

Descriptive vs. Normative Theories of Morality

Introducing two very different characters:



Mr. Dee Scriptive

This is Dee Scriptive. He likes to watch others carefully and find out what they consider to be right or wrong, and how they come to hold these opinions. In contrast to Norma, Dee is a bit timid, so he tries to remain an accurate but uninvolved observer, keeping his own opinion to himself.

What are descriptive claims?

Descriptive claims concern how we actually behave or what moral judgments we actually make and how we deliver them.

For instance, we can empirically prove that 75% of drivers break the speed limit or 45% of them believe that they do nothing wrong.

Ms. Norma Tive

This is Norma Tive. She has a strong idea of what is right or wrong, and she likes to inform others about it. Her goal is to argue for her position in a convincing way. Compared to Dee, Norma is more interested in what the world should be like rather than in the way it actually is.

What are normative claims?

Normative claims concern how we should (shouldn't) behave and why it's right (wrong).

For instance, we can argue that we shouldn't break the speed limit and justify it with many reasons.



How do Dee Scriptive and Norma Tive get along?



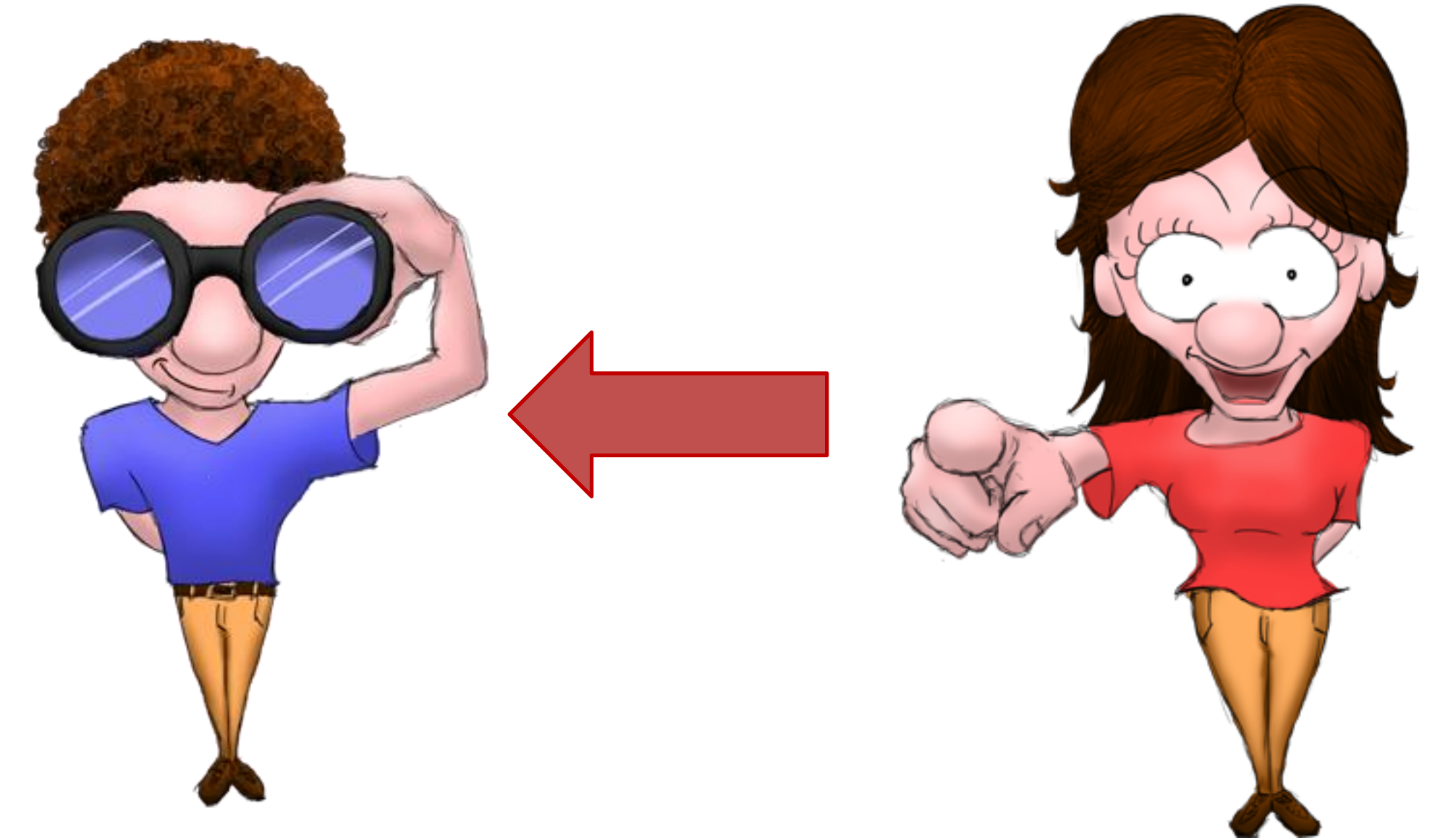
How Dee and Norma are interested in independent things

One might be tempted to simply derive normative claims (ought-statements) from descriptive claims (is-statements). For example, one might be tempted to conclude that speeding is permissible from the observation that the majority of drivers engages in speeding. This kind of reasoning would be flawed: It would constitute the so-called is-ought-fallacy. Even if almost everyone commits speeding offenses and a lot of people don't see anything wrong about it, it doesn't mean it's morally right to break the speed limit. We might still be obligated to obey traffic rules. In this way, descriptive and normative theories can be seen to be independent.

What Norma yet has to offer for Dee

When a normative theory is generally accepted, it has huge impact on the way people actually behave. If people are convinced that it would be wrong to steal, for instance, this increases the likelihood that they actually refrain from stealing. Their normative theories influence their actual moral judgments and behavior.

Normative theories provide the very language in which we conceive of and talk about moral judgments and behavior. Without basic normative theories, there would be no such thing as right or wrong, duty, responsibility, criminality, and so on. Therefore, what can possibly be observed and explained by empirical scientists depends heavily on normative theorizing.



What Dee yet has to offer for Norma

Many normative arguments contain factual premises. For example, a normative claim could be that one should beat one's children because that makes them more successful later in life. Empirical scientists can undermine such arguments by falsifying its factual premises. In the example, if they show that beating children does not make them more successful, this would be a problem for the normative argument.

It is generally agreed that "ought implies can": I cannot be obligated to do what I cannot do. "You ought to fly" seems like a silly normative claim. The reason is that I cannot possibly fly (at least without an airplane). This is an empirical fact that constrains the contents of sensible normative claims.

Not all instances are so obvious. For example, psychological studies show that our evaluations of others are strongly influenced by factors that we all consider to be morally irrelevant. For example, we all agree that students' grades should not be influenced by the students' attractiveness, but only by his or her achievements. Yet, psychological findings indicate that we simply cannot regard achievement and attractiveness as independent of each other. Psychologically, we *cannot* follow the prescription. We cannot help but relying on irrelevant factors, even if we know better. From this, it does not follow that we are no longer responsible for our judgments, but findings like this may lead the normative claim to appear in a very different light.

