
Normative vs. Descriptive

Two Kinds of Claims

Two Questions

- ❖ ‘What does it profit a human being if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?’

—Mark 8:36

- ❖ ‘Good sir, you are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the greatest reputation for both wisdom and power. Are you to ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation, and honors as possible, while you do not care for—and do not even give a thought to—wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul?’

—Plato, *Apology* (29c); Socrates speaking

A Presupposition

- ❖ These two questions presuppose that the soul has a *normative* dimension: the soul is a locus of value.
- ❖ This is why we ought to care about the soul: it is an important source of worth in a human life.

Descriptive Claims

- ❖ Descriptive claims purport to describe the world as it is.
- ❖ One may fairly and uncontroversially ask, when confronted with a descriptive claim: is this claim true or false? What fact, if any, makes this claim true?
 - ❖ Some examples:
 - ❖ Margaret Thatcher was the first female Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.
 - ❖ The speed of light in a vacuum is 299,792,459 metres per second.
 - ❖ N.b. that we may not actually know the truth value of this or that claim:
 - ❖ Uruguay won the first World Cup, in 1930.
 - ❖ It is not possible that anything can travel faster than the speed of light.

Normative Claims

- ❖ Normative claims make appeal, explicitly or implicitly, to some *norm* as a standard; they are generally evaluative or prescriptive.
- ❖ Some examples:
 - ❖ Wagner is the greatest opera composer of all time.
 - ❖ One should never harm another person willingly.
 - ❖ ‘Those who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety.’ (Benjamin Franklin)
 - ❖ You really should do something about that brother of yours.

A Dispute about Normativity

- ❖ Although many people suppose this is so, we do not want to make it *definitional* of normativity that normative statements are not truth evaluable.
- ❖ Consider:
 - ❖ Murder is always and everywhere wrong.
 - ❖ If there are *moral facts*, then this is simply true.
 - ❖ The sunset over the Alps was simply gorgeous.
 - ❖ Each person should always pursue his or her own self-interest exclusively.
- ❖ The crucial point: such statements make implicit or explicit appeal to some norm, either prescriptively or by being evaluative.

An Intriguing Suggestion

- ❖ The search for the soul is a worthy search because, and only because, the soul is normatively laden.
- ❖ Is this assumption correct?
- ❖ If so, what precisely is its value?