudes, but hold that the demands placed on individuals by social norms are always limited to the behavioural components. As long as you wear black, slump your shoulders, don't get remarried too soon, and so on, you have thereby complied with the applicable social norms regardless of your motivations and regardless of how you think or feel. Such social norms, we might say, merely demand that people *act as if* they grieve. Such social norms are perfectly possible. It seems factually mistaken, however, to think that social norms are

always of this kind. In many cases, when we do not, in fact, grieve for the dead but we manage to engage in the requisite behaviour, we may well escape social sanctions. But this is not because we are not in violation of the social norm, it is because we succeed in convincing our social environment that we conform to it when we don't. If we are found out — say, someone reads our diary, or we confide in an untrustworthy friend — disapproval and other sanctions might well follow.

3. *Two Accounts of Social Norms*

Can existing theories of social norms account for attitudinal social norms? I will start with Bicchieri's view. She first provides the conditions for a social norm to exist:

Let R be a *behavioural rule* for situations of type S . We say that R is a social norm in a population P if and only if there exists a sufficiently large subset P_{cf} of P such that, for each individual i in P_{cf} ,

Contingency: i knows that 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:

(a) *Empirical expectations*: i believes that a sufficiently large subset of P conforms to R in situations of type S ;

and

(b) *Normative expectations*: i believes that a sufficiently large subset of P believes that i ought to conform to R in situations of type S ;

She then adds that a social norm R does not merely exist but is *followed* by population P if there exists a sufficiently large subset P_f of P such that, for each individual i in P_f conditions (a) and (b) are met for i and, as a result, i prefers to conform to R in situations of type S .¹

An example of a social norm is the rule that one uses a fork to lift solid food from one's plate to one's mouth at dinner. It is not uncommon that, for a group of diners at a table, this rule is a followed social norm. A sufficiently large portion of the people present prefers to use a fork conditional on their belief that sufficiently many others will also use a fork and on their belief that sufficiently many others believe that they should use a fork. This condition is met for a sufficiently large portion of these people, so that they do in fact prefer to use a fork. Were it not for these beliefs, many might prefer to use, at least occasionally, their hands or a spoon.

The second view I will look at is the one provided by BEGS. According to them, a normative principle P is a social norm within group G if and only if:

(i) A significant proportion of the members of G have P -corresponding normative attitudes;

(ii) A significant proportion of the members of G know that a significant proportion of the members of G have P -corresponding normative attitudes (2013, 29);

and

(iii) The P -corresponding normative attitudes of the significant proportion of G mentioned in (i) and (ii) are for many or most of those individuals grounded, at least in part, in presumed social practices (2013, 72).

To continue with the same example, let the content of P be that one should use a fork to lift solid food from one's plate to one's mouth during dinner. For normative attitudes to be P -corresponding

¹ These statements of Bicchieri's view are an amalgam of Bicchieri's more formal statement in (2006, 11) and her informal statement in Bicchieri (2017, 34). I have left reference to social sanctions (2006, 11) away since this does not affect my argument.

is for them to appropriately reflect the content and normative force of *P* (BEGS 2013, 30). BEGS define a social practice, as mentioned in (iii), as:

a regularity in response among the members of a group that is explained, in part, by the presence within the group of pro-attitudes (or beliefs about the presence of pro-attitudes) towards the relevant response that are a matter of (common) knowledge among the members of the group (2013, 68).

For example, a group of children may regularly play tag during class breaks. This regularity in behaviour may, in part, be explained by the fact that many of them *like* to play tag and that this is common knowledge among them. There is a social practice of playing tag during class breaks, but there need not be a BEGS-social norm to that effect. For a person's P-corresponding normative attitude to be grounded, for that person, in a presumed social practice is for that person to believe, take, or see that attitude to be justified by the (presumed) existence of that social practice (BEGS 2013, 68-70). For example, I might believe that one ought to use a fork, and I might take that normative judgment to be justified by the (believed) existence of a social practice of using forks.

4. Bicchieri over BEGS

It would seem that the BEGS view is better able to account for attitudinal social norms than Bicchieri's view. After all, according to Bicchieri, social norms are rules of behaviour so her view is incompatible with the existence of attitudinal social norms. On the BEGS account, on the other hand, social norms are normative principles, and BEGS explicitly endorse the view that such principles can demand attitudes as well as behaviour (2013, 245-259). In this section, I will argue that appearances are deceiving.

The problem with the BEGS account lies in condition (iii), requiring that the normative attitudes of individuals are grounded in presumed social practices. The problem is that for many kinds of attitudes that are subject to significant social norms, the presence of a social practice of

having that attitude does not provide justification for the normative principles requiring it. Let the relevant normative principle be that one should grieve for one's relatives when they die. There could well be a social practice of doing so within a given social group, but it would be a mistake to think that the existence of such a social practice justifies the corresponding normative principle. If it is true that we should grieve for our relatives, the reasons for this come from their value as persons, from the value of our relationship to them, from the badness of their death, or from other considerations of this kind, *not* from the (presumed) fact that there is a social practice of grieving for them.² The same can be said for other attitudinal social norms. There may be a social practice of loving one's children, but the reason why one should love one's children lies in their need to be loved, in their humanity, in the value of one's relationships to them, or similar considerations, not in the existence of a social practice of doing so. Likewise, when we should be angry or ashamed, this is because we are wronged, or because we have been revealed to fall short of certain standards, not because there are social practices of having these attitudes.

The source of this problem is that there are restrictions on the kinds of considerations that can justify normative principles requiring attitudes. These restrictions depend on the kind of attitude at issue. Imagine a participant in an execution by firing squad who knows that one of the shooters is firing a blank. Consider the normative principle that this shooter should believe that *he* is the one firing the blank. Evidence for the proposition that he does can provide justification for this principle (a felt absence of recoil, for example). However, the various advantages there may be to following the principle (say, a reduction in feelings of anxiety or guilt) do not provide such justification. To judge that the shooter should believe that he fires the blank because of such advantages would consequently be mistaken — pragmatic considerations are reasons of the wrong kind for principles

² Under certain circumstances, the existence of a social practice of grief may provide evidence for the truth or correctness of the normative principle, but BEGS deny that such epistemic justification constitutes grounding (2013, 68).

requiring belief. Likewise, principles requiring grief, love, anger, or shame can only be justified by specific sets of considerations — having to do with the significance of our loss, with the value of our relationships to the dead and the living, with being wronged, with being exposed, and so on — other considerations provide reasons of the wrong kind.³

Condition (iii) requires that individuals take their principle-corresponding normative *attitudes* to be justified by social practices, not that they take those principles themselves to be so justified. This observation doesn't help avoid the present problem. If the existence of a social practice does not justify a given normative principle, it is difficult to see how this social practice does justify a normative attitude that consists in the endorsement of that principle. Further, condition (iii) only requires that individuals' normative attitudes are *in part* grounded in presumed social practices, so these attitudes can be grounded partly, even primarily, in practice-independent considerations. This also does not answer the problem. The issue is that individuals' normative attitudes are grounded, for them, in social practices that provide no justification for those attitudes; the issue is not that these individuals fail to appreciate whatever practice-independent justification there may be for these attitudes.

BEGS discuss this issue (2013, 78-81) as a problem for their account of social norms generally, not as a problem for attitudinal social norms in particular. BEGS provide two responses. The first is that condition (iii) only requires that individuals *take* their normative attitudes to be, in part, justified by a social practice; the social practice need not in fact provide any justification for those attitudes. This means that the existence of attitudinal social norms requiring grief, love, anger, shame, and the like is compatible with the claim that social practices do not provide justification for the corresponding normative attitudes. The price of this response, of course, is that it requires the attribution of widespread error to the members of any social group in which there are such

³ Principles requiring behaviour, by contrast, can typically be justified by all kinds of practical considerations.

attitudinal social norms. The problem here is the *kind* of error that is being ascribed. Take a social norm that demands that one is disgusted by the touch of members of certain racial or caste groups. It wouldn't be problematic to ascribe to those who follow this norm the mistaken view that there is justification for the normative principle that one should be disgusted by the touch of specific group members. After all, it would not be surprising if followers of this norm rationalise their attitudes. The BEGS account, however, requires ascription of the specific idea that this normative principle is justified (in part) by the existence of a corresponding social practice — a consideration of the wrong kind for justifying principles requiring disgust.

Their second response is that social practices can provide justification for normative principles, based on the value of those social practices. Even if it is not intrinsically better to use a fork rather than a spoon or chopsticks, a social practice of using a fork may be valuable. It may, for example, help us discriminate between those who are worthy of social inclusion and those who are not, or it may support the mutual expression of a sense of affinity with one another (BEGS 2013, 80). The value of social practices can in turn provide justification for the associated normative principles. This does not answer the key issue of attitudes imposing restrictions on the kinds of considerations that can justify normative principles requiring those attitudes. To be sure, there may be normative principles that require attitudes such that the value of an underlying social practice may justify those principles. But there are all kinds of attitudes for which this isn't the case, and it isn't true for my main examples: the (possible) value of social practices of grieving for the dead or loving one's children does not justify normative principles requiring those attitudes.

Bicchieri's theory, I will now argue, better accounts for attitudinal social norms, provided we amend the theory in one crucial way. As it stands, Bicchieri's theory cannot account for attitudinal social norms at all because it conceives of social norms as rules of behaviour. This restriction to rules of behaviour is, however, simply a starting point of her theory; it is not a position for which she provides a substantial argument, nor is it required to make the rest of the view

function. We can amend the theory in a straightforward way, allowing social norms to be constituted not just by behavioural rules but also by rules requiring various kinds of attitude, leaving the rest of the theory exactly as it is.

Let R be the rule that one gets angry when spat on. When R is a followed social norm in a given population, sufficiently many members of the population (conditionally) prefer to conform to R . This is the first key difference with BEGS: on their view, social norms are patterns of normative attitudes corresponding to normative principles; on Bicchieri's view they are patterns of non-normative preferences to conform to rules. The second key difference between the two views lies in how they account for the conditionality of social norms; for the idea that social norms are complied with in a given social group because they are accepted or endorsed in that group. On the BEGS view, conditionality is reflected in the fact that individuals take their P -corresponding normative judgment to be justified by the existence of a social practice. Bicchieri's view accounts for conditionality by holding that individuals prefer to conform to R , conditional on their belief that sufficiently many others also conform and on their belief that sufficiently many others believe that they should conform.

These differences with the BEGS account allow Bicchieri to avoid its problems. If there is a followed social norm requiring people to be angry when spat on, then many of the members of that population have a preference for being angry when spat on, where this preference is conditional on their empirical and normative expectations. Having such a preference does not entail the mistaken view that these empirical and normative expectations constitute justification or provide reasons for being angry when spat on (or for the claim that one should be angry when spat on). There is no inconsistency in *wanting* to be angry in order to be in step with one's fellows, while at the same time thinking that the only *reason* why one should be angry, in the circumstances, is that one was slighted. In this way, Bicchieri's amended view can account for attitudinal social norms without having to attribute widespread error to those who follow them. This is not to say that attitudinal

social norms can only demand attitudes that are independently justified. Again, take social norms requiring disgust along racial or caste lines; assuming that such attitudes are unjustified, individuals may nonetheless have a conditional preference to display them. Those who conform to such a social norm would be making a kind of mistake: they are disgusted by something they shouldn't be disgusted by. It is no cost to Bicchieri's view, however, to attribute error in such cases. After all, the view accurately reflects the fact that, in these cases, social norms make unreasonable demands of individuals, and it doesn't construe individuals as taking their attitudes to be justified by the wrong kind of considerations.

One might have the following concern for the resulting picture of attitudinal social norms. If a social norm demands an attitude like grief, love, or shame, then if my arguments are sound, individuals' empirical and normative expectations do not generally provide justification for those attitudes. This means that there are two possibilities: either the required attitude is justified, but then this is so for reasons independent of the existence of the social norm; or the required attitude is not justified, in which case the existence of the social norm does not change this fact. It may now seem that attitudinal social norms are either superfluous or impotent. If people have independent justification for the required attitude, they may conform to the norm but would do so for norm-independent reasons. If they don't have such justification then they cannot simply adopt attitudes of grief, love, or shame just because they prefer to have those attitudes.

This objection is mistaken. On the one hand, it is often important to have norms requiring attitudes or behaviour even when the individuals subject to it have sufficient norm-independent reason to conform to the rule. It makes sense to have a legal norm against killing persons, for example, even if most or all individuals have sufficient moral reason not to kill persons. One reason to have such norms is that they may provide motivation to conform to the rule in situations where people fail to be motivated by their moral reasons. On the other hand, even if we cannot respond to a preference to conform to an attitudinal rule by simply adopting the attitude, there are many other

ways we can try to satisfy our preference. Suppose I prefer to be angry with another person because of my empirical and normative expectations, but I neither have nor take myself to have good reason to be angry with that person. I could try to induce anger with this person by, for example, reflecting on past instances in which she has wronged me, by imagining that she did wrong me, by talking to others in the hope they will convince me that I have reason to be angry with her, and so on.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that the BEGS theory of social norms cannot properly account for attitudinal social norms and that Bicchieri's view, with one key adjustment, can. I close with two further observations. The first is that my argument turns on two key differences between these accounts. First, the attitudes central to the constitution of social norms are preferences on Bicchieri's view and normative attitudes on the BEGS account. Second, conditionality is understood as conditionalisation on empirical and normative expectations by Bicchieri and as grounding in social practices by BEGS. These differences naturally go together, but it does invite the question of whether they can be pulled apart to generate a wider range of options for understanding social norms. Second, proponents of the BEGS account may wish to respond to my arguments by accepting the kind of error-ascription I consider problematic. In this case, my discussion identifies a way in which the disagreement between these two views can be evaluated empirically. The BEGS view predicts that if many or most people become convinced that their normative attitudes are not justified by a corresponding social practice, the social norm disappears. Bicchieri's view predicts that social norms can persist despite the widespread presence of such beliefs.⁴

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