

Reductive Theories of Normativity

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Normative judgements – judgements about what we and others have reason to do or ought to do – are a ubiquitous part of our lives. We typically think that sometimes such judgements are true. For example, it might be true of some student that they ought to stay home and write an essay rather than attend a party. However, on reflection normative truths can seem puzzling. They purport to have a kind of action-guiding authority; they count in favor of or justify certain actions and attitudes. This feature marks them out as different from truths about, say, the chemical composition of salt or the number of trees in the park. These latter truths don't seem to demand some response on the part of an agent. Also, it is unclear whether we can discover normative truths through empirical inquiry. What kind of observation or test would confirm the student ought to stay home and write the essay?

My thesis examines a family of theories which try to defuse these kinds of concerns about normative truths. One important variety of such theories suggests that normative truths can be understood as truths about what rationality requires of us – where the requirements of rationality are understood as principles which are conditions of agency. That is to say, principles which agents are somehow committed to simply by virtue of being agents. The value of this kind of theory is that it allows us to find a place for normative truths without positing the existence of distinctive normative properties and facts. According to this approach, normative truths are ultimately just facts about the structure of our own thought.