

[Jonathan Birch](#)

## The difference between the scope of a norm and its apparent source

**Article (Accepted version)  
(Refereed)**

**Original citation:**

Birch, Jonathan (2018) *The difference between the scope of a norm and its apparent source*. [Behavioral and Brain Sciences](#), 41. E97. ISSN 0140-525X  
DOI: [10.1017/S0140525X1800002X](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X1800002X)

© 2018 Cambridge University Press

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/89165/>  
Available in LSE Research Online: July 2018

LSE has developed LSE Research Online so that users may access research output of the School. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LSE Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain. You may freely distribute the URL (<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk>) of the LSE Research Online website.

This document is the author's final accepted version of the journal article. There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

## **The Difference Between the Scope of a Norm and Its Apparent Source**

Commentary on Kyle Stanford, *The Difference Between Ice Cream and Nazis: Moral Externalization and the Evolution of Human Cooperation*.

**Jonathan Birch**

London School of Economics and Political Science

Department of Philosophy, Logic and Scientific Method,  
London School of Economics and Political Science,  
Houghton Street, London,  
WC2A 2AE, UK.

*Abstract:* We should distinguish between the *apparent source* of a norm and the *scope* of the norm's satisfaction conditions. Wide-scope social norms need not be externalised, and externalised social norms need not be wide in scope. Attending to this distinction leads to a problem for Stanford: the adaptive advantages he attributes to externalised norms are actually advantages of wide-scope norms.

Stanford has identified an important feature of our moral psychology: our tendency to regard moral norms as externally imposed demands rather than as shared subjective commitments. The motivational force of a moral norm appears to come 'from outside'—from an external source—and this appearance of externality calls for explanation. He also argues, plausibly, that existing accounts of the evolution of morality do not explain this phenomenon of 'moral externalisation'. His proposed explanation is that externalisation generates a link between the strength of an agent's own motivation to comply with a norm and the strength of their normative expectation that others likewise comply—a link that helps maintain correlated interaction between prosocial individuals. Here is a problem for this proposal.

Stanford does not distinguish between the *apparent source* of a norm (i.e. Do I regard myself as making a subjective commitment to a norm, or do I regard it as something that is externally imposed on me?) and the *scope* of the norm's satisfaction conditions (i.e. Do the satisfaction conditions of the norm pertain to my behaviour only, or to the whole community's behaviour?). The apparent source and scope of a norm are separable: wide-scope social norms need not be externalised, and externalised social norms need not be wide in scope.

To see the difference between the apparent source of a norm and its scope, consider the following two cases. On the one hand, an agent may have a subjective commitment to a norm that pertains to the behaviour of an entire community. Suppose, for example, I have a subjective commitment to the norm that everyone in my community should pick up litter. The norm is wide in scope (it applies to the behaviour of the whole community), yet I do not regard it as externally imposed: I regard it as a subjective commitment, the motivational force of which derives from my personal desire for clean streets. I like it when people adhere to the norm and dislike it when they violate the norm, but I do not regard these norm violations as transgressions of an externally imposed demand. On the other hand, an agent may externalize a norm that pertains solely to their own behaviour. Suppose, for example, the Pope regards certain norms as applying to himself alone *qua* Pope. These norms of Papal conduct have very narrow scope, and yet they may well be externalised: the Pope regards these norms not as subjective commitments, deriving their motivational force from his own personal desires, but as externally imposed Divine commands.

The problem for Stanford's argument is that the adaptive advantages he attributes to externalised social norms are actually advantages of wide-scope social norms. It is wide-scope social norms, not externalised social norms *per se*, that maintain correlated interaction between cooperators. For example, my subjective commitment to the litter-picking norm will motivate me to pick up litter myself, to monitor my neighbours' litter-picking, to get upset when neighbours fail to pick up litter, to encourage my neighbours to pick up litter, and to prefer interacting with neighbours who pick up litter to neighbours who don't. If others share my subjective commitment, we will profitably cooperate; if they don't, I will shun them. This

adaptive package of correlated interaction and profitable cooperation can arise without any externalisation of the norm, provided it is sufficiently wide in scope. Conversely, an externalised norm may fail to yield any significant correlated interaction if it is excessively narrow in scope. Norms that apply to a single individual, such as norms of Papal conduct, are a limiting case in which there is no correlated interaction at all. Once we distinguish between wide-scope norms and externalised norms, allowing the two properties to come apart, we see that it is the former property, not the latter, that leads to correlated interaction.

The ability of wide-scope social norms to maintain cooperation across extended social networks suggests an important role for these norms in human social evolution. One can imagine a gradual expansion of the scope of social norms from the scale of the band to the scale of the wider kin-group, and from the scale of the kin-group to the scale of even larger ethnolinguistic groups. However, there would have been no need for these wide-scope norms to be perceived as externally imposed: shared subjective commitments would have yielded the same adaptive advantages. Externalisation is a separate phenomenon in need of a separate explanation. Although this is not the place to develop such an explanation, it is worth pointing out that Stanford's article, surprisingly, makes no mention of religion. As the example of the Pope suggests, it may be that our tendency to externalise moral norms is a culturally evolved way of thinking entangled with the concept of a Divine enforcer.