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## Norms Require Not Just Technical Skill and Social Learning, but Real Cooperation

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**Abstract:** Birch’s account of the evolutionary origins of social norms is essentially individualistic. It begins with individuals regulating their own actions toward internally represented goals, as evaluative standards, and adds in a social dimension only secondarily. I argue that a better account begins at the outset with uniquely human collaborative activity in which individuals share evaluative standards about how anyone who would play a given role must behave both toward their joint goal and toward one another. This then scaled up to the shared normative standards for anyone who would be a member of ‘our’ social group.

**Keywords:** social norms, shared intentionality, evolution, cooperative interaction, non-instrumental skills

Philosophers have many different views on the realm of the normative. But almost all views include some form of evaluative standards that transcend the individual and her own idiosyncratic dispositions and preferences. In naturalistic interpretations, normative standards almost always transcend the individual by being socially constituted, that is, by being normatively conventional for some social group.

Birch wants to propose a naturalistic evolutionary story in which the first evaluative standards are individual. They first emerged in humans’ “complex motor skills and craft skills, such as toolmaking ... guided by internally represented norms of correct performance” (Birch 2021, 192). What ‘correct’ means here is instrumentally effective for the individual in achieving her goal. The social dimension enters the picture in response to “distinctive problems of standardizing, learning and teaching complex motor skills and craft skills” (192) within the social group, which somehow socializes the previously individual goal-standards. There can then be generalization to wider domains of social interaction governing all kinds of social and even moral interactions.

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The first step of this story should be applicable to chimpanzees as well, as they engage in complex forms of tool using, tool choice, and, to some degree, tool making. Chimpanzees' use of stone tools to crack nuts is an extremely complex motor skill, and individuals guide their actions by some kind of imagined goal-outcome at which they are aiming. They cognitively control their actions in various ways, including by listening to the sound that the nut makes as it cracks: if it is one kind of sound, then the nut still needs more cracking, whereas if it is another kind of sound then it is ready for eating. But in such goal-guided behavior the 'norm' is simply the imagined outcome, as in all goal-directed behavior. The difference, as compared to the goal-directed behavior of most other animals, is that the goal in this case involves the state of an external object as affected by the agent's action (as opposed, e.g., to the simple goal of climbing a tree). And something very similar is true when chimpanzees strip the leaves off of sticks to make a tool for use in fishing for termites: they have a goal-standard before they start stripping. So the chimpanzee case is very similar to the first step in Birch's account, even though his story begins in the lower Paleolithic in human evolution. In any event, Birch does not address chimpanzee tool use and making, except in passing, and how it might fit with his story.

The social element in Birch's story involves social learning and its social motivations: "I further conjecture that the evolution of non-instrumental (or intrinsic) motivations to adhere to group-wide standards was also linked to toolmaking, and in particular to the problem of motivating sustained practice." (196) Birch claims that "norm-like phenomena are sometimes observed in other animals such as chimpanzees" (192), but one of his citations is simply taking well-known observations of nonhuman primates and reinterpreting them as reflecting conformity to norms, and the other two do not concern norms per se but only group-wide 'preferences' and/or 'traditions'. Recent research, in my view, suggests rather that, in contrast to the first step of the story, a motivation to adhere to group-wide standards is unique to the human species.<sup>1</sup>

And so what is this uniquely human social motivation and where does it come from? Birch locates it in processes of social learning (including teaching). Thus, he claims that once early humans were cognitively controlling their own individual behavior with images of an ideal outcome or goal, then individuals might just copy others in the group for instrumental reasons. But then comes the further

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<sup>1</sup> See Tomasello 2016 for a review. If I am wrong, and chimpanzees are capable of socially normative behavior, then Birch's particular story about human toolmaking in the Paleolithic needs to be changed.

motivation for what is essentially conformity to widespread group behavior. Here is a summarizing statement:

So far, our focus has been on the self-regulation of skill execution and practice. However, human normative cognition involves monitoring other people's behaviour for conformity with norms, not just one's own behaviour ... I propose that this other-directed side of normative cognition was driven by the need to teach, and not just execute, standardized toolmaking techniques. Once agents have cognitive control models, it is a small step from using them to regulate one's own behaviour to using them to regulate the behavior of others. Taking this step was advantageous for hominins because the manufacture of Acheulean bifaces is a dangerous activity ... Intentional teaching, in which an adult closely monitors the performance of a learner and anticipates errors, is a way of managing that risk. Injuries can be forestalled, and low-cost micro-punishments can be administered in their place, benefiting the direct fitness of the learner and (provided teacher and learner are genetically related) the inclusive fitness of the teacher. (196)

And so the social motivation of the teaching of the first norms, for Birch, is helping kin. These norms might then be generalized to other activities, for example, "Norms of equitable division would have been favoured in this context because they benefited the agent, in the long run, by showing them to be a trustworthy and profitable cooperation partner." (197) The social motivation for this extension is thus reputation management. But kin favoritism and reputation management should be just as powerful for chimpanzees as they are for humans. So why did they enter into the process of tool use and tool making for humans but not for chimpanzees? Again, either they also did for chimpanzees, and the human story will have to be changed, or else, as I believe, they did not, and then we need to identify something else unique about humans. My proposal for this something else is humans' species-unique skills and motivations of cooperative social interaction, which lead them to structure such important social activities as teaching and conformity to the group in uniquely cooperative ways.

In focusing on kin selection and reputation management—in the context of the social learning of tool use and tool making—as the primary evolutionary bases of normative cognition, Birch is making a concerted effort not to credit early humans with any intrinsic motives for cooperation per se. Many scholars, myself included, would think of teaching others for their benefit as a cooperative activity requiring a special cooperative motive beyond kin favoritism—since if individuals only taught their offspring that would not lead to group-wide but only family wide conventional practices—and the learner conforming to the group's normative ways of doing things, and encouraging conformity in others, is also an expression of cooperative solidarity, in this case for the group's overall benefit. The underlying evolutionary basis for these cooperative behaviors is the growing interdependence of human individuals living in groups, such that it makes sense for them to work together

and watch out for each other because they all need one another to survive and thrive (Tomasello 2016).

And so an alternative story for the emergence of norms begins with new forms of cooperation from the outset of early human evolution in the genus *Homo* (on around the same timetable as Birch is considering). Early humans engaged in many different activities, some chimp-like and some unique, and what made humans start to look so different is cooperative skills and motivations and the way they governed many human activities. In particular, my evolutionary story begins in collaborative foraging. Early humans but not other apes were forced into collaborative foraging (for reasons that are not crucial to the story). Collaboration of the type that humans evolved was structured by new and species-unique skills and motivations of shared intentionality, guided by a new type of goal-standard: a joint goal between partners to a joint agency such that they had to imagine together in common ground a model to guide their actions. Then, in addition, the collaboration required each individual to play her individual role in the ideal way that they knew together in common ground was necessary for joint success. These ideal role standards were thus action-guiding, but already in a social, that is, cooperative, way, with a dual function: one instrumental such that ideal role performance was necessary for joint instrumental success, and the other socially normative such that ideal role performance was necessary to live up to a partner's expectations of a cooperative mode of interaction throughout for the benefit of the joint agency. The ideal role standards in collaborative activities were thus the first *socially constituted* normative standards.

Only after this structure of joint agency and joint intentionality had been established among individuals did conformity to group-wide behavior become a part of the picture. It emerges with modern humans and culture (in the past 200,000 years), in which conforming to the group's ways of doing things was crucial for individual survival and procreation, mainly because group solidarity was necessary for survival in the face of competition with other groups (individuals become interdependent with all others in the group and with the group's smooth functioning as such). Ultimately, then, the individual motivation for following explicit social norms was conformity to the group's ways of doing things so as to identify with the group, and the individual motivation for enforcing social norms on others was ensuring the group's smooth functioning by making sure that everyone follows the rules. And actually creating social norms in the first place is a cooperative activity aimed at enforcing cooperation in the group and requiring mental coordination of a type not available to other apes (Tomasello 2019).

One note. Philosophers who do not believe that a naturalistic account of normativity is possible would object to locating the source of normativity in simply a group of people; their preferences are still just the preferences of individuals, only

aggregated. That is why I have previously proposed that the actual mechanism is that people identify with the group as an ideal entity (Tomasello 2016). From the point of view of normativity, the group is not an aggregate of people but rather a set of ideal practices in which ‘anyone who would be one of us’ must engage in order to be one of us. The standards thus come not from the personal preferences of the individuals of the group but rather from the shared ideals of the group that serve to identify us as a group. I know that this will not satisfy non-naturalists, but it is at least an attempt to recognize normativity as emanating from ‘the kingdom of ends’.

The key difference between our two stories, then, is this. While chimpanzees and early humans both engage in goal-guided activities with objects, what I would consider the first truly normatively guided behaviors are from the outset social, indeed cooperative, and they emerge from the way that collaborating individuals self-regulate their roles in acting toward joint goals. On the group level, the creation of social norms governing such group-important activities as mating and marriage, collaborating and dividing the spoils, control of valuable objects, and much else where potential conflicts can occur, is about agreements among the interdependent members of a cultural group about how the group can best regulate itself cooperatively. Trying to beef up goal-guided activities on objects with kin-selected social learning and reputation management is not sufficient to capture the essentially cooperative structure of following, enforcing, and even creating social norms, which require individuals who are both capable and motivated to engage in unique forms of cooperative activity.

## References

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