

UNLV

PHILOSOPHY COLLOQUIUM

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Time: 3:00pm

Room: CBC C148

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Normativity in the Natural World

Philosophers offer theories of normative categories (e.g., moral goodness, epistemic justification, rational action). Naturalist theories try to account for these categories in purely descriptive, empirical, non-normative (or at least only instrumentally normative) terms. In so doing they ground normativity in the descriptive facts uncovered and analyzed within science. Consider some well-known examples:

- 1) Utilitarians characterize moral rightness in terms of pleasure and pain.
- 2) Reliabilists characterize epistemic justification in terms of the reliability of cognitive mechanisms.
- 3) Preference theorists characterize rational action in terms of people getting what they want.

Many philosophers take the normativity challenge to be a magic bullet objection: No matter how powerful a naturalist theory might be, it's false because it can't account for normativity. So suppose a descriptive theory fits smoothly with our best science – i.e., it's well-supported by evidence, theoretically and explanatorily fruitful, and predictively powerful. Suppose it also captures most of our intuitive judgments about cases. And suppose it's pragmatically powerful – when applied, it provides useful and beneficial guidance. Even with these virtues, many philosophers take the normativity challenge to be a magic bullet that slays the theory.

The first step to disarming the challenge is understanding it. We contend there isn't just one normativity challenge. There are at least three.

1. Moore's Challenge is about the meaning of normative expressions: No set of descriptive claims can have the same meaning as a normative claim.
2. Hume's Challenge is about motivation: Normative claims have a motivating force descriptive claims lack.
3. Kant's Challenge is about objective reasons: Normative claims (or some of them) carry a certain kind of authority that descriptive claims cannot supply. For example, you have an obligation to do your (moral or epistemic) duty even absent any desire to do so.

Having divided the challenge, the naturalist can then conquer it. For each individual challenge, the naturalist has a compelling and definitive response. The power of the normativity challenge is spurious – it seems powerful only if we embrace the confused assumption that the naturalist has to give a single solution to what is, in fact, many distinct challenges. The normativity challenge is not a magic bullet objection because it's not an objection. It's multiple objections, none of which is a serious threat to naturalism about the normative.