Research Statement

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My research is in ethics and epistemology but with a focus on moral psychology. This is by way of an interest in distinctively human capacities. One of these is the capacity to guide our behavior by a conception of what we have reason to do and to believe.

My long-term research program is to understand what motivates moral and immoral action and how we form our moral beliefs, ultimately drawing conclusions for ethical theory and contemporary moral issues. In particular, I aim to help determine: whether this means moral knowledge is hopelessly out of reach; how to deal with entrenched moral disagreements; whether non-consequentialism is a viable approach to ethics; and which public policies fit well with our best understanding of human moral psychology.

Such issues are susceptible to both empirical and non-empirical investigation. Thus, I approach them in an interdisciplinary way by looking to both philosophy and the sciences of the mind. I also engage in some so-called “experimental philosophy,” though I think this method of inquiry is one that can sometimes merely augment, not replace, more standard methods in philosophy.

My dissertation and the papers growing out of it deal with some issues in moral motivation. I defend a roughly Kantian view against two key challenges: psychological egoism and “Humean” (or instrumentalist) theories. Psychological egoism holds that our ultimate motives are always self-interested, while Humeanism holds that motivation is always grounded in antecedent desires (which may well be altruistic). My articles in the *European Journal of Philosophy* and the *Southern Journal of Philosophy* (Spindel Supplement), which comprise part of my dissertation, defend the idea that empirical evidence concerning empathy-induced helping behavior provides sufficient evidence against psychological egoism. In more recent work, I focus less on egoism and more on empathy’s implications for moral behavior generally.

In papers growing out of my dissertation, I likewise attempt to argue against Humeanism. Such a view denies that a normative belief, such as the belief that one ought to be kind, can motivate without promoting an antecedent desire. I argue that this is implausible on both conceptual and empirical grounds. The more conceptual issues are addressed in my article in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*. I address the empirical side of this debate in a paper under review titled, “The Motivational Power of Moral Beliefs,” where I discuss certain neurological disorders and experiments on temptation. My general strategy is to show that moral cognition underlies much of what may at first appear to be sentiment, passion, or desire.

Apart from egoism and Humeanism, I have worked on motivation as it relates to the will. In philosophical discussions, an agent is often thought to be weak-willed only by acting contrary to one’s judgment of what is best. And theorists have sometimes appealed to our ordinary conceptions here. Richard Holton and I, in our paper in *Philosophical Studies*, have explored empirically what the ordinary notion of weakness of will is.
Against certain theorists, we argue that many factors play a role, including acting contrary to one’s intention, not just one’s judgment.

Related to when the will is weak, I am also interested in its freedom. In a paper currently under review, I attempt to explain a key problem facing free will and moral responsibility. The mystery is that free action seems to both require both the truth and falsity of determinism. I propose that the powerful arguments for each side of this puzzle focus on only one crucial factor in the concept of free will. Drawing on a number of sources, including some empirical work on ordinary judgments about freedom, I suggest that one factor tied to the having of options (dubbed “liberty”) is precluded by determinism while the other, which involves a certain kind of control (“ensurance”), requires it. My “cluster theory” treats both factors as important for the concept of free will but without providing necessary and sufficient conditions for application of the concept. This explains the deep tension in our ordinary and philosophical thinking about freedom, but without treating the debate as resting on a mere verbal dispute.

In epistemology, my research so far focuses on moral skepticism and ordinary attributions of knowledge. In a paper forthcoming in the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, I defend moral knowledge against skeptical attacks modeled on the brain-in-a-vat and similar scenarios. My research on knowledge attributions addresses whether they are sensitive to context or pragmatic factors, such as the importance of the truth of the proposition purportedly known. Many epistemologists have recently accommodated these factors, and they have sometimes defended them by appealing to intuitions about certain hypothetical cases (especially DeRose’s famous bank cases). I have challenged such arguments by engaging in some empirical work with several collaborators (in our paper in the *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*). More recently, I have written a paper on the nature of self-knowledge, especially as it connects with findings in cognitive science. I hope to further explore epistemic problems in my future research, but the focus will be on moral epistemology in particular, discerning how we come to know right from wrong.

In more recent work, I have been primarily exploring the viability of a rationalistic conception of moral psychology. My paper forthcoming in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* is an initial step in this direction. It attempts to undermine popular empirical evidence for the role of emotions in moral judgment (disgust, in particular). Related to this, I am also working on the role of disgust in intuitions in bioethical debates, such as moral enhancement. Some bioethicists have argued for the “wisdom of repugnance” when deciding whether to enhance our bodies, even our moral character. I maintain that the empirical evidence only shows that emotions like disgust can slightly affect our moral judgments in a way that doesn’t reflect on their normal function. So repugnance, rather than a matter of wisdom, is an aberration moral judgment that cannot realistically be relied upon to drive it.

In future work, I plan to focus on the neuroscience of ethics, especially the role of reason versus emotion in moral cognition and motivation, defending rationalist and anti-Humean accounts. For example, in my article in the *AJP*, I undermine popular empirical evidence for the role of emotions in moral judgment (disgust, in particular). This naturally leads to engaging with arguments, like Josh Greene’s, which attempt to debunk
non-consequentialist intuitions based on their allegedly being driven by emotional “alarm bell” responses from System 1 brain processes.

I’m also working increasingly in the ethics of neuroscience, including moral enhancement, human cloning, and maladaptive responses to Deep Brain Stimulation. Some of my research here connects directly with my other work in the neuroscience of ethics. For example, some bioethicists have argued for the “wisdom of repugnance” when deciding whether to enhance ourselves by altering our bodies and minds. I maintain that the empirical evidence only shows that emotions like disgust can slightly affect our moral judgments in a way that doesn’t reflect on their normal function. So repugnance, rather than a matter of wisdom, is an aberration of moral judgment that cannot be relied upon to inform it.

Ultimately my investigations into the cognitive science of morality lead to three major theories. First, I argue for a non-skeptical view of moral knowledge. We do often rely on moral intuitions, but these are not entirely inflexible and unreliable; and rational reflection on relevant information is central even if fallible. Second, I argue for a non-consequentialist moral theory. Our thinking about morality is so infused with agent-centered norms that jettisoning them risks changing the subject. While many of these norms rest on relatively automatic intuitions we evolved to have in a rather different environment, there is no reason to reject them as unreliable while allegedly utilitarian intuitions are comparatively safe. Finally, I advocate a nuanced approach to the contemporary moral issues of our time that avoids the extremes of the political spectrum. An appreciation of our best understanding of human nature vindicates neither liberal nor conservative policies and beliefs exclusively. The truth is more complicated and both perspectives have something to offer in public discourse.