

Statement of Research Interests

My research is focused in metaethics, epistemology, and ethics, with a special interest in the nature of moral and epistemic normativity. The aim of my published work and ongoing research agenda is to articulate and defend a unified account of normative reasons, including moral reasons, reasons of self-interested practical rationality, and epistemic reasons. On my approach, these different kinds of reasons are all fundamentally instrumental in nature, but are differentiated by their sources in the contingent aims of different sorts of agents. My account is intended to be responsive to the sorts of metaethical considerations that generally draw philosophers to forms of antirealism, such as epistemological concerns about our ability to come to know mind-independent and necessarily true normative principles. It is also a goal of my account to avoid some of the least plausible implications of familiar antirealist views. For instance, I think that certain forms of moral relativism are wrong to equate socially common and conventional forms of behavior with morally permissible behavior.

In my 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 (2020), I propose a novel form of relativism about moral reasons. What makes my own metaethical view especially unique 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. I propose that what distinguishes moral reasons from reasons of self-interested practical rationality is that they arise in connection with the aims of different agents, viz. the aims held collectively by societies as opposed to the varied interests of individual persons. My dissertation, completed in 2018, first proposed a version of this view. I also presented a portion of this work at the 13th Annual Madison Metaethics Workshop.

My most recent published work defends 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 a major objection to traditional forms of epistemic instrumentalism that has been pressed by Thomas Kelly (2003). The objection is that individual people do not actually possess the goals they would need to possess in order for all of their epistemic reasons to be instrumental ones.¹ I 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 interest in social epistemology among those who recognize the crucial importance of phenomena such as the sharing of testimony as a source of everyday knowledge. I suggest that my own view would furthermore 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

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).

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 draw from the epistemic literature on reliabilism about knowledge in order to argue that “third-factor” replies to the Darwinian Dilemma are unsuccessful. 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 unsurprising that the moral facts as the realist understands them would correspond to our moral beliefs. I argue that such reasoning presents a question-begging instance of “bootstrapping,” an intuitively illegitimate form of reasoning that has been discussed in a different philosophical context as an objection to reliabilism.

My research currently in progress includes work on issues pertaining to moral epistemology, normative antirealism and relativism, and the characteristics of moral, epistemic, and other practical reasons.

I am currently working on developing my view of epistemic normativity further in a collection of related papers. In one paper in progress, 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. Familiar forms of epistemic instrumentalism lack the resources to explain why, in paradigmatic cases of epistemic irrationality, one’s peers can have the standing to hold one accountable for irrational beliefs and inference patterns. I suggest that my own version of epistemic instrumentalism, by contrast, can account well for the appropriateness of epistemic blame.

I have recently completed a paper about the relationship between evolutionary debunking arguments and modal conditions (safety, sensitivity) on knowledge and defeat, which is currently under review.

I am also interested in the relationship between ethical intuitionist epistemology and the debate over moral realism versus antirealism. In another paper in progress, I argue that all metaethicists 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 our moral beliefs if we assume that the moral facts are contingently true and mind-dependent rather than necessarily true and mind-independent.

Additionally, I am contributing 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. In the chapter, I will survey familiar forms of moral relativism and their drawbacks. I will also discuss how my own approach, which I consider to be a form of normative relativism, can avoid objections often leveled against relativist views, such as that they are necessarily self-undermining or that relativized norms lack any genuine normative authority.

I am also contributing 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 moving forward. For instance, I am interested in 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 plan 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.

I am also interested in discussing how some of the views I have been developing bear upon other debates about the relationship between agents and their normative reasons. 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? (I suspect that they are.) And what are normative reasons, exactly – Are they facts? Propositions? Beliefs or other mental states? Something else entirely? (I am attracted to the latter view.) 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.