Overview

I work in metaethics, ethics and political philosophy. My metaethics research is mainly on the ontology of normativity, but branches some into epistemology and philosophy of language. My work in political philosophy is primarily in the areas of State justification, and the obligations of justice that individuals have. My research in ethics intersects with those two areas; some being on the fuzzy boundary between ethics and metaethics, and some being in applied ethics (mainly medical ethics), typically involving conflicts between individual rights and state interests.

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 (the view that normative properties or facts constitute a *sui generis* kind, wholly independent of natural properties) 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, and so I bring my expertise in metaphysics to address the central ontological objections they face.

Buck-Passing Accounts of Value

Buck-passing accounts of value hold that goodness (for example) reduces in some way to reasons. But an insufficiently addressed objection goes "value can exist in a world without agents, and so without reasons, thus it could not be reducible to reasons." My article in *Philosophers' Imprint* responds to this "value without reasons problem," by refining the buck-passing account. First, I show that on all the standard accounts of dispositions, disposition-types depend on their manifestation-types. So, 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) my 'dispositions depend on manifestations' thesis.

In a follow-up work-in-progress, I show which resources from the metaphysics of dispositions can be used to 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." There are a number of elements of dispositional metaphysics that look promising, but ultimately fail. (Triggering conditions, the intrinsic/extrinsic distinction, finking.) Properly addressing the issue requires separating the target phenomena into (a) cases where we have value but lack the characteristic reasons (Lacks) and (b) cases where we have the characteristic reasons of a certain kind of value without having that value (Gains). Disposition "masks" prevent dispositions from manifesting in their triggering conditions but without removing the dispositions, which can explain Lacks. Some dispositions have "mimics" that duplicate their manifestations in the same circumstances, but are nevertheless distinct, which can resolve Gains. Producing the same profile of reasons as something good in a specific case doesn't entail that the thing has the property of being good. These solutions are easy to adopt on dispositional realism, but I show that even the counterfactual analysis view can employ them without being subject to circularity objections.

Non-naturalist Metaphysics

The most significant metaphysical problem for non-naturalism begins with the supervenience intuition. The project of ethics depends on treating like cases alike, but this only makes sense if there can't be *mere* moral differences. And so, methodologically, we're committed to the supervenience of the normative on the natural. Of course, 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?

I've been refining two papers on the metaphysics of supervenience through a recent series of R&Rs. In the first, I show that there are two crucial misunderstandings in how we think about the problematic bruteness that non-naturalists are apparently committed to. When these are recognized, we see that while the

supervenience challenge isn't completely escapable, neither is it completely damning. The standard understanding of the supervenience problem is that any non-naturalist explanation for supervenience must rely on positing further brute necessary connections, and therefore cannot discharge the explanatory burden. But this treats commitment to bruteness as binary, rather than by degree. The Humean framing of brute necessary connections causes the literature to overlook the possibility of brute explanatory absences. With these two insights in hand, I show that non-naturalists significantly reduce the amount of bruteness they are committed to. And, given plausible methodological constraints, this is sufficient to respond to the challenge.

In the second, I show that the options available to non-naturalists to explain supervenience are significantly more constrained than previously understood, limited only to "principle-based" (or similar) explanations. My argument works by showing that any view that does not involve normative principles will either fail to explain supervenience, or will be naturalist. To facilitate this, I examine what makes various explanatory structures naturalist, and articulate a few category-inheritance theses that account for this. The lessons learned here show that to avoid category-inheritance un-principled non-naturalists need an explanatory relation that holds between property instances (not universals), and with very specialized features. Essentialism is the only ideology that could provide this. But I show that (without appeal to normative principles) any essentialist conditions for being a non-natural normative property will either fail to adequately distinguish between naturalist and non-naturalist ontologies, or undermine the explanatory project.

Epistemology and Non-naturalism

I care about my discrete projects producing well-connected, coherent, big-picture packages of views. As such, I also address the epistemological worries raised by non-naturalist metaphysics. The major worry is the "genealogical debunking" objection, where some feature of the origins of our normative beliefs undercuts their positive epistemological status. In my paper, recently presented at the premier metaethics conference "Madison Metaethics Workshop," I articulate a strongest version of the debunking challenge, and show that non-naturalism can take on the commitments required to address it. The challenge is best understood as a Gettier-challenge, where justified true beliefs are gettier-lucky when they are not explanatorily connected to the facts they are about. This means the popular "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. Instead, I propose a moral perceptualism that doesn't violate the commitment to normative properties being causally inert. Cognitive penetration is a view in philosophy of perception where our concepts affect our perceptions. For example, 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, and puts moral perception on epistemic-par with ordinary object perception. My argument takes on some assumptions (justified true belief, accurately referring concepts) that are appropriate in the dialectical context, but require a second paper for vindication outside of that context. This will be one of the next projects that I begin when my current new work has matured.

Against Linguistic and Formal Arguments for Metaethical Conclusions

I have recently started a new track of research in response to a trend of trying to substitute substantive arguments about normativity and meta-normativity with linguistic and formal arguments, with two papers in the works. There has been a growing debate over whether the rules of Deontic Logic are incompatible with the Error Theory, or normative nihilism. The basic argument relies on the rule of inference that if P is not impermissible then P is permissible, and its converse. It is a commitment of Error theory that for any P, it is not the case that it is permissible and it is not the case that it is impermissible. This is supposed to show that holding that there are no normative properties is untenable or contradictory. This debate is settling into burden of proof arguments, over whether the opponents have to offer a replacement semantics for Deontic Logic that is compatible with Error Theory. My contribution is, instead, to offer such a semantics. Error theory needs a tri-valent logic, where propositions are allowed to be true, false, or neither, changing the

deontic modals from duals to trios. The modified rules of inference to allow Error Theory and the additional axioms for if we deny Error Theory) are straight forward. The difficulty is in replacing the highly successful Kratzer semantics for deontic modals, where worlds or situations are ranked from best to worst, and P is permissible if it is found in any world above a threshold in that ranking, and impermissible otherwise. My basic innovation is to sort atomic propositions into two lists (say, moral and amoral), and to build (and rank) worlds or situations only out of elements from the "moral" list. If a proposition is found in no world on the ranking, then it is assigned neither permissible nor impermissible. Now, if the "amoral" list is empty, then it is equivalent to standard Kratzer semantics. If the "moral" list is empty, then it models Error Theory. The further advantage is that this allows us to model other normative systems where we think all three states can apply. For instance, we might want to add *arational* to rational and irrational depending on our substantive theory of rationality. This connects to my non-naturalism projects, as if non-naturalism is true, we wouldn't want formal normative considerations to prove the existence of non-natural normative properties.

My second new project, to be presented at the Central APA, is on linguistic arguments about rationality. Wes Siscoe has published a series of articles employing a linguistic consideration about rationality as a key premise. In the paper I use as my foil, he argues that satisficing theories of practical rationality are ruled out by grammatical, linguistic considerations. "Rational" exhibits grammatical features that show that it's an absolute gradable adjective, like "flat" or "pure." Gradable adjectives have a scale, or ordering, associated with the terms, and absolute gradables only apply to the top degree on their scales. From this, Siscoe concludes that "being rational requires being perfectly rational." This rules out rational supererogation, the view that we can act rationally without acting fully rationally. And since rational supererogation is central to standard satisficing theories, such theories are false. I argue that grammatical data are irrelevant to whether rationally admits supererogation, and so are irrelevant to whether satisficing or maximizing theories are true. there is a separate, normative sense of the term that picks applies to the range on the scale specified by the relevant normative standard. With this normative sense, we can say that something is full, flat or pure when it rates high enough on the scale, and at the same time say that something else is fuller, flatter, or purer in the gradable sense. The threshold for the normative sense of "rational" depends on what rationality requires of us, which is a substantive normative question, and so requires substantive normative theorizing.

Political Philosophy and (Applied) Ethics

I have begun sending out for review a recent paper presenting a dilemma argument that libertarianism cannot sustain its objection to the more-than-minimal State. First, suppose our right to form associations is limited: we can associate however we want, unless it diminishes the liberty of others. This Association Proviso risks disallowing any association by the same "zip back" argument that threatened private property through the Acquisition Proviso. Nozick suggests the Acquisition Proviso only requires that people be left enough and as good to use, not to acquire. Where the Acquisition Proviso protects the use of stuff, the Association Proviso protects the use of liberty: it would only require that people be left with equally useful liberty. When Robust States don't diminish the worth of liberty, the Association Proviso isn't violated—even if they diminish formal liberty. Now suppose there is no Association Proviso. If we don't have to preserve others' worth of liberty, we can form associations that leave them no real option but to join our associations. Further, stronger protections for worth of liberty leans libertarianism leftward.

I'm also circulating a medical ethics paper on the Hippocratic Oath, and the duty of non-maleficence. This paper critiques the popular idea that doctors have the duty to do-no-harm because they swore the Hippocratic Oath, proposes an alternative, and shows how understanding different explanations for the duty of non-maleficence settle different debates in medical ethics. For instance, if the badness of harm is part of the explanation, then there is no reason to limit the scope of the duty to medical harms, as is needed to offer many standard objections to the various kinds of physician-involved death. While the Hippocratic Oath view is rarely supported by academics and professional ethicists, I think we should consider it part of our responsibility to engage with folk ethics, to help clarify and revise the common-sense positions, and explain why sometimes some part of folk ethics should be rejected. I initially wrote this to fill a gap in the materials I could find for use in my medical ethics classes, and have found it to be a very successful teaching tool.