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Statement of Research Interests

My research is focused in Metaethics, Epistemology, and Ethics. I am most interested in studying the nature of moral and epistemic normativity. As a philosopher, I am especially partial to forms of normative antirealism and relativism; I think that the strongest arguments for the rejection of normative realism are epistemological in nature. My work is shaped by an interest in how our normative reasons of different kinds could arise in connection with our membership in contingent social groups. I am also interested in how we come to know the normative truths.

My dissertation, which I completed in May 2018, defends an original relativist theory of normative reasons, focusing especially on the different sources and characteristics of moral reasons as opposed to reasons of self-interested practical rationality. My goal for the project was to begin developing a general meta-normative view that was consistent with the major motivations for meta-ethical antirealism and relativism (especially epistemological arguments) while also avoiding some of the biggest challenges that face popular relativist views, such as their entailment of some counterintuitive claims about the moral reasons we possess. For instance, I think certain forms of moral relativism are wrong to grant that socially common and conventional forms of behavior are thereby morally permissible.

What makes my own view most distinctive is its appeal to the notion of group agency, the idea that whole groups of people, including societies, can be genuine agents in their own right. This means, among other things, that we can attribute aims to them as well as instrumental normative reasons to act in pursuit of those aims. In my dissertation, I proposed that what distinguishes the different kinds of normative reasons that we recognize intuitively, and attribute to individual persons, such as moral reasons and reasons of self-interested practical rationality, is that they arise in connection with the aims of different sorts of existing agents, viz. the aims held collectively by societies as opposed to the varied interests of individual persons. It was also my hope to provide a unified account of moral, epistemic, and self-interested practical normativity.

I presented a portion of this work at the 13th Annual Madison Metaethics Workshop, a major conference for new work in Metaethics, in September 2018. The paper, "Group Agency Meets Metaethics: How to Craft a More Compelling Form of Normative Relativism" appears in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics, Volume 15*, Ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (2020).

Some of my most recent published work extends the general approach to meta-normative theory that I develop in the dissertation by proposing in more detail an account of the collective source of epistemic normativity. In the paper, "Could our epistemic reasons be *collective* practical reasons?" which is forthcoming in *Noûs*, I defend a form of epistemic instrumentalism that emphasizes the importance of epistemic communities, with investigative goals, as a source of individuals' epistemic reasons for belief. I argue that this view can avoid the objection to traditional forms of epistemic instrumentalism that has been pressed by Thomas Kelly (2003), which is that individual people do not possess the right goals in order for instrumentalism to

provide a plausible account of their epistemic reasons.[1] I argue that an emphasis on collectively held epistemic ends is independently motivated both by a tradition within the philosophy of science of emphasizing collective inquiry as well as the growing philosophical interest in social epistemology. I also suggest that my view would retain the advantages of traditional epistemic instrumentalism, such as compatibility with a naturalistic worldview, and immunity to the kinds of objections to normative realism first emphasized by Mackie (1977).[2]

I am currently working on new material that will develop this view in a collection of related papers. For example, I am working on a paper in which I argue that we can appeal to considerations regarding the phenomenon of epistemic blame as a source of support for an inherently social, as opposed to traditionally individualistic, form of epistemic instrumentalism.

Another finished piece of my work in Metaethics contributes to an ongoing debate over the epistemology of moral beliefs. In the paper "Bad bootstrapping: the problem with third-factor replies to the Darwinian Dilemma," (*Philosophical Studies*, 2020), I defend Sharon Street's (2006) challenge for moral realism against the family of replies on behalf of the realist that are known as "third-factor" replies.[3] These arguments appeal to the assumption of the truth of key moral facts as part of an explanation (a "third-factor explanation") for why it is not, as Street contends, a puzzling coincidence why the moral facts as the realist understands them would correspond to our moral beliefs even as they have been shaped by our species' evolutionary history. I argue that such replies present question-begging instances of "bootstrapping," an intuitively illegitimate form of reasoning that has been discussed in a different philosophical context as the basis for an objection to Reliabilism about knowledge. I have included this paper with my application as my Writing Sample. I also have a new piece under review about the relationship between evolutionary debunking arguments and modal conditions (safety, sensitivity) on knowledge and defeat.

In the near future, I am excited to continue working on issues pertaining to moral epistemology, moral antirealism and relativism, and the nature of moral and epistemic reasons.

As one example, I have just begun work on a paper on ethical intuitionism, in which I argue that all meta-ethicists should grant that moral intuitions provide prima facie justification for the truth of our moral beliefs, and yet this does little to support metaethical moral realism as is typically assumed. This is because, I argue, it is easier to explain why our ethical intuitions would provide strong yet defeasible justification for the truth of our moral beliefs if we assume that the moral facts are contingently true and mind-dependent rather than necessarily true and mind-independent.

I have also been invited to contribute a chapter on "Relativism" for *The Oxford Handbook of Meta-Ethics*, edited by David Copp and Connie Rosati, which is forthcoming with Oxford University Press. Since the volume is intended for a very broad audience in philosophy, the chapter will include introductory discussion of familiar forms of moral relativism and their

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[1] Thomas Kelly, "Epistemic rationality as instrumental rationality: A Critique," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 66, no. 3 (2003): 612-640.

[2] J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977).

[3] Sharon Street, "A Darwinian dilemma for realist theories of value," *Philosophical Studies* 127 (2006): 109-166.

drawbacks. It will also include a discussion of how my own approach can avoid objections often leveled against normative relativism, such as that relativism is necessarily self-undermining or that relativized norms lack any genuine normative authority.

Additionally, I have been invited to contribute short pieces on "Instrumentalism about epistemic reasons" and "Evolutionary debunking arguments" to the forthcoming 3rd Edition of the *Blackwell Companion to Epistemology*, edited by Kurt Sylvan.

There are other topics I am eager to explore in new papers going forward. For instance, I have been thinking more about how epistemic and moral reasons compare in light of the frequently endorsed philosophical slogan that "ought implies can." While some kind of significant freedom over one's actions is often thought to be necessary for moral responsibility, little or no voluntary control over one's beliefs is usually presumed in order for judgments regarding that agent's degree of epistemic rationality to be appropriate. I hope to suggest that a closer comparison of these two cases can help to illuminate the kind of control that is, and especially is not, needed in both instances of normative responsibility.

In the longer term, I also intend to investigate in more detail how the view I have been developing of the relationship between agents and their reasons might help to provide answers to fundamental questions about agency and normativity. For example, is it always possible, in principle, for us to comply fully with all of our normative obligations, or are the requirements of morality, practical rationality and epistemic rationality all fundamentally at odds? And what are normative reasons, anyway – Are they facts? Propositions? Beliefs or other mental states? Something else entirely? These are the sorts of questions I am eager to continue to examine in my written work as well as through the practice of teaching and advising.