

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT: DIVORCING THE GOOD AND THE RIGHT

In my dissertation, I argue that deontic and evaluative concepts figure in distinct and independent types of normative appraisal, with claims of neither type holding in virtue of the other: deontic facts are not explained by evaluative ones, nor are evaluative facts explained by deontic ones. I argue that this result has important consequences for debates in normative ethics and also leads naturally to an appealing conception of the relationship between moral and non-moral norms in practical deliberation.

Both deontic and evaluative claims have normative force. Saying that something is good and saying it's required are two different ways of recommending an action. Deontic concepts, as I draw the distinction, are those – such as *required*, *forbidden*, and *permitted* – definable in terms of necessity. To say that you're required to X is to say that you *must* X, in some sense. Such facts therefore purport to mark limits on our freedom, claiming that we don't in fact have certain options that we might have thought we had. The key feature of evaluative concepts – *good*, *bad*, *better*, *best*, etc. – is that they establish a partial ordering of their objects. This ordering doesn't completely coincide with deontic status: most people think that even if lying and torture are both forbidden, the latter is morally worse than the former, and that even if volunteering two hours a week and volunteering four hours a week at the soup kitchen are both permissible, the latter is morally better than the former.

Most consequentialists and many deontologists think that deontic facts hold in virtue of evaluative facts: that an action is the best available to an agent makes it required. Call such views teleological. I show that given a few reasonable assumptions, teleologists must in fact say that an agent is required to do what is best, *in light of what she ought to believe*. I show that this latter clause is both deontic and non-epistemic, which means that there will be at least one class of deontic facts that don't hold in virtue of evaluative facts. Even granting such deontic facts, however, I show that teleology can't be given a positive defense. Such a defense would require an argument of the form: O(X); if X, then O(Y); therefore O(Y). But this type of argument isn't generally valid. I conclude that although an agent may be rationally criticizable for failing to do what's best, there is no important sense in which she *must* do what's best.

Fewer philosophers explicitly claim that evaluative facts hold in virtue of deontic facts, but there are nevertheless a number of intuitively compelling ways to reason from deontic premises to evaluative conclusions. For example, libertarians typically act as if a larger redistributive tax is worse than a smaller one, and Rawlsians normally count each increase in the welfare of the worst off as an improvement. Recently, the Sidgwickian thought that we can define the good as what ought to be desired has returned to prominence. Despite their intuitive appeal, I argue that none of these proposals succeed. I show that the most plausible versions must make use of hypothetical deontic facts – facts about what *would be required* in certain circumstances – and that relying on such facts leads to implausible evaluative conclusions.

I conclude the central part of the dissertation by arguing that the deontic and the evaluative don't share a common normative foundation. Claims of both types are intimately connected to reasons, but the reasons in each case are of different types. If, then, neither the deontic nor the evaluative holds in virtue of the other, nor are they both grounded in some common normative source, it follows that they are independent modes of appraisal, each requiring its own foundation. This has a number of consequences for debates in normative ethics. For example, I argue that, carefully formulated, classical utilitarian and Kantian theories aren't incompatible. The former is essentially an evaluative theory and the latter essentially a deontic one, so their claims concern distinct domains.

I end the dissertation by asking what positive view of practical reason is suggested by my argument. I show that my thesis doesn't pose any threat to the existence of either the deontic or the evaluative. In fact, it makes available an attractive picture of the relationship between moral norms and the other things that are important to us, such as family, friends, profession, and art. Morality seems to enjoy a kind of priority over these other values, and most people also think that at virtually any moment we have the opportunity to do something of moral value – e.g. sending money to or volunteering on behalf of a charitable organization. Together, those claims threaten to leave no practical space for non-moral values. Once we recognize that the deontic and the evaluative are independent, however, I argue that we can clearly see that morality *must* enjoy deontic priority, but *can't* have evaluative priority, over non-moral sources of norms. This makes room for non-moral values and also allows us to explain puzzling concepts like supererogation in a straightforward way.