

Norms as Direct Explanations of Behavior.

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Abstract: When explaining someone's behavior, reference is often made to Theory of Mind concepts like beliefs ("she believed it was the right thing to do") or desires ("she wanted to"). Less appreciated is the explanatory potential for descriptive and prescriptive norms (e.g., "she returned the wallet because it was the right thing to do"). One possibility is that norms serve as explanations only when mediated by beliefs, suggesting a norm-belief asymmetry whereby the quality of a norm explanation depends on belief, but not the reverse. However, two experiments provide evidence that norms influence participants' explanations for behavior without mediating beliefs, whether the norm is moral, conventional, or statistical, and regardless of participants' meta-ethical commitments (relativist or objectivist). Our results suggest that much like physical laws (e.g., explaining someone's fall by reference to gravity), norms are endorsed as direct explanations for behavior. These results have implications for attribution theory and causal reasoning.