

# A Commentary on Pettit

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Pettit draws attention to an important social fact. To a large extent behaviour conforming to certain standards is not carried out out of a personal attachment to those standards, if there is any such attachment at all. Rather, the real motive is a prevailing desire for the *approval* of others combined with a twofold belief: (1) that this approval depends on being *regarded* as a person attached to the relevant standards and motivated by them, and (2) that people are prone to take *factual* conformity by words and deeds to be evidence of this. Now, this scenario is quite common and understandable in cases of prudential individual adaptation, say of a dissenter simulating allegiance to the moral standards of the majority. So one may well ask whether there are corresponding generalized cases of social adaptation, too. Are some if not many standards present in a group or society accepted and conformed to only by some kind of general mutual mistake and hypocrisy? Pettit suggests they are. This is a disquieting and provocative idea raising a number of intriguing questions of which I shall take up three.

## 1

First, is Pettit right in claiming that such cases are instances or at the very least limit cases of *normativity*.<sup>1</sup> Here it is advisable to distinguish between mere conformity to a norm and normative action. A bunch of apples, e.g., may conform to the agricultural norms set by the European Union. But apples certainly do not act normatively. Normative action implies intentionally trying to meet standards taken to be norms. But surely this may also be done by someone not endorsing these norms personally or being mistaken in believing that they are socially well-established. So one may easily say that trying intentionally to live up to the standards (taking up Pettit's examples) of student drinking or military courage is normative action even if no member of the relevant groups is attached to these standards personally or does act for this reason. Surely it is one thing to ask *whether* a person follows a norm and quite another thing to ask *why*.

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<sup>1</sup> Pettit: this volume, p. 143.

## 2

Secondly, there is the question under what conditions a standard *taken* to be a social norm *really* is one. In part this is a matter of conventional definition. So Pettit is right, I think, in taking a liberal stance at this point.<sup>2</sup> Still it is necessary to face the problem of the social establishment of norms, by which I mean both their *validity* and their social *entrenchment* as well. A given norm, say a law, which is not reinforced any more and to which nobody tries to conform may be valid and existent in a juridical sense though inexistent in terms of social practice. Conversely, suspicion or knowledge that a norm is invalid may induce people not to care about it any more. Whether derived from valuations, interests or other motives: first and foremost the validity of social norms rests on the combined *will* of men, if even indirectly and restricted by majority rules (as in democratic legislation) or merely by way of an implicit, tacit consent to existing traditions or the normative declarations of an unquestioned common authority. A norm that is *not supported* by a fairly general common will loses its social validity, and to the extent this becomes public it is very likely to lose its binding force and practical meaning, too. A fortiori there will be no gain in social reputation by trying earnestly or pretending to meet it. Accordingly, such norms are instable and likely to be given up sooner or later, implicitly at least or even explicitly (as in a functioning democratic society).

To be sure, this process will slow down if people do not *notice* that volitional support is fading or missing in the minds of other people or even within themselves. Yet it is not likely that a situation of general mutual volitional error will last for long (except in very special, e.g. pathological, cases). Even a child with normal intelligence learns to distinguish early between words and deeds backed by a serious will and those which are not. Hypocrisy may be prolonged a bit if the social climate is such that the individuals do not *dare* to take the first step in coming out, shunning public ostracism even from those who they know are also volitional dissenters. Nevertheless the situation remains unstable even here and may change rapidly if a few candid and courageous persons take the lead. So while I agree that there can be “value mistaken norms” in Pettit’s sense,<sup>3</sup> I would like to insist that they are strongly dependent on an *unusual* kind of error and will be *temporary*, being ill-established in terms of validity and social entrenchment.

“Virtue mistaken norms” are different. Here validity is secured by the hypothesis that there *exists* a relevant common will. Still it is necessary to differentiate. Take Pettit’s example of courage. “Courage” may be defined “thinly” as a personal disposition to *show* courageous behaviour no matter on what grounds. Courage in this sense can be endorsed sincerely by everyone even if no one is mistaken about the fact that most people are not really brave-hearts but merely act out of a strong desire not to be ostracized as cowards. Moreover, despite this disillusioning fact,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 140.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

courage defined “thinly” may well be entrenched as a norm and socially stable. As has been diagnosed ironically by the humorist Wilhelm Busch with respect to politeness, social norms may be well-known to be based on hypocrisy for the most part, yet valued and enjoyed by all as a game of civilization. Thus, norms of this kind are *not* dependent on error at all. Indeed, I think this is the regular case with most everyday norms of morals and etiquette and nearly all norms of law.

Now, courage and many other virtues or behavioural norms supported by common will may be defined in a more demanding manner, requiring not only that people try to meet them *in fact* but that they do this *out of* a relevant state of mind. If so, people unqualified for this but eager to gain a good reputation may try to *deceive* others (or even themselves) about what is really the case with them. But as before, it is not likely that they will succeed in this enterprise generally and in the long run. Suppose, then, it is known or strongly suspected among the members of some group or society that all or most of them do not live up to these demanding standards. Surely this may lead to their successive *retraction*. But it need not and will not in many cases. An obvious alternative reaction is intensified moral *education* and *habituation*, a response that has long been recommended, e.g., by Aristotle and Cicero. And if this also proves ineffective for the majority one can still maintain high standards as an *ideal* the attainment of which is highly exceptional and therefore admired by all as supererogatory.

In sum, then, although I can agree that Pettit’s suggestion is a theoretical possibility, I cannot see that there is much room for stable social norms which are dependent essentially on mutual error and hypocrisy, a result which to my mind is agreeable both to our ordinary and theoretical view of normative action.

### 3

Thirdly, however, isn’t it still true that many norms depend on the  *motive*  of gaining social approval? Sure it is. Gain and loss of reputation are general and strong motives, much stronger even in some groups or societies (e.g., Islamic ones) than classical standards of utility and individual interest. Therefore they are a challenge to standard contractualist argumentation. Many people – children and adults as well – are inclined to consent readily (i.e. not out of hypocrisy) to certain standards merely because they realize (without error) that these are accepted as general social norms. This is the main source of traditionalism, authoritarianism or charismatic dominion in Weber’s sense. And norms established that way can well be deeply *entrenched* and stable for a long time. Moreover, they can be socially *valid* insofar as they are supported continuously by the combined will of all or most members.

Now, this validity and later on entrenchment, too, may become undermined gradually if individuals come to realize, not that they have been mistaken about the opinions of others, but that their own will and corresponding willingness to conform have grown unreflectively, unfreely or even as a result of social manipulation. If so, they are in a position to *weigh* their desire for social approval against other desires they have or can develop. This can, but need not normally lead to a very substantial

change of mind. So a more sophisticated contractarian who is not fixed on primary interests and utilities might argue that the supposed generality of *meta-interests* in social reputation guarantees that individuals who are sufficiently free and rational are willing to enter in “negotiations” about particular interests they would not have been willing to possibly give up otherwise. To what extent social norms are dependent on considerations of this kind, or could be based plausibly on them, is unclear to me as there are many unanswered questions. Still it would certainly be worthwhile trying out this scheme, starting from Pettit’s very helpful reference to the central role which the desire for social reputation could play in establishing stable social norms.