

Book Symposium

Précis of *Social Goodness: The Ontology of Social Norms*

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Although we live immersed in a sea of social norms, they are sometimes tricky to observe with any clarity. The web of social norms is often invisible to us and emerges clearly only when norms are broken or when they change or when we observe new cultural contexts. Social norms are important to understand because they are a central ingredient in our social agency. It is only by acting through the social roles attached to the social positions we occupy that we exercise our agency. Social norms both limit and enable our social practices; and they do so at the same time. Just as learning a new knitting technique allows for new kinds of fiber creativity by virtue of learning a new technique so too becoming a mother engages new norms of practical agency thereby creating new practical possibilities.

Social role norms are puzzling in any number of respects but the central puzzle is the source of their normativity. As Anderson puts it:

“The great puzzle of social norms is not why people obey them, even when it is not in their self-interest to do so. *It is, how do shared standards of conduct ever acquire their normativity to begin with?* Once we understand this, there is no further difficulty in understanding the motive to obey them. We obey them because we believe that we *ought* to.” (Anderson 2000, 191).

As a mother, I *ought* to put my children first, and as an academic I *ought* to pursue knowledge above all. Where do these “ought-tos” come from? What is the source of their normativity? Why do they attach to me, seemingly independent of whether I subscribe to them? In *Social Goodness* I argue that it is illuminating to model social role normativity on artisanal normativity. Artisanal social roles, being a

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carpenter or being a baker, provide an illuminating model for other social roles, like being a mother or being an academic.

I distinguish social role normativity from both ethical normativity (the applied ethics view) and from prudential reckoning. Social role normativity is not ethical normativity. Some social norms are *prima facie* not in accordance with, much less applications of, ethical principles. Social norms are often limiting, oppressive, and unjust; including some of the norms one ought to enact by virtue of one's social position. Also, social normativity includes normatively evaluable activities that do not fall within the range of standard ethical theories. Artisanal examples exemplify this point; around here there is a way the carpenter ought to make a corner, but this is not an ought-to that is an application of a purely ethical principle to a context. Finally, some form of universalizability typically characterizes ethical normativity, but social norms are understood to be local—what my people do or what we ought to do around here. The locality and situatedness of social norms are central and permanent features of social role normativity and not a bug.

Just as it is a mistake to think that social role normativity is best explained as the application of ethical norms to a concrete social context, so too it is a mistake to think that social norms have only prudential value. It is simply not the case that social role obligations always track rewards and punishments. What I ought to do as an academic might diverge from my prudential best interests. I ought to evaluate students fairly but, in current circumstances, it would be prudent for me to give very high grades to all students in my classes regardless of their performance. The prudential decision and what I ought to do as a teacher diverge. The norm the teacher ought to be responsive to and evaluable under differs from what prudence might dictate.

In Chapters 1–3 of *Social Goodness*, I distinguish two approaches to the question of the source of social role normativity: internalism and externalism. And I develop an externalist answer to the question of the source or origin of social role normativity.

What is internalism? According to internalism, social normativity enters the world through the attitudes of the persons who are subject to the norms. There are many ways to be an internalist; here are three important ways.

Conditional Preference View For example, working in the Humean tradition, Bicchieri says “A social norm is a rule of behaviour such that individuals prefer to conform to it on two conditions” (2017, 11). The first condition is empirical, namely that most people in the reference group conform to it and the second is normative, namely that most people believe they ought to conform to it.

Self-legislation View For example, working in the Kantian tradition, Korsgaard says “The reflective structure of human consciousness requires that you identify

yourself with some law or principle that will govern your choices. It requires you to be a law to yourself. And that is the source of normativity.” (2003, 83) *Recognitive Attitude View*¹ Finally, working in the Hegelian tradition, Brandom says “each individual is responsible only for what she has authorized others to hold her responsible for”. (2009, 78)

In contrast, externalists root social role normativity in the social world itself, in its positions, institutions, and larger architecture. The core insight of externalism is that the function or structural feature of an enterprise or activity can bring with it normative demands quite independently of the attitudes of those who engage with it. For example:

Lawson’s social positioning view sees the process of assigning a person to a social position as at the same time situating the person (or object) in relation to others by means of a package of rights and obligations. (Lawson 2019).

Other externalists point to games and model social normativity on the rules of a game that one ought to follow if one is playing the game. (See Rouse 2017)

Still others argue that social norms are elaborations of biological normativity. (Rouse 2023, Okrent 2018)

While these theories are externalist, they are not the version of externalism that I endorse—the artisanal model. Before introducing the artisanal model, however, I want to consider some reasons for being an externalist about social role normativity. Rather than grounding social normativity in the attitudes of persons, as internalism does, I argue for an externalist model that roots social role normativity in the social world itself: in its positions, institutions, and larger architecture. The core insight of externalism is that the function or structural feature of an enterprise or activity can bring with it normative demands quite independently of the attitudes of those who engage with it. I argue that externalism can explain social role non-conformers but internalism cannot, that there are many examples of social roles (mother, Professor) where we would not cancel its normative force if the person does not endorse or prefer the norm in question, and that social norm externalism provides the best account of persisting normative conflict.

Social role practices are like artisanal skills; they are developed through habituation, imitation and guided practice. In *Social Goodness* Chapter 3 I argue that the artisanal model provides the best externalist explanation of the source of social role normativity. Just as the artisan, the carpenter or the chef, is responsive to and evaluable under the norms or technique that comprise their craft, so too is the mother, the President, the professor. There are two layers of normativity in the artisanal model.

1 Anderson is best described as a recognitive internalist.

First, there are things to be done and, second, there are better and worse ways of doing what is to be done. Likewise, there are things to be done by a professor and better and worse ways of doing them. And the better and worse ways vary in the same ways and for the same kinds of reasons that local craft traditions vary. Rather than focus on collective or shared intentionality, the artisanal model emphasizes the embodied skills that are passed on from expert to novice through habituation, imitation and guided learning.

The artisanal model is especially illuminating in the following respects:

- *Situatedness*: The situatedness of artisans and artisanal activity—material, cultural, historical—models how other social roles are also situated in these ways.
- *Locality*: The artisanal model incorporates the idea of local standards of excellence—the way things ought to be done around here—as an important component of social role norms that include both what is to be done and the way it is to be done around here.
- *Agency*: The artisanal model displays two sides of social norms; like artisanal techniques they are not simply oppressive and limiting; they also can be enabling and empowering. And they can be both at the same time.

What picture of social reality or social ontology is implied by externalism and by the artisanal model of social role normativity? Chapters 4 and 7 address the ontological questions raised by the artisanal model. In chapter 4 I argue that the artisanal model for social role normativity presents a non-individualist ontology of social norms. As described by Haslanger methodological individualism holds that “the social world is made up of individuals, and so explanations of social phenomena should be in terms of the behavior and attitudes of individuals” (Haslanger 2022, 1). Because the artisanal model finds an aspect of the normativity of social roles to be situated, material, and world-involving, it is committed to the rejection of methodological individualism. To the extent that we are convinced by normative externalism, and the artisanal model we have reason to reject explanatory and ontological individualism.

In Chapter 7 I argue that the relational ontology of social roles, implicit in the artisanal model, provides a useful frame to consider both hierarchical and oppressive social relations. The artisanal model illuminates a trifecta of relationships among social roles: ontological, normative and social role holism.

Ontological relations: Artisanal practices are what they are only in relation to other artisanal practices. Brickmakers have the function they have only in relation to builders, who have the function they have only in relation to roofers etc. Similarly, social roles are never a one-off; they always are ontologically related to other social roles. It is useful to think of the social world as comprising a social role system or multiple systems at varying levels of complexity.

Normative relations: The norms that comprise a social role are what they are in relation to the norms that comprise other social roles. For example, brick making techniques are what they are in relation to house building techniques or the way that houses are built around here. Similarly, being a mother is a social role comprised of normatively evaluable practices, or ways of being maternal around here and these norms are calibrated in relation to others in related social roles like fathers.

Social role holism: The holism implicit in the artisanal model illuminates the normative and ontological co-ordination of social roles. It is because social roles form systems (e.g. family systems, workplace systems) and are inter-connected both ontologically and normatively that they can perform a co-ordination function.

Finally, it is important to balance the resources of the artisanal model to explain the persistence of social role norms with the resources of the model to explain norm criticism and normative self-creation. In Chapter 5 I develop the resources of the artisanal model for criticism of social norms (by those who are responsive to them and evaluable under them). And in Chapter 6 I address the resources of the model for the possibility of normative self-creation. It is a strength of the artisanal model that it has resources both to explain the evident persistence of social norms and oppressive normative hierarchies and to explain normative critique, innovation and self-creation.

Critical selves: Transmission of artisanal skill via habituation, imitation and guided practice helps explain both the “stickiness” or persistence of social norms and how critical selves emerge. These include but not limited to social role non-conformers. The artisanal model has significant resources for normative criticism. First, the process of habituation has two outcomes. One is the attainment of a particular skill; through practice and habituation a person becomes a skilled banjo player or a skilled surgeon. But they also gain a general sense of excellence which can be the fulcrum for norm criticism. Second, through habituation the artisan learns both what to do and why to do it that way, and that provides a second fulcrum for norm criticism.

Creative selves: The artisanal model and externalism allows us to unravel the paradox of self-creation (Callard 2018) and to explain how we can engage in normative self-creation.

The artisanal model provides a rich array of resources to illuminate important aspects of our social agency. The image of an artisanal workplace situated in a landscape, a geographical location and at a particular historical moment with specific material, aesthetic and ideological resources allows us to identify each of these aspects of the social roles that we are responsive to and evaluable under. The artisanal model also illuminates the relational character of social roles both normatively and ontologically.

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