

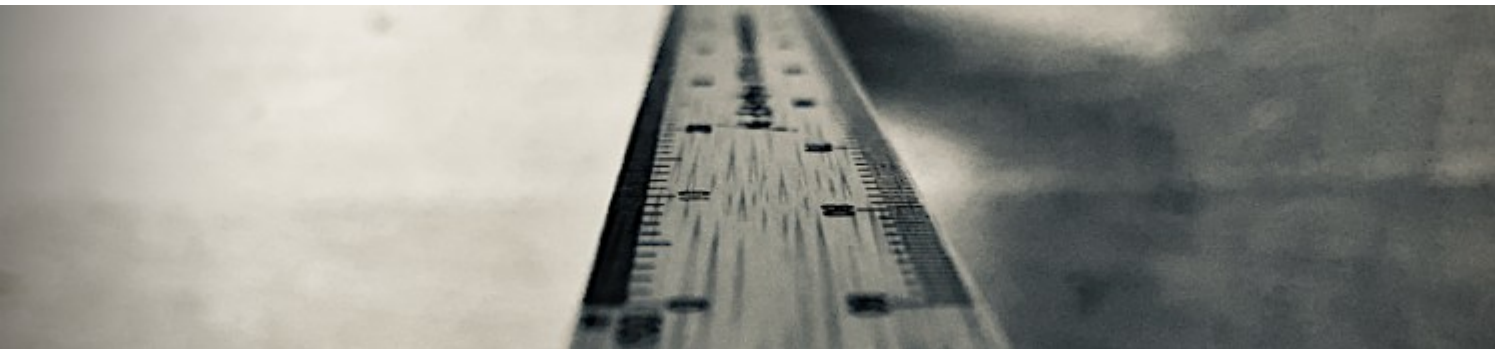


Secret norms

Description

• is an architectural term, according to the OED derived from the Latin noun *norma* which was a square of wood used by carpenters and masons for creating right angles. As known to any student of geometry, a line (or wall) is *normal* to another if it meets it at right angles. The term has been since generalised to refer to any operation or behaviour that follows a pattern, template or model • a behaviour that is *normal*.

• has similar origins as a *regula*, a rod for drawing straight lines and measurement, though it's adopted now to indicate prescriptive statements about behaviours that are to be followed. Norms follow a pattern that may be invisible; rules are explicit. Rules can be recited or written down, regularized • as regulations.



Shattering norms

A recent article in the [Washington Post](#) lists some of the ways that Trump has •shattered norms. • If it's not written down in law as a rule and if he thinks it's to his benefit, he'll do it. Laws that prevent someone from circulating insults are notoriously difficult to codify and enforce. There are norms of decorum, but you can't prosecute someone for breaking norms.

It also turns out that very few rules are so tightly defined that norms don't come into play in their interpretation and application. One norm for some people is that rules about general conduct don't

apply if you are in a position of power: "When you're famous they let you get away with it."

Rules are overt and potentially explicit. The people to whom they apply must know or be able to find out about them. There's nothing secret about the rules of the road. There are norms however, not written into the traffic code, e.g. that you let another driver enter in front of you if their lane is congested and they look desperate. In turn, the norm at least in this country, is for the beneficiary to show gratitude with a simple wave. Such courtesies are not written into the traffic code.

Norms and rules can be weaponized. Rules and regulations can limit people's actions and oppress people from outside and within. The psychoanalyst philosopher Jacques Lacan famously identified the "law of the father" as a deeply embedded censorship function within the human psyche. Norms also have potential as a means of controlling others.

Assertiveness 101

Years ago I read the famous self-help book *When I Say No, I Feel Guilty* by Manuel Smith. He outlined the typical power move exercised by many of us in inventing and imposing rules on others: daughters should look after their aged parents, rational people don't change their minds, men don't weep in public, if you wash the dishes it's someone else's job to dry them, don't complain to shop assistants, leave the room to blow your nose, ask me about my day before you tell me about yours. I made up that list. The book focusses on interpersonal relationships and has many examples introduced with the word "arbitrary."

"Where did all these arbitrary ways of properly doing things come from? The answer is a simple one. All of us invent the rules as we go along, using the beliefs taught us in childhood as an outline" (30).

In other words, as we know from [hermeneutics](#), our preferences and values are informed by a long-standing, complicated and fluid background of experiences and influences. For Smith, we mature as social beings (i.e. become suitably assertive) when we can own up to our likes, dislikes and values without constantly casting our desires on one another as external, universal, god-given rules. If we want to debate or justify our position then we could do worse than start with how we feel about the matter and declare our self-interest rather than concoct some seemingly external rule that others ought to abide by.

Arbitrary rules

The clever message of the book is not that it's ok to be insensitive to other people's rules, but that the appeal to rule impedes effective social interaction. A person who seeks to influence or control you

"will psychologically manipulate you with rules and standards of right and wrong, fairness, reason, and logic to control behaviour that may be in conflict with his own personal wants, likes, and dislikes. The manipulative person will invent this type of external structure or assume it already exists in a relationship in order to control your behavior" (30-31).

Trump's many social offences include not only breaking rules (at risk of prosecution) and slashing norms, but turning his own particular preferences, and self-interested values into rules for others. You must be loyal to your leader: "I hope I can count on your loyalty" • Return one benefit with another, the *quid pro quo* rule "I want you to do me a favour though."

Norms and ethos

I raise the issue of norms here to continue my consideration of the pervasive nature of encodings from my previous post: [Place is the code](#). Norms and rules are codes of conduct, which are in the world, embedded and negotiated within the complex web of relationships among people, organisms, things, environments and places. It's about ethics after all. See post: [What have the arts to do with ethics?](#)

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1. Architecture

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2. cryptography
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