

Statement of Research Interests

My research is focused in epistemology and metaethics, with a special interest in the nature of epistemic and moral normativity. The guiding aim of my published work and ongoing research agenda is to present a unified theory of normative reasons that is wholly consistent with a commitment to naturalism. On my approach, our moral reasons, reasons of epistemic rationality, and reasons of self-interested practical rationality are all fundamentally instrumental in nature, but are differentiated by their sources in the contingently held aims of different sorts of agents.

My most recent work has been devoted to an investigation of epistemic normativity. I defend a form of epistemic instrumentalism that is essentially collective. Epistemic instrumentalism is the view that epistemic rationality is a particular kind of means-ends rationality. According to the view I advance, our epistemic reasons for belief arise in connection with the ends attributable directly to the epistemic communities of which we are members, such as scientific laboratories and everyday peer groups. On this view, the presence of collectively held epistemic ends is what lends authority to the norms of epistemic rationality and gives us the standing to blame one another for flouting those norms. I also defend a distinctive form of moral relativism, according to which what we have moral reason to do is determined by the contingently held aims of the diverse societies of which we are members.

My philosophical interest in developing these views is driven by a sympathy with classic objections to realism about value, including epistemological concerns and especially evolutionary debunking arguments. These arguments emphasize the ways in which the realist's commitment to mind-independent normative principles or irreducibly normative properties may be at odds with a wholly naturalistic worldview. The desire to offer an account of genuine normativity that remains compatible with naturalism is a key attraction of both moral relativism and epistemic instrumentalism. My own versions of these views seek to preserve that advantage while also vindicating as factual more of our ordinary normative discourse than previous theories have been able to do.

In short, my work seeks to explain why we are subject to the norms that we are and why we have the authority to hold others accountable for behaving morally and believing rationally.

1. Epistemic Normativity: Collective Epistemic Instrumentalism

According to the epistemic instrumentalist, the norms of epistemic rationality are authoritative for us because forming beliefs in accordance with rules of epistemic rationality is an effective strategy for achieving the goals that we have already set for ourselves. According to different forms of epistemic instrumentalism, the relevant ends may be distinctively epistemic (e.g. our desire for knowledge), or may include a wide variety of everyday goals, such as completing a book or making it to the airport on time.

In "Could our epistemic reasons be *collective* practical reasons?" (*Noûs*, 2021) I propose a form of epistemic instrumentalism that emphasizes the importance of epistemic communities, with investigative goals, as a source of individuals' epistemic reasons for belief. On this view, what

we have epistemic reason to believe depends not upon our own individual ends, but upon the investigative ends attributable directly to epistemic communities of which we are members, such as a jury's end of determining whether the accused is guilty beyond a reasonable doubt, or a laboratory's end of determining whether a newly developed medication produces statistically significant benefits compared to already-approved treatments. I propose this view as a solution to a key objection to traditional forms of epistemic instrumentalism that has been pressed by Kelly (2003) and also discussed by Schroeder (2007), who calls it the "Too Few Reasons" objection.¹ The objection is that real people do not actually possess the goals they would need to possess, such as a general desire to maximize their store of true beliefs, in order for all of the epistemic reasons for belief that we find it natural to attribute to them to be instrumental reasons. Traditional instrumentalist theories of epistemic normativity thus seem to yield "too few reasons" for belief. I also argue that an emphasis on collectively held epistemic ends is independently motivated. First, there is a tradition within the philosophy of science of emphasizing the collective aspects of inquiry. Second, there has been a growing appreciation in epistemology for the role of social phenomena such as the sharing of testimony as a source of everyday knowledge.

I am currently working on further developing my account of epistemic normativity in a collection of related papers that seek to illustrate the theory's advantages. In "Epistemic Blame and Collective Epistemic Instrumentalism," I draw attention to the phenomenon of a distinctively epistemic kind of blame in support of this inherently social form of epistemic instrumentalism. According to traditional forms of epistemic instrumentalism, the normative authority of one's epistemic reasons comes from the value to a person of his or her own ends. I argue that as a result, these views lack the resources to explain why, in various paradigmatic cases of epistemic irrationality, one's peers can have the standing to hold one accountable for irrational beliefs and inference patterns. That is, it is not clear why one's own inability to achieve one's idiosyncratic goals effectively would merit such strong censure from others. I suggest that my own version of epistemic instrumentalism, by contrast, can account well for the appropriateness of epistemic blame. I presented this paper at the 2022 St. Louis Annual Conference on Reasons and Rationality.

In new work in progress, titled "The Commensurability Objection to Epistemic Instrumentalism" I argue that most forms of epistemic instrumentalism render epistemic reasons for belief too similar to, and wholly commensurable with, all of our other practical reasons. I suggest that my own version of epistemic instrumentalism can explain the distinctness in kind of epistemic reasons by appealing to their distinctive source; epistemic reasons arise in connection with the collective ends of epistemic communities while our practical reasons for belief arise in connection with our individual ends. The paper thus seeks to explain what makes the requirements of epistemic rationality unique and distinct from other sorts of normative requirements. I am also contributing a paper on "Instrumentalism about epistemic reasons" to the forthcoming 3rd Edition of the *Blackwell Companion to Epistemology*, edited by Kurt Sylvan.

¹ Kelly, Thomas. (2003). Epistemic rationality as instrumental rationality: A critique. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 66(3), 612-640.

Schroeder, Mark. (2007). *Slaves of the Passions*. Oxford University Press.

2. Moral Normativity: Moral Relativism and Group Agency

In my (2020) paper, “Group Agency Meets Metaethics: How to Craft a More Compelling Form of Normative Relativism” which appears in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics, Volume 15*, Ed. Russ Shafer-Landau, I defend a form of moral relativism, according to which our moral reasons arise in connection with the aims attributable to real human societies. I argue that the moral relativist should be careful not to equate what one has moral reason to do in any given society with what is conventionally approved or socially expected within that society, as in the views of e.g. Harman (1996) and Velleman (2015).² On my own view, we can have moral reasons to reform existing customs and practices where doing so would provide a more effective means to the achievement of a society’s most fundamental goals, such as the maintenance of a successful economic system. I also describe this view, and dispel some common misconceptions about moral relativism, in an invited chapter on “Relativism” for *The Oxford Handbook of Metaethics*, edited by David Copp and Connie Rosati, which is forthcoming with Oxford University Press.

According to the form of moral relativism that I defend, we can sensibly attribute ends, and thus normative reasons, directly to societies. In another paper titled, “Societies as group agents,” I defend the claim that we can attribute functional motivational states to societies, which play roles analogous to those of ends or goals in individual persons. This paper appears in a (2023) special edition of the journal *Inquiry* on reductionism about group agency. The paper concludes by reflecting on some broader implications regarding what it is to be an agent and to possess ends. For instance, one need not be consciously aware of one’s ends.

3. Epistemological Objections to Value Realism (and Broader Lessons for Epistemic Justification and Undermining Defeat)

On my view, some of the strongest objections to realism about value are epistemological in nature. This includes evolutionary “debunking” arguments, which draw attention to the way in which etiological facts about the evolutionary history of our moral beliefs undermine the justification of our moral beliefs as the realist construes them. My most recent work in progress on this topic explores ways in which broader conclusions about the nature of epistemic justification can be drawn from the examination of epistemological arguments in metaethics.

My (2020) paper, “Bad bootstrapping: the problem with third-factor replies to the Darwinian Dilemma,” in *Philosophical Studies*, contributes to the ongoing debate over the success of evolutionary debunking arguments. In the paper, I draw from the epistemic literature on reliabilism about knowledge in order to argue that “third-factor” replies to Street’s (2006) “Darwinian Dilemma” version of a debunking argument are unsuccessful.³ According to the Darwinian Dilemma, the appearance of what would be an unlikely coincidence between the mind-independent moral facts and our moral beliefs (shaped as they are by our evolutionary history) gives the realist reason to doubt that her moral beliefs are true. Third-factor replies appeal to assumed moral facts as part of a third-factor explanation for why it is actually

² Harman, Gilbert, and Judith Jarvis Thomson. (1996). *Moral relativism and moral objectivity*. Cambridge: Blackwell.
 Velleman, J. David. (2015). *Foundations for moral relativism: Second expanded edition*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers.
³ Street, Sharon. (2006). A Darwinian dilemma for realist theories of value. *Philosophical Studies*, 127, 109-166.

unsurprising that the moral facts as the realist understands them would correspond to our moral beliefs. I argue that third-factor replies take the form of “bootstrapping,” a question-begging pattern of reasoning that has been discussed in another philosophical context as part of an objection to reliabilism. In that literature, it is alleged that the reliabilist is forced to concede that bootstrapping can yield knowledge, even though the relevant form of reasoning is intuitively illegitimate. I am also contributing a piece on “Evolutionary Debunking Arguments” for the forthcoming 3rd edition of the *Blackwell Companion to Epistemology*.

I presented a new paper in progress, titled “Evolutionary Debunking Arguments and the Modal Safety of Our Moral Beliefs” at the 2023 Central APA meeting. The paper responds to a recent argument from Clarke-Doane and Baras (2021), who suggest that evolutionary debunking arguments cannot succeed in providing a source of undermining defeat for our moral beliefs because they do not establish that our moral beliefs fail to meet conditions of either safety or sensitivity for belief.⁴ Safety and sensitivity conditions are frequently discussed by epistemologists as potential requirements for knowledge or justification. I argue in response to Clarke-Doane and Baras that evolutionary debunking arguments may, after all, be interpreted as giving us reason to doubt that the method in which our moral beliefs were formed renders them “safe,” where a belief that P is safe if and only if one could not have easily formed a false belief as to whether Q, where Q is any proposition relevantly similar enough to P and that is formed using the method one actually used to determine whether P. I argue this is so because evolutionary debunking arguments highlight the contingency of our moral beliefs. The course of our species’ evolution could have taken us down a very different path while the necessary moral truths, as the realist understands them, would have remained unchanged. The paper concludes by drawing broader epistemological lessons about the relationship between undermining defeat and the conditions of safety and sensitivity. There are additional sorts of epistemic “luck” at odds with the justification of our beliefs that are not yet ruled out by familiar formulations of safety or sensitivity conditions.

July 2023

⁴ Clarke-Doane, Justin and Dan Baras. (2021). Modal security. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 102(1), 162-183.