Norms, Normative Principles, and Explanation
On Not Getting Is from Ought

DAVID HENDERSON
University of Memphis

It seems that hope springs eternal for the cherished idea that norms (or normative principles) explain actions or regularities in actions. But it also seems that there are many ways of going wrong when taking norms and normative principles as explanatory. The author argues that neither norms nor normative principles—insofar as they are the sort of things with normative force—is explanatory of what is done. He considers the matter using both erotetic and ontic models of explanation. He further considers various understandings of norms.

I. THE ISSUES

There is, of course, a long tradition in which norms (norms of rationality, for example) are thought to inform the explanation of action. I argue that the place for norms or normative principles—qua normative—in the explanation of action is much more limited than tradition has it. To clarify what is at issue, I begin by mentioning some unproblematic ways in which norms do inform the explanation of action.

Explaining is something we do. Any practice, including explanation, is informed by the socially coordinated and patterned stance-taking that is commonly denominated as the community's norms for the practice. Explaining, like all we do, is informed by our norms (as is scientific practice generally; see Laudan [1984] and Kitcher [1993]). This is not the respect in which norms have been claimed to distinctively enter into explanations of action.

Perhaps it is uncontroversial that the coordinated stance-taking of a people conditions the patterned behavior to be observed in their community—and this conditioning can and ought to be registered in

some of our explanations of their action. The point is worth making with respect to both group- and individual-level explanations. People individually hold normative principles—explicitly and implicitly (as imperfectly articulatable learned dispositions to practice and evaluative stance-taking). As a group, their holding of these principles is often, nonaccidentally, coordinated—in which case, we commonly say that they "have a norm." The holding of normative principles at the individual level and the holding of social norms condition what is done (although greater clarity on what this conditioning amounts to would doubtless be desirable).

Such admissions might be formulated in talk of an explanatory place of norms, normative principles, or the normative. But they do not capture what the tradition that I have in mind has envisioned when insisting that norms and normative principles inform the explanation of action. None of what is granted so far entails (as that tradition would have it) that the one giving the explanation must impose (what are taken to be correct) normative principles in the very act of explaining actions. None of it entails (as is central in that tradition) that the one explaining actions does so by coming to see what is done as conforming to a norm or normative principle that the one giving the explanation recognizes as correct. Nothing in these concessions suggests, for example, that common explanations of action turns on the discovery of the rationality of what is done—a discovery that would of necessity be informed by the investigator's own principles of rationality. The tradition I have in mind makes claims that are in this neighborhood. Allegiance to this element of tradition is found (or strongly suggested) in a truly diverse set of thinkers (to name a few, Collingwood 1956; Winch 1958, 1964; Jarvie 1964; Putnam 1978; Turner 1979, 1980; Davidson, 1980a, 1982, 1987; Elster 1984; Little 1991).[1]

Some time back (Henderson 1993, chaps. 4, 5), I argued that normative principles—qua normative—do not enter into explanations. Concluding a discussion of what information and principles inform our explanations, I stated,

> A reliance on descriptive generalizations rather than on our normative principles is clearly indicated once we consider what bearing normative principles might have on the question of what events can help to bring about other events, and on the question of what it is about the

> course of antecedent events that, had it been different, the
> explanandum event would have been less likely. . . .
>
>   But, what does the normative status, the propriety, of a cognitive
> process have to do with its occurrence, when we ignore the effects of
> rudimentary and learned cognitive processes that happen to be norma-
> tively appropriate? . . . The fact that a given belief *b* is normatively
> appropriate in light of a set of antecedent beliefs, *A*, is no reason to think
> that *A* helped to bring about *b*, and that *b* was less likely to have
> occurred had *A* not obtained, if we do not also suppose that there was a
> disposition of the reasoner to make inferences of the relevant norma-
> tive type. (Henderson 1993, 176-77, italics omitted)

However, some writers remain unconvinced, insisting that my argu-
ments overlook an important place for norms and normative princi-
ples informing explanations in the human sciences (Risjord 2000,
1998). There are certainly elements of my earlier presentation that
make it easy to miss the generality of my arguments. For example,
much (though certainly not all) of my discussion is devoted to giving
an account of rationalizing explanation as it features in the explana-
tion of the actions of an individual agent. There are historical reasons
for this focus—stemming in part from the prominence of writers such
as Davidson in the contemporary literature. However, it has led at
least one commentator, Mark Risjord, to suggest that my arguments
apply only at the level of individual psychology and miss the place for
norms in the explanation of social-level patterns. So it will be impor-
tant here to articulate how my considerations apply at the level of
group phenomena.

   There is a second respect in which this discussion will strive for
greater generality than my earlier discussion. In my initial treatment,
I employed only the erotetic model of explanation. I continue
to believe that understanding explanations as answers to why-
questions (and how-questions) provides a particularly perspicu-
ous treatment. However, those who find a place for normative
principles—qua normative—in explanation may be moved by con-
siderations that properly find their home within what Salmon (1989)
terms the ontic approach to explanation.[2] However, those consider-
ations ultimately should not lead us to the conclusion that norms or
normative principles—qua normative—are explanations in the way
suggested by the tradition. I here explain why. Yet I am now led to
grant one important respect in which norms—qua normative—might
yet feature as explanations.

II. THE NORMATIVE AND THE
PSEUDO-NORMATIVE: NORMATIVE PRINCIPLES,
NORMS, REPORTS, AND HOLDINGS

It is crucial to be clear from the onset on a distinction between the normative and what we might call the "pseudo-normative."

Consider normative principles. These are either sentences or the content of such sentences. They are distinguished by having normative import—by making a claim regarding what ought to be done (categorically or hypothetically). Clearly, these are distinct from reports of a person or people holding a normative principle. During the days of Jim Crow, a large number of (predominantly white) people across the southern United States held the normative principle that Negroes should sit in the back of public buses. The preceding full sentence constitutes a *report* of the holding of a normative principle. The corresponding normative principle is that Negroes should sit in the back of public buses. One cannot embrace the normative principle itself without holding that African Americans ought to do as indicated. In contrast, one can give the report without any such commitment. It is common to note that when a normative principle is embedded in the that-clause of a report, the formulation no longer does its standard work—it is normatively neutered. The embedded normative principle now serves merely to represent the content of a normative principle held by someone or some people. The report as a whole has no normative purport. Some writers are apparently liable to be confused on this point, as they seem to slip from discussions that suggest a place in explanations for reports of folk holding normative principles to talk of an explanatory role for normative principles or "normative criteria."[3] In view of such temptations, we might say that the report is pseudo-normative.

None of this is profound, but it is important to keep in mind. In denying that normative principles—qua normative—enter into explanation, the heart of the matter is this: Does one, in giving common intentional explanations, need to be committed to the normative appropriateness, or need thereby to reveal the normative appropriateness, of what is explained? One can explain the seating patterns in public transportation in the Jim Crow South by reporting the holding of the normative principle above. In doing so, the normative principle—qua normative principle—does not enter into the explanation. One need not thereby have undertaken any commitment to the normative appropriateness of the seating patterns.

In response to arguments I provide here, some may grant that normative principles do not enter into explanations yet insist that norms are explanations. While distinguishing the normative from the pseudo-normative, we need to attend to what would count as a norm—qua normative. To do this, we must respect two distinctions.

First, norms must be distinct from normative principles (otherwise norms warrant no special mention). Insofar as they are distinct from normative principles, norms are not linguistic formulations or the contents of such.

Second, norms—qua normative—need to be clearly distinguished from norms of a sort that need not make for normative correctness. There is a usage of the term *norm* on which there is a norm wherever a people are coordinated in holding a normative principle. Folk can be said to "have a norm" when they have coordinated dispositions to evaluative stance-takings that conform to (the content of) some normative principle (which itself may be correct or incorrect).[4] One might call socially coordinated dispositions to evaluative stance-taking *norms in the mere social sense* or simply *social norms*. Such social norms are not our primary concern here. After all, to recognize that norms in the mere social sense condition a pattern of action found in a society does not involve recognizing or revealing that the actions so explained are correct, right, or normatively appropriate. Otherwise, we would be committed to the view that it was right to require African Americans to sit in the back of public buses and that Rosa Parks did something wrong in not recognizing her place in the rear.

I have no doubt that reports of social norms can feature in explanations. Reports of the *holding* of normative principles can feature in explanations, and social norms are basically socially coordinated holdings of normative principles within a group. What is controversial, or should be, is the suggestion that norms in some more robustly normative sense can or should feature in explanations.

Perhaps norms—qua normative—are a special case of social norms. If so, they must be social norms *with special characteristics* that somehow constitute what is correct to do. (I take something like this to be the suggestion of Brandom [1994].)

To underline the importance of this second distinction, recall that our concern is with the traditional view that norms—qua normative—play a role in explanations of actions and thoughts and that, as a consequence, we must come to appreciate the normative correctness of what is so explained. For this consequence to follow from the explanatory role of norms, those norms would need to be more

TABLE 1
Norms, the Normative, and the Pseudo-Normative

Normative	The normative principle	For example, Negroes should sit in the back of the bus.
	The norm—qua normative (if any)	For example, whatever (in addition to coordinated attitudes) makes it right that those of African decent sit in the back of the bus.[a]
Pseudo-normative	The holding of the normative principle by a person	For example, a person holding that Negroes should sit in the back of buses.
	A norm in the merely social sense (the coordinated holding of a principle by a group)	For example, people in a community holding in a coordinated fashion that Negroes should sit in the back of buses.
	The report of people holding the normative principle	For example, folk in the American South held that Negroes should sit in the back of the bus.

a. There is clearly no such norm—qua normative. Still, I am here seeking only to articulate what would count as such a norm—qua normative. The matter is pursued further in section V ii of the article.

than mere social norms. They would have to be norms of a stripe that makes for correctness—that constitutes what is correct. Of course, mere social norms involve dispositions to evaluative stance-taking. They involve the holding of principles with normative purport. But they need not constitute what is correct, and what conforms to them need not be correct. They will not serve the purposes of the tradition.

Employing the above examples, Table 1 summarizes the important distinctions.

Some normative principles have to do with cognitive practice, reasoning. Arguably, to some normative principles there corresponds a norm—qua normative. Plausibly, a normative principle with both characteristics might be that of permissive modus ponens: ceteris paribus, if one believes a sentence of the form, "if p then q," and believes its antecedent, p, then one may infer its consequent, q. To this normative principle, there corresponds a social norm; people are coordinated in holding this normative principle. However, in this

case, perhaps their coordinated dispositions to evaluative stance-taking are such as to constitute both what they are doing as holding beliefs in conditionals and making valid inferences on that basis.

III. NOTIONS OF EXPLANATION

In addressing the question of whether norms or normative principles—qua normative—have any role in explanation, I employ two notions of explanation: the erotetic and the ontic.[5] Both are respectable and important notions of explanation that are deployed in everyday and scientific contexts. The two notions of explanation are complementary, and using both (with care not to conflate them) provides for a more nuanced and balanced perspective than can be gotten using one alone.

i. Erotetic Explanation

Erotetic explanations are answers to why-questions (or to how-questions).[6] Why-questions may be analyzed in terms of triples, $<P^k$, X, R, specifying what would count as an answer (van Fraassen 1980; Woodward 1984; Henderson 1993; Risjord 2000). P^k represents the *topic* of the question, specifying the event or state to be explained. X represents the *contrast class*. Why-questions are always at least implicitly contrastive, as one is called on to explain why the topic event obtained rather than certain alternatives that might have obtained. The formulation, "Why did Dirk punch Rocky?" may express various questions. For example, Why did Dirk punch Rocky rather than forebearing? Or, Why did Dirk punch Rocky rather than stabbing him, shooting him, hitting him with a chair, or employing similar alternative means of assault? An answer to the first question might mention the extreme nature of Rocky's provocation or Dirk's susceptibility to provocation. An answer to the second might mention the coincident unavailability of knife, gun, club, or like weapon or Dirk's judicious temperament. R represents the *relevance relation*, the relation that an event or state must bear to the topical events or state to qualify mention of it as an answer to the why-question—to be explanatory.

Commonly, the relevance relation implicit in a why-question is at least partially a matter of the relation of cause and effect. One wishes to know of an event that causally favored the occurrence of the explanandum rather than the other members of the contrast class, and

one wishes to have that event characterized in terms that highlight its causally relevant features.[7]

However, to think solely in terms of causation would be to characterize too narrowly the relevance relations in the questions of interest. This much can be said by way of a general characterization: all questions having to do with why an action, or pattern of action, obtains have to do with kinds of counterfactual dependence. Such a why-question asks for the identification of an event or state on which the topic event or state is dependent in the sense that had that event not occurred, the topic event would at least have been less likely in the conditions that obtained, where the other members of the contrast class are not likewise favored. Causal dependency is but one variant of such counterfactual dependence. In this article, I make do with the general point that why-questions regarding individual and collective action have to do with such dependencies between certain events or states and the topic event or state.

ii. Ontic Explanation

The ontic explanation for some phenomenon, event, or state is a property or state on whose realization that phenomenon is dependent. Again, a paradigmatic sort of dependence is causal dependence. So, a paradigmatic ontic explanation of an event or phenomenon is its cause (or causes). For example, beginning in 1981, doctors noticed a set of symptoms occurring in association with markedly compromised immune systems. They descriptively characterized the condition AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) and began searching for its explanation. They eventually identified the explanation: a virus, which they labeled HIV-1 (or the Human Immunodeficiency Virus). The HIVs—those tiny but consequential entities in the world—are said to be "the explanation for AIDS." AIDS is dependent on them—humans with AIDS develop that affliction because of their presence, and were they not present in an human organism, that system would not develop AIDS.[8]

While causes may be paradigmatic ontic explanations, they do not exhaust what counts as an ontic explanation. Supervenience bases are another prominent sort of ontic explanation.

Again, this is a perfectly respectable conception of explanation. It is complementary to the erotetic conception. A report of an event or state of affairs can serve as the answer to why-questions of a common

sort by virtue of describing the ontic explanation for the event described in the topic of the question.

IV. NORMS, NORMATIVE PRINCIPLES, AND EROTETIC EXPLANATIONS

i. Erotetic Explanations and the "Local Principles" of Others

Can norms or normative principles serve as erotetic explanations? We can begin this portion of our examination by reflecting on Mark Risjord's (2000, 57) charge that my denial of a role for normative principles overlooks a crucial place for "local standards" in (erotetic) explanation:

> The interpreter needs to identify what counts as a good or bad reason (for the locals) in such a context. These will be local criteria of rationality. Claims about such criteria increase coherence by permitting the explanation of behavior that was otherwise inexplicable. (P. 154)

Risjord's suggestion is puzzling. "Claims" about "local criteria of rationality" would seem to be included in what I term *reports* of the holding of normative principles. They would seem to constitute reports of locally coordinated dispositions to evaluative stance-taking. To insist that such reports enter into (erotetic) explanations is not to argue that normative principles—qua normative—enter into erotetic explanations. If this is what Risjord favors, I am not in disagreement (except on his reading of my own position).[9] Nothing in my position calls into question an explanatory role for reports of the holding of normative principles by an individual or a group. On the other hand, if "local criteria of rationality," or local normative principles generally, are to enter into erotetic explanations, then a sentence expressing just that principle (not that some person or some people happen to hold such a principle) would need to serve as the answer to a why-question of the sorts described above. Let me explain why they cannot.

To begin with, we must distinguish between two ways in which local standards might be thought to enter into explanations. The standards might be "local" *and* those of the one offering the explanation. When it is we who seek to explain the actions of a person or people, those local standards are then also our best take on how one ought to

reason or behave. We will eventually consider this case, but we can set it aside for now. This is not the picture suggested by Risjord's (2000) remarks. What is suggested is that local normative principles *of others*, principles that are local in being theirs and not ours, enter into explanations. Can the normative principles (qua normative) of others feature in our erotetic explanations?[10]

Did Priestley have an explanation of why a mouse lived longer when placed in a closed container filled with the airs obtained from the heating of the red calx of mercury? Did he have an explanation of why a candle burned brighter in such air? He would answer the relevant why-questions by saying that the air in the containers had been dephlogistonated. A reasonable response is that he would thereby give an incorrect answer—and thus that he had at best an incorrect explanation. But are incorrect explanations really explanations?

A common and reasonable response (well motivated within the erotetic approach) is to understand explanations as correct explanations—what actually satisfies the analysis given for the particular why-question and its answer. But I do not rely on this identification in my argument. Rather, I will rely on a more tolerant usage, according to which what counts as an appropriate answer to a why-question and, thus, as an explanation, is the identification of an event of state that, at least by the lights of the one giving the answer/explanation, bears the relevance relation to the topic. On this usage, Priestley had an explanation for the phenomena above. However, even on this tolerant usage, the local normative standards of others cannot qualify as explanations.

Even on this tolerant usage of *explanation*, there is an important restriction on what can serve as an answer to a why-question and as an explanation: a statement (or propositional content) can be given by someone as an answer to a why-question *only if*, to the best of that individual's knowledge, it identifies some state or event on which the topic is dependent, in conformity with *R*. Thus, Priestley might explain by citing the presence of dephlogistonated air, but we cannot. Suppose someone asked you why the mouse lived longer and that you responded by mentioning Priestley's historical account. To mention answers that have been advanced is not to answer the question. Someone could respond to your historical story by pressing on you the original why-question, "Well, *is* the presence of dephlogistonated air why the mouse lived longer?" You would need to grant that it is not. An answer that *you* can give to the question is an answer that *you*

believe to be correct—not an answer that someone else believes to be correct.

The consequences are immediate: local standards—as the normative principles of others and not of ourselves—cannot be explanations. As the normative principles of others, we do not believe them to be correct. Answers to why-questions must at least be believed to be correct by the one answering. End of story.

The above points are not dependent on the details of an analysis of why-questions. In particular, they are independent of details regarding the relevance relations supposed in questions asking why someone (or some people) did (or do) something.

For concreteness, suppose that a people implicitly hold the following local criteria of rationality. Suppose that they systematically evaluate probabilities in conformity with a unrefined version of what Nisbett and Ross (1980) call the Representativeness Heuristic. Their local normative principles may be formulated as

  (R) Judge that the P (event of type e) ∝ the degree to which an outcome of that type would be representative of the type of generating process at hand.
  (J) Judge that a sequence is unrepresentative of a random generating process to the extent that it features "long" runs in which a possible result is absent.
  (A) Judge that the probability of an outcome continuing a series is proportional to the probability of a series with that probability.

Of course, (R), (J), and (A) jointly add up to a recipe for committing the gambler's fallacy.

Now, suppose that Jim Bob just bet the farm on the next throw of a die turning up a six. Suppose that he had noticed that the last 30 or so throws of the die had not turned up a six. What might I give in answer to the question, "Why did Jim Bob bet the farm on the next die turning up a six (rather than risking less)?" I cannot give the set of normative principles (R), (J), and (A) as an answer. The reason is simple: I do not believe that this set is jointly correct. (I ultimately want to add that this "answer" would be in the wrong modality. But I need not rely on that point here, and I will return to it when considering the use of our own normative principles in erotetic explanation.) Supposing that I have information about the local standards that Jim Bob (and his folk) hold, I might give the following as an answer to the why-question: Jim Bob (or his folk) hold (R), (J), and (A), and he noticed the absence of sixes in the last 30 or so throws. In this answer, normative principles do not

feature. The local normative principles of others—qua normative principles—do not enter into erotetic explanations. (These results are represented in cell 1 of Table 3.)

Some readers will doubtless resist this conclusion. They will note that even the cognitively clumsy Jim Bob is revealed to have certain ends in view—ends that by his lights make his action desirable. His lights may be dim, but he is at least doing what is calculated (miscalculated) to further what he values. Against the background of the results of his miscalculation, his action is at least weakly rational. He is undertaking an action that, by his lights, should conduce to the realization of his ends. It might be wondered whether this showing of weak rationality is not what makes for the explanation of what he does. More generally, one might insist that such showings of weak rationality are crucial to the explanation of action. One might insist that ultimately, it is the showing of conformity with certain weak standards of rationality—ones that *we* happen to (and perhaps must) hold—that is explanatory. On this view, showing conformity with certain standards of rationality—nonlocal, universal standards and, thus, standards that *we* hold, would be explanatory. These suggestions, however, do not point to an erotetic explanatory role for the local standards of others. Rather, they point to an explanatory role for reports of the local standards of others and additionally insist on an explanatory role for *our* normative principles—particularly those that might be thought universal normative principles. The suggestion will need to be addressed in the next section.

ii. Our Normative Principles and Erotetic Explanation

Can our normative principles serve as erotetic explanations of what people do and think? These include standards of rationality in reasoning such as permissive modus ponens and modus tollens, the prohibition on affirming the consequent and denying the antecedent, prohibitions on the overuse of inferential heuristics such as the representativeness and availability heuristics, avoiding wishful thinking, and pursuing wide reflective equilibrium. Presumably, with regard to actions, they may include some variant of decision theory. Such normative principles of rationality have been thought to inform explanations in intentional psychology. In what ways do such principles, qua our normative principles, inform our explanations?

We can begin with a simple point. Not rarely, people's beliefs, desires, and undertakings result from cognitive processes that do not

conform to our norms of rationality. Cognitive malpractice is not uncommon. We caution against fallacies such as affirming the consequent because we recognize that such fallacies are tempting to many and common. The reason we instruct students in the multiplicative rule for the probability of the joint occurrence of independent events is that violations are not hard to find.

When an action or cognitive state is the result of cognitive processes violating our normative principles, these principles are obviously irrelevant to the question of why the person acted or thought in that way. A statement expressing our normative principles bearing on the determination of probabilities would be worthless by way of answer to the question of why Jim Bob assigned such a high probability of getting a six on the next toss. To say that our normative principles cannot serve as explanations in such cases is to say that what it would be good to do or think is irrelevant to the explanation of such cases.[11]

If what would be good to do or think is irrelevant to explaining such cases, what is relevant? Information about the cognitive dispositions of the agents seems crucial. This might be information about basic cognitive mechanisms that all people share. It has been suggested that the inferential heuristics, such as the representativeness heuristic, are common to us all. However, some may have learned to use them in a more restrained way than others. So while information about basic cognitive mechanisms is relevant, so also is information about acquired variations and elaborations on those mechanisms. Whether or not someone had learned to avoid an overreliance on a heuristic could be relevant to our question. In our hypothetical case, Jim Bob has not learned to rein in his use of the representativeness heuristic, and this fact about his cognitive tendencies is relevant to why he judged probabilities as he did.

The point carries over at the social level. When an audience is moved by a case of affirming the consequence, that they should not be so moved is irrelevant to explaining the beliefs that they thereby come to share. What is explanatory of their new (and ill founded) beliefs is their shared and mutually reinforcing cognitive tendencies. Patterns of belief and action within a community may be explained in terms of patterns of cognitive tendencies. Cognitive tendencies are shaped and coordinated in crucial ways. So one should not think that the present line of argument turns on a methodological individualist assumption (contrary to the diagnosis found in Risjord [2000, 155]). Reports of social norms, in the sense of coordinated and mutually

reinforcing stance-taking, like reports of individuals holding normative principles, can feature in erotetic explanations. That there is such a social norm in place can be relevant to why individuals have the cognitive dispositions that they do, why patterns of actions are exhibited, why certain beliefs are distributed as they are, and so on.

We can draw on the foregoing consideration of what is explanatory of cases where the reasoning does not conform to our normative principles to get a fix on what can be erotetically explanatory of actions or thoughts generally. Whether or not the spawning cognitive processes conform to our normative principles, reports of the cognitive dispositions of the individual can be erotetically explanatory of why the individual held certain beliefs or undertook certain actions. Whether or not the spawning cognitive processes conform to our normative principles, reports of the coordinated tendencies to evaluative stance-taking on the part of the relevant group can be erotetically explanatory of why the group exhibited a certain pattern of action or belief. An acceptable action-explanation or belief-explanation will point to features of states or events on which the occurrence of the topic action or cognitive state is dependent—features that, had they not been realized, the topic phenomena would not have occurred (or would have at least been less likely). The cognitive dispositions of the relevant agents are such features. The coordinated dispositions to stance-taking in a community arguably are the social-level analogs. Whether the spawning processes conform to our normative principles or not, what seems crucial is that the agent (or agents) had (or have) dispositions to such processes.

Now we arrive at a crucial point: regardless of whether the spawning processes conform to our normative principles, information about the agent's (or agents') dispositions to certain processes "screens off" our normative principles from being explanatorily relevant. Any given action A or thought T came about by virtue of certain cognitive tendencies possessed by the agent S. Some of S's dispositions are to good ways of reasoning (to ways of reasoning that conform to our best normative principles), and others are not. We have already considered the case in which the spawning processes do not conform to our normative principles. So now suppose that in a case of concern, the spawning dispositions and processes do conform to our normative principles. That the agent had the dispositions to certain ways of reasoning, to certain transitions, is certainly explanatorily relevant. But given that the agent possessed such dispositions, there is nothing left for conformity with our normative principles to explain. Had the

agent not had those dispositions, our normative principles would not have been relevant—as seen earlier. But given that the agent has those normative principles, our normative principles are screened off as irrelevant. Thus, whether the agent's dispositions conform to our normative principles or not is neither here nor there with regard to why *S* did *A* or thought *T*. Action *A* and thought *T* are *not* appropriately dependent on conformity of the spawning processes with our normative principles (or on the normative propriety of the spawning processes). Normative principles—qua normative—are screened off by reports of normative principle holding, by reports of cognitive dispositions (or their social-level analog). Expressions of such normative principles thus seem utterly irrelevant to the why-questions at issue. (Thus the summary in cell 2 of Table 3).

However, before moving on, we must consider again the objection that closed the previous section. There I mentioned the recalcitrant suspicion that it is a showing of weak rationality that is explanatory. Recall that Jim Bob was revealed to be weakly rational in pursuing what he values in ways that are miscalculated to attain it. What can be said in response to the suggestion?

What can serve as an erotetic explanation is a report of a feature or state on which the event or state to be explained is dependent. I have argued that such dependency turns on the dispositions of the relevant class of cognitive systems. Among humans, some dispositions may be quite local—possessed by only those who have been subject to certain influences. On the other hand, certain rudimentary dispositions are doubtless common property. The understandings of human psychology that we bring to explaining actions reflect an (imperfect) appreciation of these matters. Now suppose, as seems likely, that humans are weakly rational in certain limited respects. The crucial question becomes, Is it the showing of this limited rationality—qua rationality—that is erotetically explanatory, or is it the exhibition of a form of reasoning and inference—qua common or universal disposition of a class of cognitive systems—that is erotetically explanatory? The general arguments developed in this section already contain the basis for an answer. Even when cognitive transitions are normatively appropriate, the possession of the relevant dispositions screen off the normative propriety of such processing from being explanatory. Had the person or people not had the relevant dispositions, he or she or they would not have thought and behaved as explained. This is no less true when the form of thought in question is a common, even universal, rudimentary disposition of a class of systems.[12]

iii. Norms and Erotetic Explanation

We can quickly dispatch the idea that norms—qua normative—can have a place in such explanations. As remarked earlier, norms, insofar as they are distinct from normative principles, are apparently not linguistic. Perhaps they are (dispositions to) patterns of evaluative stance-takings with special properties. Whatever their exact character, they are not simply normative sentences or the contents of such sentences. They are not linguistic. A quick and decisive treatment is then appropriate. An answer to a question is a sentence (or an utterance or, perhaps, the content of such sentences). An answer to a question is a linguistic thing. But norms are not linguistic things. Of course, the description or report of someone's norm is a linguistic thing that might conceivably serve as the answer to a why-question. But as already explained, that is not for norms—qua normative—to enter into erotetic explanations. Apparently, norms cannot enter into erotetic explanations. (Thus, cell 3 of Table 3.)

iv. Conclusion regarding Erotetic Explanation

Our results regarding a role for either normative principles or norms—qua normative—as erotetic explanations have been *uniformly negative*. Norms were readily found to have no role, in that they are themselves not linguistic. Insofar as they are distinct from normative principles, norms are neither sentences nor the content of sentences, and only species of such linguistic genera can feature as answers to why-questions. Normative principles also cannot serve as the answer to why-questions. If they are the normative principles of others, and not of ourselves, we cannot give them as answers to why-questions because we do not believe them to be correct. Reports of people holding them might be given as answers of why-questions, but that is quite another matter. Reports of people holding normative principles are not normative. Finally, our own normative principles cannot feature as answers to the relevant why-questions. For even when an action or state arises by virtue of processing that conforms to such principles, information regarding the cognitive dispositions of the relevant agents screens off the topic phenomena from any dependence on the correctness of the processing. The topic turns out to depend on the cognitive dispositions of the agents—and thus not on the correctness of the processes. (In any case, it is hard to imagine what sort of dependence was ever clearly entertained as holding

between normative principles—qua normative—and the topic events or states.) Again, reports of people holding a normative principle—reports of their cognitive dispositions and dispositions to evaluative stances—might serve as erotetic explanations.

NORMS, NORMATIVE PRINCIPLES, AND ONTIC EXPLANATIONS

i. Ontic Explanations and Normative Principles

To repeat, a normative principle is some manner of linguistic or propositional thing. Depending on one's ontological preference, they may be either sentences, tokens of sentences, or the contents of sentences. Setting aside ontological niceties, I will simply suppose that there are legitimate usages of the term *normative principle* that take each of these sorts of things as a referent. To use an earlier example, the English sentence "Negroes ought to sit in the back of public buses" is a normative principle (sentence) expressing the normative principle (content) that *Negroes ought to sit in the back of public buses*. Tokens of sentences (in natural language, or in some mentalese, if there is such a thing) with such content are normative-principle tokens. Can anything in this family of things be ontic explanations for what is said or done?

The answer to this question seems to me to be presumptively straightforward. Insofar as linguistic things (sentences, sentence tokens, and/or contents) can enter into the causal order, insofar as linguistic things can make a difference to what happens in the world, there is no reason to think that normative principles should have any special infirmities. There is no reason to think that normative principles are especially inert linguistic things. There are obviously vexed questions regarding the causal relevance of sentences, tokens, and contents. There are difficult questions regarding the counterfactual dependencies in which these things can be involved. Settling these questions is beyond what can be undertaken in this article. So I simply state that I believe, and will suppose for purposes of this article, that at least sentence tokens can be causal and that the content of sentences can be causally relevant. This said, I have no reason to doubt that normative-principle tokens and that the content of such tokens may be ontic explanations.

However, a crucial qualification is immediately necessary. There are an infinity of normative principles (sentence types and their contents), and only a small subset have featured in the world in a way that qualify them as ontic explanations of what is said and done. It is important to be clear on what gives some special qualifications here. (It is not that they express truths or are correct.) Take the normative principle that those of African decent ought to sit in the back of the bus.[13] There are very many normative principles closely related to it. For example, that those of African decent ought to be seated in the front of the bus, that they ought to sit distributed in every other seat of the bus, . . . in every third seat, . . . first one alone, then by pairs—the variations are endless. But very few of these normative principles have ever featured in the world in such a way as to qualify as ontic explanations of what was done. It is not hard to discern what makes for the difference, at least in outline: it is the normative principle being "held by" the person(s) whose actions or thoughts are the ontic explananda.[14]

What it is to "hold" a normative principle is not itself a simple matter. Like what it is to believe something, it allows for a diversity of cases. Certainly, one can be said to hold a normative principle (content) without one having tokened (in natural language or in mentalese, if there is such a thing) any sentence with that content. Crudely, we may say that one holds a normative principle (content) if one has dispositions to act or reason in accordance with it and to adopt evaluative stances in keeping with it. I will proceed on the basis of this rough characterization.[15]

One might say that normative principles—qua held—can be ontic explanations. Yet this is just to say that the state that is the holding of a normative principle can be an ontic explanation of what is thought and undertaken. There should be little surprising in this admission. I noted earlier that reports of people holding normative principles could serve as erotetic explanations. This is to say that such reports could point to states on which the action or thought to be explained is dependent. Thus, the holding of normative principles can be ontic explanations.

None of this is to say that normative principles—qua correct—serve as ontic explanations. When I insisted that normative principles—qua normative—do not enter into explanation (then thinking in terms of erotetic explanation), I was repudiating the idea that the explanation of what is thought and done turns on findings of normative correctness. If, for example, normative principles—qua norma-

tive—could serve as erotetic explanations of why someone did or thought something, then one giving that explanation would be committed to the normative correctness of the thought or deed. In giving the explanation, one would be saying that the explanandum is normatively appropriate in whatever sense of normative propriety the principle expresses (rational, moral, or whatever). But we have found that normative principles cannot feature in erotetic explanations. If normative principles—qua correct—could be ontic explanations of what is thought or done, then what is so explained would be correct. But we have found that normative principles only can serve as ontic explanations insofar as they are held by those whose actions or thoughts are explained. Such ontic explanation is normatively neutral or inert.

In summary, normative principles—qua held—can be ontic explanations. Normative principles—qua correct—cannot. (Thus, we may fill in cell 4 in Table 3.)

ii. Ontic Explanations and Norms

When norms or normative principles—qua normative—are thought to be explanatory, explanation of actions and thoughts are thought to be normatively partisan. To explain in the way traditionally envisioned would be to find the agent normatively virtuous. Such is the hallmark of the involvement of norms in explanation to which I object. In the arguments above, projected roles for norms and normative principles in explanation were shown to be illusory. The explanations themselves were found to be normatively neutral. Will this pattern repeat itself when considering the possibility of norms as ontic explanations? Will norms only qualify as ontic explanations to the extent that they are "normatively neutered"?

It will be important to keep in mind the earlier distinction between norms in the merely social sense and norms—qua normative. There are two families of norm talk.

On one hand, one encounters discussions of various people and "*their* norms of rationality" (or "sportsmanship," or "proper social conduct," or "reasonable attention to detail," and so on). The norms referred to in such formulations are the norms held by someone or some group. Here, there need be no suggestion that the norms actually manage to constitute or characterize what makes for rightness. When the people in some group hold a normative principle in a coor-

dinated fashion, we have what I have called a "norm in the merely social sense."

On the other hand, people talk and write of "*the* norms of rationality constraining us" to reason in certain ways, or to act in certain ways, given antecedent beliefs and desires. One hears that "it is a norm of rationality that one ought to" reason or act in certain ways. Insofar as this is not just a report of what some folk, including the author, happen to hold appropriate, the norms appealed to in such formulations would appear to be rightness or correctness makers themselves (or to correctly characterize what makes for correctness). To say that the norms of rationality constrain us to act or reason thusly entails that so acting or reasoning is rational. Sometimes, what is apparently on order is some manner of platonic principle—say, Platonic forms of rationality or principles awaiting rationalistic discovery or appreciation. Other times, what is envisioned is perhaps some manner of social norm—but ones with special characteristics that allow them to constitute what is being done and what is correct to do. It may well be that such correctness-constituting social norms are most commonly what people have in mind when arguing that norms—qua normative—can feature in explanation. Whatever the exact story about the norms envisioned on this usage, there is this consistent theme: the norms make for, or at least characterize what makes for, the correctness of what is done. Again, this is what I intend by "norms—qua normative."

There are, then, three usages of talk of norms to be considered. These are summarized in Table 2. I remark on the ontic explanatory role of each. For any of these to be an ontic explanation for what is thought or done, the thought or act must be dependent on the norm. It must be the case that had the norm (in the relevant sense) not obtained, the thought or act would not have obtained (or at least would have been less likely to have obtained).

I find unpromising the suggestion that norms as nonsocial correctness-makers are ontic explanations. The suggestion that there is an appropriate dependence relation here is mysterious. Furthermore, suppose one were to posit a mechanism to fill in between those select platonic norms prescribing those rational processes that people happen to be inclined toward and the actions that conform to them. There would remain a telling objection to taking even these select norms to be appropriately responsible for the corresponding action. The ontic explanation for those actions would seem to be, most directly, the relevant dispositions possessed by the agent or agents and, secondarily,

TABLE 2
Uses of "Norm" to Be Considered

	Social Matter	Not a Social Matter
Not necessarily a correctness-maker	Coordinated evaluative stance-taking of the sort evinced in coordinated actions.	
A correctness-maker	Coordinated evaluative stance-taking with special features that make for the correctness of what is indicated. Typically thought to constitute what is done and what is correct.	Platonic matter, for example, "the norms of rationality" awaiting rationalist discovery.

the various mechanisms that are responsible for those agents' being inclined or disposed one way or another. Whatever mechanisms one might posit to connect up certain supposed platonic norms with actions or thoughts, these mechanisms would presumably screen off the norm—qua correct—from being ontically explanatory. (Thus, cell 7 of Table 3.)

a. Ontic Explanations and Merely Social Norms

Social norms as here understood are patterns of coordinated evaluative stance-taking among a social group—coordinated stance-taking that yields coordinated behavior. Commonly included in the coordinated behavior are expressions of prescriptions and proscriptions, impositions of sanctions for violations, and rewards for compliance. However, for some social norms, there may be no articulation of the rules and very subtle rewards and punishments. Social norms are a varied lot. Examples include the norms of Jim Crow, the norms of guerilla warfare, the norms for interpersonal space, the norms/rules of baseball, and the norms/rules of a natural language. Notably, some of these social rules may also be norms as correctness-makers. For now, the question is, Can they, insofar as they are at least social norms, be ontic explanations?

This question has a ready answer: yes. The answer is already reflected in the characterization of social norms given above: the coordinated stance-taking "yields" or gives rise to coordinated behavior. Had the folk in the days of Jim Crow not taken the coordinated attitudes that they did, seating patterns would have been different. If people did not internalize the rules of baseball and judge accordingly,

the infielders would not toss the ball around as they commonly do. The actions and patterns of action are dependent on the coordinated stance-taking. Social norms can be ontic explanations. This result is in keeping with the recognition that normative principles—qua held— are ontic explanations and that reports of the holding of norms or normative principles can be erotetic explanations.

b. Ontic Explanations and Correctness-Constituting Social Norms

Some social norms may be more than merely social norms—perhaps some may also make for the correctness of what conforms to them. For purposes of this article at least, I will suppose that some social norms *may* manage to constitute what is correct (and what is incorrect) in the actions to which they apply.[16] In what follows, I explore what would be the consequences of there being such norms for the role of the norms—qua normative—as explanations of actions and thoughts. If there is any such norm, this must be because some coordinated stance-taking has certain features that make it different from that found in many run-of-the-mill social norms. Thus, we must address two issues: What are the special features had by correctness constituting norms? Are actions or thoughts dependent on these distinctive features in a way that would qualify the correctness-constituting norms—qua correctness constituters—as ontic explanations?

A disclaimer is needed. I am somewhat hampered in this investigation by not having any ultimately satisfying account of what, in addition to there being a norm in the minimal social sense, is required for there to be a correctness-constituting norm. Indeed, I even have a sneaking suspicion that the question of what makes one into the other may rest on a false presupposition: that there is something that will turn the trick. There may be no norms constituting objective correctness. If we were to know that there are no such norms—qua normative—then the article could be ended at this point. I have shown that neither normative principles nor norms—qua normative can serve as erotetic explanations. I have also recognized that norms—as social norms that do not make for correctness—are ontic explanations. But then, there has been no explanatory role found for either norms or normative principles that would lead one, simply in giving such an explanations, to be committed to the normative propriety of what is thought of done. That would be the end of the matter.

Because my skeptical suspicions are no more than suspicions, it is fitting to press on, considering what would be the consequences for the

issue of concern in this article of there being correctness-constituting social norms. I do have some rough ideas about what would be needed to turn the trick, if anything can. My strategy is as follows: I will point to what plausibly might be in the neighborhood of what makes certain social norms into correctness-constituting norms, then suggest that such features are of limited explanatory worth. However, this is not to say that they cannot be ontic explanations.

As is well known, an entity can be the cause of an event or state without all of its features being causally relevant. Where ontic explanation turns on cause, the ontic explanation of an event of state is, strictly speaking, the causally relevant features of the entity. (One might say that the ontic explanation is the entity-*qua-P*, where *P* is the causally relevant feature.) Because ontic explanation may turn on forms of dependency other than causal, we should formulate the point more broadly: the ontic explanation of a state or event is, strictly speaking, the features of entities on which the explained state or event is appropriately counterfactually dependent. Accordingly, an entity, such as a norm, may be an ontic explanation for an action or pattern of actions only in virtue of some of its properties, in which case we would need to get a fix on which properties.

When considering the role of norms as ontic explanations, these issues must be kept in mind. This is especially so when norms—qua normative—are closely related to (perhaps a species of) social norms. It will then be important to determine whether it is the norm—*qua normative*—that is the explanation or merely that norm—*qua social norm*.

Suppose that some social norm is also a correctness-constituting norm. As a constellation of dispositions to socially coordinated stance-takings, it has certain features that do not of themselves make for the correctness of the thought and action conforming to it. There are features that it may share with social norms that are not constituters of correctness. (On the other hand, if there are features that qualify some norms as constituters of correctness, then these are not features that are shared with norms that do not constitute what is correct.) These points give rise to a crucial question: when thoughts or actions are dependent on a social norm that also has features that qualify it as a correctness-constituting norm, does this dependency turn on features that the norm possesses—qua social norm—or does this dependency turn on features that it has—*qua correctness constituting norm?* For the norm—qua social norm—to be an ontic explanation is for thought or action to be dependent on those features of the norm that it can share

with norms that are not correctness constituters. For the norm—qua correctness constituter—to be an ontic explanation would be for thoughts or actions to be dependent on those special features of the norm—qua normative. If all thoughts and actions are dependent on norms—qua social norms—then norms—qua correctness constituters, qua normative—would seem to be screened off as ontically irrelevant. Thus, what is needed for norms—qua normative—to be ontically explanatory is for there to be features of actions or thoughts (other than correctness, of course) that are dependent on these features of coordinated stance-taking that make for correctness.[17]

It might be thought that a significant internal coherence of a set of coordinated stance-taking is enough to make for the correctness of what is approved in the stance-taking. But this can be seen to be inadequate by reflection on examples. There is reason to believe that the stances taken in the Jim Crow South might have been reasonably consistent. We may presume that one growing up there would have been trained to see the social world in a certain way—trained to have the "appropriate" mutually reinforcing attitudes and beliefs. However, the internal coherence of stance-taking was insufficient to make the practices of Jim Crow correct.

One might question the internal coherence of that stance-taking. Admittedly, the African Americans were less effectively indoctrinated. Furthermore, there were clearly elements in the wider political and religious traditions that made the Jim Crow stance-taking problematic. So one might ask, is not what is lacking in Jim Crow stance-taking just a coherence with a *wider* set of stance-takings—say, that in the religious and political (and even scientific) traditions in which those stance-taking practices were embedded? Does a kind of wide reflective equilibrium in stance-taking within a community constitute the correctness of what is there approved? I doubt that it does. Were there a society without the troublesome democratic ideals, religious traditions of lowly virtue and intrinsic individual worth, scientific evidence of kinship, and so forth, and were a people there treated as were those of (recent) African descent under Jim Crow, this would not make that treatment correct. Something more than wide internal coherence is needed in coordinated dispositions to stance-taking to constitute the correctness that is there approved.

The internal coherence of a constellation of stance-taking is a feature of social norms, qua social norms, since a set of stance-taking can have this feature without being a correctness constituter. Now, such coherence can have an impact on the actions or thoughts exhibited in

a community. For example, actions may be taken with less hesitation, with more confidence, than they would were the relevant stance-taking inconsistent. This is to say that features of social norms such as internal coherence can be ontic explanations.

Robert Brandom (1994, chaps. 1, 8) advances an account of stance-taking that purportedly constitutes what is done and thought and its correctness (or incorrectness). In Brandom's approach, there are norms reflected in the everyday practice of undertaking and attributing discursive commitments. These are said to constitute the correct applicability of concepts and what counts as correct inference.[18] If anything distinguishes correctness constituting social norms from those that do not constitute what is correct, it would seem to lie in the neighborhood he describes. According to Brandom, for coordinated dispositions to stance-taking to qualify as normative in a full-blooded sense, the stance-taking must itself incorporate a distinction between some act's or thought's being correct and its merely seeming correct. (Of course, this demand hearkens to the later Wittgenstein.) The idea that there is a matter on which to be correct or incorrect, and that seeming so does not make it so, must be integral to the stance-taking constituting the norm—qua normative.[19]

Looking to correctability involves the idea of objectivity in this sense: even uniform contemporary agreement in an evaluative stance can be mistaken. That is, not only can an individual be mistaken and corrected, but so can the community of stance-takers on points where they agree in the stances they presently take (Brandom 1994, 594, 597-601). For example, the community of investigators might be at a point in their investigations where they uniformly embrace a theoretical and empirical equilibrium according to which the basic constituents of reality are indivisible atoms. Yet they might be wrong and correctable in terms of subsequent results as a descendent community continues to evaluate the commitments undertaken by the earlier community.[20] Similarly, a community might have achieved a reflective equilibrium according to which all groups within the community are being treated correctly. They might yet be wrong in living in an unjustly stratified community. The correction, to which present stance-taking equilibria must remain open (if they are to qualify as correctness-constituting), treats later equilibria as further considered applications of the same concepts and constraints.

In my understanding of Brandom's (1994) approach, a given social norm may be a correctness constituter at least in part by virtue of looking to correctability. When the coordinated stance-taking has this fea-

ture, what the stance-taking ultimately points to, what is ultimately in accord with the norm, may be difficult, perhaps impossible, to read off from the present evaluative stances of those holding the norm. After all, the relevant community of stance-takers may take reasonably (and fairly widely) internally coherent stances regarding the just treatment of people and yet be uniformly wrong in those stances. They may uniformly take evaluative stances on the appropriateness of a given belief, their stances may be marked by a reasonably wide and coherent reflective equilibrium, and yet be uniformly wrong.

One might put the matter this way: what we think of most naturally as a social norm is a fairly temporally located socially coordinated set of dispositions to stance-taking. What that social norm *points to* in the most straightforward sense, what *conforms to it directly*, is a matter of what is and would be, there and then, approved of in the characteristic evaluative stance-taking. Yet the correctness-constituting social norm, by virtue of being open to correctability, looks to later equilibria as further considered applications of the same concepts and constraints. These later equilibria become later stages in the more diffuse norm. The temporally local equibria would seem to be components of an extended evolving entity. And it would seem to be this historically evolving and open-ended norm that "points to" what is correct. What conforms to the extended correcting social norm can then be quite different from what any local social norm directly points to—at best, the common coordinated dispositions to stance-taking only point to these "corrected" verdicts indirectly. Thus, the common social norms seem to be (or be components of) correctness-constituting norms by virtue of an openness to correctability that incorporates them into a more diffuse historical set of equilibria or social norms that constitute the correctness-constituting norm (strictly taken).

Now, there is reason to believe that much of what is thought and done depends on features characterizing norms in the more mundane social sense. A particularly striking prima facie case for this point can be made when considering cases of norms—qua normative—that encompass successive equilibria, a scenario broached in the previous paragraph.[21] Each equilibria is a social norm (I will call these "local" social norms)—a coordinated pattern of dispositions to stance-taking that can be individuated so as not to include whatever makes for correctness. The norm—qua normative—may then be viewed as composed of an evolving series of more finely individuated local social norms. These local social norms may stand to each other as sedimented strata within an ongoing geological formation. Each local

social norm—each socially uniform equilibria of dispositions to stance-taking then serves as a more or less considered application (or misapplication) of the broad norm—qua normative. These elements or constituents would seem to be united in the norm—qua normative—by relations of correctability (and sometimes of correction).

For concreteness, consider this possibility: perhaps the social norms associated with the days of Jim Crow were a sedimented temporal layer of stance-taking within a more extended pattern of stance-taking that constitutes a norm—qua normative. This norm supposedly constitutes what counts as the just treatment of people. The Jim Crow sediment constitutes a mere component stage of the evolving grand norm, a component that locally (and mistakenly) points to actions quite contrary to those the grand norm ultimately constitutes as correct. Those temporally and socially local patterns of stance-taking constituted a local social norm—one indicating that those of African decent should sit in the back of the buses. Now, for our purposes, the crucial point is this: what people did and thought in those days seems clearly dependent on the local, merely social, norm—not on the grand norm—qua normative. Some sat in the back of the bus as a result of the local norm.

If there is anything to the idea of norms—qua normative—it would seem to require something like this distinction between norms—qua normative—and those local social norms—qua coordinated dispositions to stance-taking—that are their components. A local social norm, as a component of the norm—qua normative, must have an openness to correction but may itself be an equilibrium that is quite mistaken. Features of the component social norms need not be features of the more historically extended social norms that constitute correctness. Yet features of these local social norms presumably explain much of the action to be found. These features include the systematic evaluative stances that were and would be taken during the relevant period toward actions. At a time (say, the time of Jim Crow), certain stances were and would have been taken toward actions (seating choices, restroom use, hotel choices, and so on). These systematic patterns of approval and disapproval are a feature of the social norm—but not, it would seem, of any norm qua real correctness constituter of which it might somehow be a component. Other features of the social norm include the degree of internal coherence of the contemporary patterns of stance-taking and the comprehensiveness of such coherence in patterns. Such features of the local social norm—qua social norm—can be ontically explanatory. Indeed, they typically

are ontically explanatory of what is thought and done. So we are left with the question of what remains for the norms—qua normative—to explain? What remains for those features making for correctness to explain?

Here, my suggestions are not wholly negative. I envision at least one role for norms—qua normative—as ontic explanations.

It is commonly suggested that norms manage to constitute what is correct as they constitute actions that *can be* performed. Norms are thought to constitute what is correct in the way of promising as they constitute what counts as promising—possible ways of promising. Uttering a phonetic string such as *I promise* will not count as a promise (nor as imposing obligations) if it occurs in certain contexts such as the reading of a script for a play or if is occurs among folk speaking only Swahili. The norms (of the relevant language, here English, and of conversation more generally, and those associated with the particular normative-communicative concept of a *promise*) constitute various *possibilities for action* and various possibilities for correct action. One cannot correctly promise without the coordinated stance-taking that constitutes the norms of conversation and those that constitute the rules of a shared language, say, English. Indeed, one cannot *incorrectly* promise without those norms. Correct *and* incorrect actions are dependent on such norms. Norms are, it seems, the ontic explanation for *both* indifferently.

Thus, norms—qua normative—would seem to constitute the action-kinds for which they control evaluation as correct or as incorrect. They supposedly constitute the kinds, as they constitute what counts as correct and as incorrect actions of the relevant kinds. *If* norms—qua normative—do this, then both correct and incorrect actions are dependent on them. They then are ontic explanations for what is done or thought—as long as what is done or thought is of a sort that *can be* either correct or incorrect. This is not to say simply that the correctness (or the incorrectness) of a promising is dependent on such norms. Rather, it is to say that the possibility of promising at all— that there are behaviors that would be promises at all—is dependent on norms. As a result, any particular promise—*whether correct or incorrect*—is dependent on those norms.

My conclusion then is that *if* there are norms—qua normative— that constitute the correctness (and incorrectness) of actions, these might be ontic explanations for the actions whose correctness *and* for the actions whose incorrectness they constitute. The concession being entertained is not at all inconsequential. However, one consequence

must be emphasized, as it is quite at odds with the traditional view about what follows from the explanatory role of norms. It is commonly thought that the explanatory role of norms—qua normative—has the implication that what is so explained is correct. But the particular explanatory role of norms being entertained here has no such implication. One might say that what is explained, what is dependent on the norm, is in the first instance what actions are possible to undertake. Norms constitute kinds of actions (or thoughts) and, thus, the possibilities for action (or thought). Doing something correctly or incorrectly depends on there being a kind that can be done correctly and incorrectly. It is in this sense that what is done in a particular case can be said to be dependent on a norm. It is in this sense that norms—qua normative—have been found to be ontic explanations for what is done. But what is so explained does not need to be correct. It does not even need to be largely or predominantly correct, as witnessed by the treatment of African Americans under Jim Crow.

What, then, explains *what is done*, given the possibilities or alternatives open to agents? What explains what is done in particular instances and in particular times or periods is not the norm—qua normative. Rather, what is done seems largely dependent on (merely) social norms (and their local features that do not make for correctness). Perhaps there are norms that constitute certain ways of treating people as objectively just and other ways as objectively unjust. But the norms that are the explanation for what is done in any given instance of behavior are those that are like Jim Crow norms—local social norms as dispositions to local coordinated patterns of stance-taking. Of themselves, these may lack features sufficient to constitute what is done there as correct, but they seem to have just what it takes to condition thought and action.

It is perhaps worth returning to the topic of erotetic explanation in closing. If there are the ontic dependencies suggested above, and thus the ontic explanations there described, there must be corresponding erotetic explanations. I have argued that features of local social norms—which are themselves not sufficient to constitute what is correct—can be ontic explanations. I have argued that such features are ontic explanations for much of what is done, for much of the patterns of behavior that we observe. Accordingly, there seems no place for norms—qua normative—as the explanation of what is done. These points give rise to parallel points regarding the corresponding erotetic explanations—reports of local social norms provide the explanation of what is done and what patterns of actions or thoughts

TABLE 3
Overview of the Argument

	Normative Principles		Norms	
	Local	Our/"Objective"	Social	Platonic
Erotetic	1. No—an answer to a why-question must be believed by the one answering.	2. No—the normative principle is screened off from explanatory relevance by the holding of it.	3. No—not the sort of thing that can be an answer to a question at all.	
Ontic	4. Yes—qua held these can be explanatory of the actions or states of the person holding them; no—qua correct.		5. Yes—qua merely social. 6. Perhaps—qua constituters.	7. No—has little apparent connection to what is done.

one finds. These explanations leave no room for the erotetic explanations of what in particular is done or thought by reporting on norms—qua normative. However, there is perhaps a place for reporting on norms—qua normative—when answering questions about what action possibilities confront agents. The norm—qua normative—might then be mentioned in explanations, not of what someone or some people actually did, but of what actions they might have done.

In closing, I should note how these last remarks may relate to Mark Risjord's view—a view that prompted me to rethink my position on these matters. As noted earlier, Risjord writes of "local criteria" and "norms" as erotetic explanations. Norms cannot be erotetic explanations, but they might be ontic explanations, and reports of them commonly would then be erotetic explanations. Insofar as this might also serve as a terminological refinement on Risjord's formulations, then his position is not at all at odds with my earlier position. Still, Risjord also insists that the norms which are explanatory are norms—qua normative. I have argued that norms—qua normative—are largely not explanatory of what is thought and done—but that they may be explanatory of what might be thought and done—as the possibilities for action would seem to be dependent on them. Furthermore, I have argued that these norms—qua normative—are not the local social norms—but a more diffusely individuated sort of social norms. These thoughts may provide a helpful way of addressing a puzzle that

arises when reading Risjord (2000). He insists that norms—qua normative—can be explanations, and yet he shares with me the symmetry thesis that rational and irrational, correct and incorrect, actions are similarly explicable and that something being correct is not itself an explanation. One may wonder how what is done could be explained by norms that are constituters of correctness and yet not be correct. My suggestion is that correctness-constituting social norms do not have the here-and-now, localized features needed to explain why agents did or do some act or exhibit some pattern of action. Why-questions have only local merely social norms as explanations. But insofar as there are more diffuse social norms that constitute what action/thought possibilities there are, as well as constituting what would be correct to do/think, these can serve as explanations for what could be done. Such explanations clearly do not have as a consequence any commitment to the correctness of what is explained.

NOTES

1. Davidson's writings on interpretation certainly seem to consistently provide a prominent example, as do those of any writer who thinks of the explanation of actions fundamentally in terms of finding rationality and thinks of the relevant "rationality" as codified in our best normative principles. A range of such writers are discussed in Henderson (1993). At one level, Winch (1958, 1964) would seem to develop a very different position. For Winch insists on understandings that are open to, indeed revealing of, others' forms of life and attendant rationality. Still, I argue in Henderson (1987) that Winch's own formulations indicate that the recognition of rationality to which he points involves the finding of means-end appropriateness of the language games and their embedding forms of life. Finding this much turns on the use of our own grasp of practical rationality.

2. I believe that this is true, for example, of Risjord (2000). Although he intends to be employing the erotetic model exclusively, much that he says about a role for "local norms" in explanation can best be accommodated by saying that such norms can be ontic explanations and that reports of those norms (rather than the norms themselves) may then enter in erotetic explanations. I have no objection to reports of norms entering into erotetic explanation. However, the claim that norms can be ontic explanation must be approached with care.

3. See Risjord (2000), whose arguments (chap. 7) support at most a role for reports of normative principles in erotetic explanations but who at least seems to hold that "criteria of rationality are explanatory" (p. 57) —and who understands this point as a correction on my earlier position that (as he puts it), "when used as explanantia, claims about norms collapse into descriptions of belief or habit" (p. 155). I would have summarized my point somewhat differently: what serves as the explanantia in an (erotetic) explanation is not a norm or normative principle but rather a report of the holding of a normative principle or norm—and the holding of a normative principle is a matter of

articulate or inarticulate dispositions to evaluative stance-taking. (Holding, at the social level, is a matter of coordinated dispositions.)

4. The parenthetical qualifications are intended to signal that normative principles are such in virtue of their content—the kind of claim they make—and that "claim" may well not be correct. All normative principles are normative in the sense that one embracing the normative principle (rather than merely a report embedding it) is committed to the correctness of what the normative principle dictates. Still, normative principles (while normative in this sense) need not be correct.

5. We need not explicitly consider epistemic accounts of explanation (according to which an explanation is an argument to the effect that the explanandum is to be expected). Such accounts (the venerable covering-law model) have well-known limitations, particularly in the context of statistical explanation; and well-known difficulties, particularly in demanding rather more as background than is intuitively appropriate. In any case, what would qualify as a epistemic explanation can also be treated using the erotetic model—with appropriate choices of relevance relations. So we would seem to loose no generality by employing just two of the big three approaches to explanation here.

6. The temptation to find a role for norms in explanations arises in connection with explanation seeking why-questions rather than how-questions, which are discussed in Cummins (1983).

7. If one adopts an understanding of events as property instantiations at a time, rather than Davidson's (1980b) understanding of events as multiply-describable nodes in the causal network, then one does not need to add this last qualification.

8. The example is employed in Humphreys (1989).

9. In correspondence, Risjord has insisted that when he wrote of "claims about local criteria [of rationality]" having a place in explanation, he did not intend merely to refer to what I would call "reports of the holding of normative principles." The claims that are to serve as erotetic explanations on his understanding are, then, to refer something richer than the holding of normative principles. He insists that he did not intend that the explanatory claims about local criteria be merely reports of the social norms of others. The local criteria to which Risjord appeals are not, then, simply coordinated dispositions to stance-taking. Risjord thinks of the relevant local criteria as norms of a sort that the later Wittgenstein and recently Brandom have discussed. These involve coordinated dispositions to evaluative stance-taking, but are more. These "genuine norms" would seem to constitute what is done and what should be done. If Risjord's suggestion is read in conformity with these points, then my discussions in section V are more directly relevant to it than is my discussion in the present section. In section V. ii., I now acknowledge correctness- (and possibility-) constituting norms can have a very limited place as ontic explanations of actions. If this is correct, then there should be a kind of erotetic explanation in which reports of such norms can feature. I argued later that reports of such norms can feature as erotetic explanations, not of why someone did something, but of why anyone might be able to do something of the sort.

I do not intend this article as a commentary on Risjord's interesting book, although that book has occasioned my return to the present topic. Instead, I here exhaustively survey the full range of ways in which norms or normative principles might be thought to have a "place" in explanation; I seek to evaluate each suggested way—to decisively repudiate any that have the traditional suggestions with which we began.

Interestingly, as I understand him, Risjord shares my goal—insisting that neither normative principles nor norms feature in erotetic explanation to commit one explain-

ing actions to the normatively appropriateness of what is explained. What I have not been able to get clear is just how Risjord hopes to hold on to this position while also insisting that norms—qua normative—can feature as ontic explanations or that the normative principles—qua normative—as expressing the import of such norms can themselves, as themselves, be erotetic explanations. Nor am I able to discern how reports of normative principles expressing the content of correctness-constituting norms can serve as explanations without making out the actions explained to be correct. In other words, I think Risjord owes us an explanation of how claims about correctness-constituting norms can feature as explanatory without compromising the symmetry thesis that he shares with me.

10. It is worth considering how this division of cases can accommodate those cases in which the relevant standards are both theirs and ours. The line of argument that I now present does not deal with such cases—as it supposes that the standards under consideration are local in being the standards of some groups and not of others and that those standards happen to be ones that we (the explainers) do not hold. It argues that what one does not hold cannot feature in an explanation one can give—although a report of its being held could. Soon, I will consider whether our normative standards can feature in explanations. (Many of these are local—not shared by all groups. Perhaps some are not local. Their being local really does not seem to make for any relevant difference.) I argue that our normative standards—qua normative—cannot serve as erotetic explanations as they are screened off from being explanatorily relevant by information regarding what principles are held by what people—by reports of normative principles being held. Of course, what once are the standards of others can become our standards as well—but in neither case are the normative principles—qua normative—explanatory.

11. Some writers would want to add a qualification: "what is good to do or think (by our lights) is irrelevant." Their point would be that what was done was really rational and that our local norms—or rather normative principles—are inadequate to appreciate this. Perhaps it will then be said that our principles do not have application to what is done in some common cases and that their application there amount to misconstruing what is done. While there are doubtless cases of making others out to be irrational by misunderstanding what they are about, there are also many cases where no such misunderstanding is in play. To attempt to explain away the present point in this manner involves an overly strong principle of charity (Henderson 1993; Risjord 2000).

12. It might be insisted that we would not talk of "actions," "beliefs," and "desires" were there not to be at least this rudimentary rationality to the dispositions of the system. I concur (Henderson 1993, 1999). However, nothing follows straightforwardly regarding the role of normative principles—qua normative—in the erotetic explanation of action. One can grant that there are kinds of transitions to which a cognitive system needs to be disposed for it to be describable as having beliefs and desires, and one may grant that those include transition dispositions between states that conform crudely to functional roles that are weakly rational. One can grant this without holding that normative principles serve to delimit just what rationality is required here. That might be an empirical question that has been decided largely by what suppositions or interpretations have enabled us over many generations to model each other's behavior (Henderson 1996, 2000, 1999).

13. Again, I intend this as an expression of a principle actually held by many in the days of Jim Crow. However, to be so taken, we must understand being of African

descent in rather special ways. After all, apparently all humans are ultimately of African decent.

14. Again, qualifications are needed. Perhaps a normative principle, qua sentence token, can have caused a response in someone who does not hold it. For example, one who holds its denial might be led to engage in long-winded argument upon encountering its being tokened. So perhaps the holding of a normative principle is simply the paradigmatic case of such principles' being ontic explanations. Cases in which agents adopt various evaluative stances to a normative principle might then be considered variations. In this case, one would want to say the normative principles can be ontic explanations insofar as the agent whose thought and action is explained adopts an evaluative stance toward that principle.

15. Reflecting on work in connectionist artificial intelligence, Terry Horgan and John Tienson (1996) have developed a very interesting perspective on the content on which a cognitive system may and must rely. They write of the morphological content on which a system draws. Perhaps this notion provides a way of sharpening the present points (see also Henderson and Horgan 2000).

It should also be noted that this formulation in terms of dispositions must be understood to presuppose that the content of the states between which transitions are in question are taken as settled—this is not an account of content generally. This forestalls threatened objections inspired by Kripke's remarks on rule-following.

16. An influential account that revolves around such social norms has been developed by Brandom (1994). Abstract conceptual roles are sometimes thought to have a normative element. Corresponding dispositions yielding patterned stance-taking are thought to constitute norms—qua normative—by Peacocke (1992). Without conceding that there really are such correctness-constituting norms, I here explore what would follow from there being such.

17. Such explanandum features cannot already be determined (or fully probablized) by features of the coordinated stance-taking that do not make correctness.

18. As this account applies to the correct application of normative concepts, it would seem to aspire to accounting for all the normativity that one could want.

19. One of my reservations concerning Brandom's (1994) ultimate success in providing for correctness-constituting norms can be put as follows. While he clearly characterizes how our discursive norms incorporate the notion of objective correctness, reflected in de re attributions of belief (pp. 592-601), it is not at all clear that he manages to explain how the norms themselves manage to determine the correctness to which they aspire. As Brandom admits, "What is shared by all discursive practices is that there is a difference between what is objectively correct in the way of concept application and what is merely taken to be so, not what it is-the structure, not the content" (p. 600). This leaves open the possibility that the norms incorporate the notion of objective correctness but are unable to provide for what they structurally have us seek. For all Brandom shows, objective correctness might either derive elsewhere or be a myth enshrined in our discursive practices.

20. To be correctable in virtue of what subsequent communities of investigators might discover does not require that any community or individual ever arrive at the correct equilibrium—all might now and subsequent communities of investigators might always agree in a mistake (Brandom 1994, 594).

21. It seems that we must conceive of a correctness-constituting norm as a much more sprawling thing than social norms as commonly characterized. Correctness-constituting norms might be thought of as composed of all the dispositions to stance-

taking to which a given set of stance-taking points in its "looking to correctability." There may be problems with this crude formulation. However, the central point is that the stance-taking to which some people uniformly arrive at a time is structurally open to correction in terms of appropriately related discursive practices of antecedent communities. The stance-taking of those communities must then be included in the full set of stance-taking that makes up the norm itself. Perhaps even "possible" but unactualized stance-taking equibria need to be included. In any case, norms—qua correctness constituters—would need to be much more open-ended things then mere social norms (as passing coordinations of dispositions to stance-taking).

REFERENCES

Brandom, R. 1994. *Making it explicit*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Collingwood, R. 1956. *The idea of history*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cummins, R. 1983. *The nature of psychological explanation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Davidson, D. 1980a. Actions, reasons, and causes. In D. Davidson, *Essays on actions and events*. Oxford: Clarendon.

———. 1980b. Mental events. In D. Davidson, *Essays on actions and events*. Oxford: Clarendon.

———. 1982. Paradoxes of irrationality. In *Philosophical essays on Freud*, edited by R. Wollheim and J. Hopkins. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

———. 1987. Problems in the explanation of action. In *Metaphysics and morality*, edited by P. Pettit, R. Sylvan, and J. Norman. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Elster, J. 1984. *Ulysses and the sirens: Studies in rationality and irrationality*. Rev. ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Henderson, D. 1987. Winch and the constraints on interpretation: Versions of the principle of charity. *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 25:153-73.

———. 1993. *Interpretation and explanation in the human sciences*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

———. 1996. Simulation theory vs. simulation theory: A difference without a difference in explanation. *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 34 (Spindel Conference suppl.): 65-94.

———. 1999. What is a priori about action? Available from http://cas.memphis.edu/philosophy/dkhndrsn/actiontalk.htm.

——— (with Terry Horgan). 2000. Simulation and epistemic competence. In *Empathy and agency: The problem of understanding in the social sciences*, edited by Karsten Steuber. Boulder, CO: Westview.

Henderson, D., and T. Horgan. 2000. Iceberg epistemology. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 61:497-535.

Horgan, T., and J. Tienson. 1996. *Connectionism and the philosophy of psychology*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Humphreys, P. 1989. *The chances of explanation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Jarvie, I. 1964. *The revolution in anthropology*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Kitcher, P. 1993. *The advancement of science*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lauden, L. 1984. *Science and value*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Little, D. 1991. *Varieties of social explanation*. Boulder, CO: Westview.

Nisbett, R., and L. Ross. 1980. *Human inference: Strategies and shortcomings in social judgment*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Peacocke, C. 1992. *A study of concepts*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Putnam, H. 1978. *Meaning and the moral sciences*. Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Risjord, M. 1998. Norms and explanation in the social sciences. *Studies in the History and Philosophy of Science* 29:223-37.

———. 2000. *Woodcutters and witchcraft*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Salmon, W. 1989. Four decades of scientific explanation. In *Scientific explanation: Minnesota studies in the philosophy of science*, vol. 13, edited by P. Kitcher and W. Salmon. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Turner, S. 1979. Translating ritual beliefs. *Philosophy of Social Science* 9:401-23.

———. 1980. *Sociological explanation as translation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

van Fraassen, B. 1980. *The scientific image*. Oxford: Clarendon.

Winch, P. 1958. *The idea of a social science and its relation to philosophy*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press.

———. 1964. Understanding a primitive society. *American Philosophical Quarterly* 1:307-24.

Woodward, J. 1979. Scientific explanation. *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 30:41-67.

———. 1984. A theory of singular causal explanation. *Erkenntnis* 21:231-62.

David Henderson is an associate professor of philosophy at the University of Memphis. He received his Ph.D. in philosophy from Washington University in St. Louis. His research interests include epistemology as well as the philosophy of social science. His publications include Explanation in the Human Sciences *(State University of New York Press, 1993).*