

My core project is on the ontology of ethics. I am particularly interested in the nature of ethical properties broadly—e.g. whether non-naturalism is true—as well as the natures of specific ethical properties—e.g. whether goodness is reducible to reasons, as buck-passing accounts of value hold. I'm attracted to these views, non-naturalism and buck-passing. They both come with central ontological objections, to which I bring my expertise in metaphysics. My research on non-naturalism has led me to do some work in epistemology, including the research that I was awarded a post-doc to conduct, at Hebrew University. I also do significant work in political philosophy, primarily in the areas of State justification, and individual obligations of justice. Teaching medical ethics has led me to develop two papers to fill gaps in materials I've be able to use in class.

Dissertation—Non-Naturalist Metaphysics

My dissertation focused on the major metaphysical challenge for non-naturalism, the supervenience challenge. It is almost universally held in metaethics that there cannot be a normative difference without a natural difference—any two situations that are exactly alike in every natural respect will be exactly alike in every normative respect. When supervenience holds, especially with metaphysical necessity, this calls for explanation. On the one hand, if no explanation can be offered, non-naturalism is left committed to a metaphysically necessary coincidence. Some see this as a significant cost for the view, and others as an outright refutation. On the other hand, the usual metaphysical tools used to explain supervenience—identity, reduction, constitution, etc.—would all bear the implication that the normative is natural. So, what's a poor non-naturalist to do?

In my dissertation, I make the following contributions (more details available in the included Dissertation Abstract). I identify what formal constraints a proposal must meet to count as explaining the right supervenience phenomenon, and evaluate how complete explanations can get. I argue that there are minimal requirements about what kinds of metaphysical elements (e.g. properties, entities, etc.) from which categories (e.g. normative, natural) for a theory to be both explanatory and non-naturalist. Finally, I develop a concrete proposal for how should we meet all the previously discovered desiderata.

Epistemology and Non-Naturalism

Non-naturalist metaphysics raises epistemological worries. The major worry is the “genealogical debunking” objection, where some feature of the origins of our normative beliefs undercuts their positive epistemological status. Non-naturalists can't have the fact explain the belief or the belief explain the fact. Instead, they hold that the belief and the fact are each explained by a third factor. I argue (with David Faraci, Durham University), the challenge is best understood as a Gettier-challenge. This means third factor accounts fail because either a) the third factor is a higher-order coincidence, merely moving the problem, or b) the third factor explanation is of the “wrong kind,” since the same structure wouldn't resolve the problem when added to standard Gettier cases.

Because I'm drawn to non-naturalism, I am independently developing a solution to this expression of the genealogical debunking challenge. This research is the focus of my post-doc. Cognitive penetration is a view in philosophy of perception where our concepts affect our perceptions. E.g., we can directly perceive natural kind properties like “pine tree,” even though they don't causally affect our sense organs. So, if we acquire normative concepts that pick out genuine normative properties, these would allow us to directly perceive normative properties—*without* violating non-naturalist ontological constraints. This would let non-naturalists explain our belief-fact

correlation in a way that bootstraps from an insufficient third factor genealogy to a successful “the fact explains the belief” genealogy.

Buck-Passing Accounts of Value

Buck-passing accounts of value are attractive. They hold that goodness (for example) reduces in some way to reasons. But an (insufficiently addressed) objection goes, value can exist without reasons and so could not be reducible to reasons. I respond to this “value without reasons problem,” by refining the buck-passing account. I show that on all the standard accounts of dispositions, disposition-types depend on their manifestation-types. If goodness is a disposition to provide reasons, instances of goodness may obtain without instances of reasons, but goodness as a kind depends on reasons as a kind. This allows buck-passers to adopt a modal revision without taking a stance on the natures of dispositions. This paper is significant not just for buck-passers and critics, but for the dispositions literature in general because no one has advocated (nor critiqued) the ‘dispositions depend on manifestations’ thesis. This account opens further avenues for research. For instance, a clearer understanding of how dispositions are metaphysically distinguished from their mimics should help distinguish genuine value from cases that provide similar reasons, thereby solving the other main objection to buck-passing accounts--the “wrong kind of reasons problem.”

Metaphysics

I am interested in metaphysical fundamentality, partially for its significance to non-naturalism, but also in its own right. I am working on a paper criticizing Karen Bennett’s response to a trilemma that a) grounding facts cannot be fundamental, b) grounded, nor c) rejected. She suggests that grounding facts can be grounded if grounding is a “superinternal” relation. Internal relations come “for free” once you have the relata. For superinternal relations, the relation and second relata come for free once you have the first relatum. This would avoid the problems of a) recombability, b) regress, c) “flatworld” ontology—no layers, all entities are on par. But since internal relations only come “for free” if they are nominalist reductions, the same applies for superinternal relations and entities. Thus, the resulting ontology is still flat.

Political Philosophy

I am also interested in political philosophy, and particularly in what justice requires of individuals and how state structures are justified. On the first issue, I have a paper on the commitments members of Rawls’s well-ordered society must maintain. G. A. Cohen argues that that members must regulate their own behavior by the Difference. By examining the plausible reason for an ethos, the role it would play in Rawls’ theory, and the value of liberty, Titelbaum concludes that the ethos would additionally involve an element limiting the requirement of the egalitarian element that Cohen has recognized, for the sake of developing our two moral powers as persons—to adhere to the terms of fair social cooperation, and to develop a conception of the good.

But there is still a missing element. The point of liberty is the development of the two moral powers, particularly the capacity to form a conception of the good. Concern with the development and exercise of the moral powers motivates a concern for the worth of liberty, not just formal liberties. Since individuals can affect the worth of liberty of others, even in the Rawlsian well-ordered society, they must be concerned with others’ worth of liberty of. Where Cohen’s ethos is a commitment to promote equality, this new element is a motivation to promote or respect liberty.

I'm additionally developing an argument that Nozick's justification for moving from anarchy to the Minimal State would also allow moving to a Robust State. The libertarian position must allow Robust States when agents unanimously agree to cooperate in that way, even if they cannot impose this on the unwilling. This generates a political association version of the Lockean Proviso—groups may form Robust States, so long as they leave space for others to decide whether to form political associations. The original Proviso risks disallowing any private property, because no amount of acquisition is repeatable by everyone, since one more person could always come along after all has been acquired. Similarly, no amount of association is repeatable by everyone, since one more person who doesn't want to associate could come along, and not be left space to live an un-associated life. Nozick's solution for acquisition is to respect the spirit of the Proviso by requiring unequal acquisitions to leave the rest better off than they would have been with an equal share. The same move can be made regarding political association. Furthermore, since Nozick allows the Minimal State to violate (cross) individuals' rights to not associate so long as they are compensated, this can ameliorate the violation of "conscriptio" into the association of a Robust State. If the Robust state can increase worth of the formally diminished liberty of the conscripted, this should compensate for the violation of forced association.

Medical Ethics

I am developing two papers aimed primarily at undergraduate education in Medical Ethics, which would fill some voids that I've found. The first is on the Hippocratic Oath, and why this is an insufficient foundation for the duty to do no harm, counteracting a common misconception. Making a promise when graduating medical school can't be what gives doctors a duty to do no harm because this would let the duty vary with variations in promising, rather than the duty applying to doctors as such. Doctors have a special duty to do no harm since they have a special role in society due to the profound impacts of health on wellbeing, and they have been given a monopoly on providing healthcare. If this is the foundation for the duty, then the duty to do no harm cannot be appealed to as an objection against Physician Assisted Dying. First, some people can have lives that are irredeemably bad for them (illbeing), so assisting their death doesn't count as an overall harm. Second, if people have a right to end their own lives (under certain conditions), participating in the monopoly control of the best means to do (certain drugs and technologies) but refusing to help is preventing people from ending their lives, and so harms them by perpetuating their lives of illbeing.

The other paper I'm developing is for getting students clearer on the difference between a how autonomy is valuable on a Kantian model and on a Millian model, and how this relates to the use of "nudges" on both views. This is important as students often don't understand how to weigh the duty to respect autonomy against the duty of beneficence. I argue that nudging is acceptable on both views. This serves as an object lesson in understanding the different frameworks of autonomy, since the justifications for nudging cannot be the same. On the Millian model this is a clear case of when the patient won't be the best steward of their own best interest, because nudging is applicable when cog biases interfere with our reasoning. It is harder to justify nudging on a Kantian model since people are allowed to choose against their own interest. But because nudges are applicable when people make systematic errors in reasoning, these are cases where people are systematically incompetent. If framing affects allow the patient to be a better reasoner, this supports the Kantian value of autonomy. But, unlike the Millian model, this view requires nudges to be transparent: in order to respect autonomy while nudging, you have to explain that and why you're nudging.