

Normativity and Reason

Phil 701: Topics in Value Theory

Tues & Thurs 3:40 – 5:00 pm Paul McNamara

- Melissa *ought* to meet Emily
- Jane *shouldn't* believe John
- John's conclusion is *unjustified*
- That is a *good* law/policy

A



We evaluate a wide array of things. When we do so, we are engaging in what philosophers call *normative* or *evaluative* thinking. Note also the apparent link to reasons and standards: If Melissa ought to help Emily, then there must be a reason for her to do so, and similarly, a reason for Jane to not believe John, and one for John not to conclude what he did; and if something is a good law or policy, there must be some standard that determines that. Contrast this with descriptive claims:

- Melissa will help Emily
- Jane believes John
- John drew a conclusion
- That is a law/policy

B



Philosophers and other thinkers have taken normative and evaluative claims like those in group A to be more challenging to account for than descriptive claims like those in group B. Yet normative and evaluative thinking is pervasive and inescapable. **It is arguably impossible to be a rational person, much less a decent person, and not engage in normative and evaluative thinking.** Similarly, for being guided by reasons and standards. How else could we navigate through our lives without such thinking?

This raises a simple question:

Is it possible to provide a systematic credible account of these pervasive ways of thinking?