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[Next](#) | [Home](#) | [Previous](#)

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# THE NORMATIVE ANIMAL

## NEIL ROUGHLEY AND KURT BAYERTZ

Reviewed by Martina Valković

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*The Normative Animal? On the Anthropological Significance of Social, Moral, and Linguistic Norms*

Neil Roughley and Kurt Bayertz (eds)

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Chimpanzees might have social structures, elephants burial rituals, and prairie dogs communication systems, but it is undeniable that these do not come close to analogous phenomena in humans. What is it that makes us so unique? Which traits enabled humans to develop such intricate life form? *The Normative Animal?* seeks to explore an answer to this question that could subsume properties often considered unique to humans, such as rationality, morality, sociality and language, under one fundamental structural property: normativity. The book is a culmination of a years-long effort by a group of scholars from various disciplines—including philosophy, anthropology, behavioural biology, psychology, and linguistics—all of whom are committed to interdisciplinary interaction and the belief that to understand norms, it is necessary to undertake both conceptual and empirical work. Their annual meetings contributed to the formation of the normative animal thesis, whose likelihood the contributors to the volume aim to assess.

The normative animal thesis, elaborated in the introductory chapter by Neil Roughley, states that different capacities often seen as unique or specific to the human life form are enabled by our sensitivity or tendency to normatively regulate our thought and behaviour. That is, social, moral, and linguistic capacities that have been traditionally thought of as specifically human may all be grounded in a more basic and generic capacity for normative thought and behaviour, understood as an orientation to obligations,

permissions, and prohibitions. The normative animal thesis is not only the common denominator in all the chapters, but also the collections' most original contribution by far. For that reason, I will discuss it at some length in what follows.

In their everyday lives, Roughley notes, humans are to a great extent influenced by what they think they should do, and they take themselves to be subject to a great variety of norms. Some of these are prudential ('take the best available means to an end'), others are conceptual ('do not refer to an object as a cat if you are not prepared to refer to it as an animal'), and some are syntactic ('add "-s" to English verbs in the third person singular'). Yet other norms are legal, such as traffic rules; related to etiquette, like norms of proper address; or moral, such as those that prohibit theft, lying, or murder.

All of these different kinds of norms, the thesis goes, are applied by primarily, or even uniquely, reasoning, linguistic, socially organized, and moral animals. What is common to all these categories (reasoning, language, social organization, and morality) is that the animals are subject and sensitive to formal structures of prohibitions, prescriptions, and permissions that are inherent in participation in the related practices. In this regard, the tendency to live according to norms, which are rooted in those formal structures, is the most widespread and general structural feature of the human life form, making humans primarily normative animals.

Roughley lists five features taken to characterize norms in general. The first is their prescriptive character: norms require actions. Furthermore, they require actions in a stronger sense than, say, recommendations do: they demand actions of the agents to whom they apply or, in other words, they ascribe obligations. The third general feature of norms is their generality, in the sense that these obligations or requirements apply to all agents who share the relevant trait, such as membership of a particular association, religion, or ethnic group, being speakers of a particular language, or being persons. Another feature of norms is that their applicability entails a condition on agents' abilities. More precisely, prescriptions with which agents are generally unable to comply are not suitable for the role ('ought implies can'). Finally, norms plausibly entail some connection to sanctions in a very broad sense, at least in agents' belief that it is appropriate to judge norm-breaching behaviour in negative terms.

The authors focus on norms in three areas of human behaviour that could plausibly be seen as normatively structured—social organization, morality, and language—and ask whether it could be the case that generic normative phenomena are being instantiated differently in these three domains. While the existence of social norms is beyond doubt, this is not the case with the existence of moral and linguistic norms. Another challenge facing the normative thesis is whether, even if norms are in the centre of all these areas, they share the same generic structure. Indeed, the questions of whether social, moral, and linguistic normativity might differ and, if so, how remain open.

The book is structured in four parts, sixteen chapters in total, all of which are oriented towards evaluating the normative animal thesis, but approach it from different angles and with different methods. The introductory part consists of two chapters in which the editors, Roughley and Bayertz, introduce the normative animal thesis and the volume's contributions. The second part is devoted to social norms. In the excellent third chapter, behavioural biologists Peter Kappeler, Claudia Fichtel, and Carel van Schaik take a look at non-human primates, aiming to identify potential precursor mechanisms of human social norms and conventions. The chapter also introduces one of the recurring themes in the collection: the methodological problem of inferring whether animal behaviour, or that of non-linguistic creatures more generally, is guided by norms or some other, non-normative factors. In the following chapter, cultural anthropologist Christoph Antweiler describes ethnological approaches to the study of social norms and focuses on methods of upbringing by which norms are inculcated in children, while in the fifth chapter philosopher Karl Mertens develops a conception of social norms that takes sanctions as the sufficient condition of normativity. Mertens hints that animals could also be guided by such norms, thereby reaching a different conclusion from Kappeler and his colleagues. The disagreement, however, seems to stem largely from the differing conceptions of norm that they employ. In the final chapter of the second part, psychologists Marco F. H. Schmidt and Hannes Rakoczy take the normative animal thesis to relate to agents' attitudes—normative animals think of themselves as bearers of rights and obligations and social norm creators. They set the bar for normativity even higher by claiming that collective intentionality is necessary for the development of these attitudes. Maybe unsurprisingly, they conclude that humans are the only known normative species, since there is no evidence that other species develop normative attitudes.

Part 3, on moral norms, begins with a contribution by anthropologists Carel van Schaik and Judith Burkhardt, who suggest that moral norms should not be viewed as a kind of social norm, but as the paradigm case of normativity that allowed other norms to develop. This formulation may be misleading, however: they seem to equate moral norms with norms that in early societies served to preserve cooperation and social structure and for which, importantly, disobedience was met with sanctions. Since the emphasis is on socially administered sanctions and preserving social order, one wonders whether moral norms might be more aptly seen as a subset of social norms, after all. This is the view of philosopher Kurt Bayertz in the eighth chapter, where he draws attention to an important insight that is often neglected in the literature, namely, that morality cannot be reduced to a sum of prosocial behaviour. Similar to Schmidt and Rakoczy, Bayertz also assumes we need collective or shared intentionality to have norms, and argues that the moral 'ought' does not depend on agents' psychological states—such as the sense of obligation—since the moral ought is an external, social reality. Bayertz's views on the social origin of moral norms are largely shared by philosopher Holmer Steinfath in the ninth chapter, but the two accounts are in disagreement about the role of language. While Bayertz believes that language is important because it enables the justification of pre-existing normative practices, Bayertz believes that the role of justification, and therefore language, is more fundamental, in that it transforms pre-existing social practices into normative ones, thereby enabling normativity itself. In the chapter that follows, psychologists Elliot Turiel and Audun Dahl make a distinction between moral and conventional norms within the framework of social domain theory, and argue for a constructivist account of the development of moral and conventional domains. Finally, in the eleventh chapter, philosopher Roughley proposes a version of Turiel's moral-conventional distinction, which he uses to ground an empirically informed theory of moral obligation.

The fourth part of the volume focuses on the possible existence of linguistic norms. It starts off with a chapter by Nikola Kompa, a philosopher whose goal is to identify the point at which the development of human language requires that agents are responsive to norms. Kompa makes a tripartite distinction between natural signs, signals, and symbols, claiming that only the latter are specifically human. In the next chapter, ethnolinguists N. J. Enfield and Jack Sidnell identify two ways in which norms influence language: by regulating its use in a conversation, and by playing the causal role in conventionalization of word meanings. The norms in question are taken to be genuinely linguistic and grounded in accountability. This idea is firmly rejected by the next contributor, linguist and philosopher Anne Reboul, who denies there are any linguistic norms, except maybe in the marginal case of rigid designators. Arguably, Reboul's is a quite narrow conception of norms, and she proposes demanding criteria that specifically linguistic norms have to satisfy, leading her to the conclusion that linguistic conventions are not norms. In the final chapter of the part, philosopher Hanjo Glock focuses on the claim that semantic norms are constitutive of lexical or literal meaning, and defends his proposal from several objections.

In addition to the normative animal thesis, there are several other recurring themes in the book. These include the problem of differentiating normative from non-normative behaviour, the relation between joint or shared intentionality and normativity, and the meaning and importance of (third-party) sanctions. The authors sometimes disagree about these issues and their accounts diverge, at times substantially, in their definitions of norms in general, and of social, moral, and linguistic norms in particular. This brings us to the main flaw with the volume: not enough effort is made, neither in Roughley's afterword nor in the preceding chapters, to highlight the common thread(s) running through the contributions or to point out the conceptual variance and its implications.

While the absence of a synthesizing (or 'What have we learned?') chapter is maybe to be expected in this type of book, more discussion of the similarities and differences between contributions would have been informative, especially when trying to determine how much of the disagreement is more terminological than not. Some of the chapters are also quite dense and not easily accessible to non-experts, undermining one of the aims of the volume, namely, dialogue across disciplines. Indeed, it might seem that the contributions could benefit from more 'trespassing' into each other's territory, rather than, as it may appear, more or less neatly dividing into social, moral, and linguistic domains. As it stands, we are left in want of a clear picture of how the different accounts presented in the book relate to each other.

In spite of these relatively minor faults, the book deserves a very positive assessment. It introduces an original and intriguing hypothesis that is certainly worth investigating, and it brings together a diverse group of experts to shed light on its implications from their various perspectives. In this sense, the volume's lack of synthesis might be seen less as a flaw than as a necessity at this rather early stage in which ideas are being proposed at a great rate, sometimes to dizzying effect.

At any rate, the book's significance lies primarily in its original normative animal hypothesis, and the conversation this may spark. It is especially valuable for the conceptual, methodological, and empirical questions and problems it raises, and it will benefit a diverse readership, ranging from philosophers and anthropologists to psychologists and linguists. It is undeniably the place to go for anyone interested in norms and their effects on the human way of life. As its name might suggest, *The Normative Animal?* is best seen as a start of a discussion rather than its conclusion, and it is an excellent one.

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