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Department of Philosophy
University of Pittsburgh
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Education

University of Pittsburgh; Ph.D. in philosophy, 2011

University of Chicago; B.A. with honors in philosophy, 2002

Areas of Specialization

Ethics, Philosophy of Action

Areas of Competence

Applied Ethics, Social & Political Philosophy, 20th Century European Philosophy, Logic

Dissertation

‘Multitasking, Consequentialism and Practical Imagination’

I argue that the distinction between actions and their consequences cannot be robust enough to underwrite a substantive debate between consequentialism and deontology. These appear to be viable options for ethical philosophy because it appears that the primary function of ethics is to settle questions about what to do. But I argue that ethics should also discover how to be moved to act in an ethical way, and that this can only be understood by investigating the role of imagination in an ethical life.

Committee: Robert Brandom (director), Edouard Machery, John McDowell, Kieran Setiya, Michael Thompson

Publications

‘How Mules Refute the Neo-Aristotelian Metaphysics of Foot and Thompson’ (under review)

‘Deviant Causal Chains, Knowledge of Reasons, and *Akrasia*’ in *Topoi*, April 2014

Employment

Visiting Instructor, University of Pittsburgh, 2019-present

Special Faculty, Carnegie Mellon University, 2019-2020

Visiting Lecturer, University of Pittsburgh, 2013-2019

Post-doctoral Fellowship at the Centre for Time, University of Sydney, 2011-2013

Editorial/Research Assistant to Robert Brandom, University of Pittsburgh, 2011

Papers Presented

‘Mules and the Epistemology and Metaphysics of Morals,’ Visitors’ Philosophy Conference IV: *Attention, Praxis & Metaphysics*, University of Pittsburgh, April 2021

‘How Truthfulness Unifies the Mind’s Practical and Theoretical Employments,’ Visitors’ Philosophy Conference III: *Agency, Responsibility & Rational Unity*, University of Pittsburgh, February 2020

‘Aesthetic Agency and Aesthetic Ethics,’ Indiana University of Pennsylvania, October 2019

‘Consequentialism Is Committed to a Metaphysics That Generates Skepticism about the Possibility of Acting Intentionally,’ Visitors’ Philosophy Conference II: *Dynamic Activity, Self-Knowledge & Ethics*, University of Pittsburgh, February 2019

‘How Mules Refute the Virtue Theory,’ Visitors’ Conference, University of Pittsburgh, February 2017

‘Living with the Problem of Fraudulent Agency,’ University of Pittsburgh, September 2013

‘Deviant Causal Chains, Knowledge of Reasons, and Weakness of the Will,’ Topoi Conference 2012: *Intentions: Philosophical and Empirical Issues*, Istituto di Scienze e Tecnologie della Cognizione, November 2012

‘Deviant Causal Chains, *De Re* Knowledge, and Weakness of the Will,’ Conference of the Australasian Association of Philosophy, University of Wollongong, July 2012

‘Deviant Causal Chains, *De Re* Knowledge, and Weakness of the Will,’ University of Sydney, June 2012

‘What Is the Topic of Ethical Philosophy?’ University of New South Wales, March 2012 (invited)

‘Living with the Problem of Fraudulent Agency,’ SHAPE Conference 2012 *Themes from Cavell*, University of Sydney, February 2012 (invited)

‘Agent-Centered Restrictions, the Imagination, & Rational Growth,’ University of Sydney, October 2011

‘The Case for the Practical Imagination,’ Australian National University, September 2011 (invited)

‘In Defense of Daydreaming,’ University of Pittsburgh, April 2010

‘Multitasking,’ University of Pittsburgh, March 2009

‘The Argument from Failure,’ University of Pittsburgh, March 2008

Works in Progress

‘The Implicit Metaphysics of Consequentialism Generates Skepticism about Intentional Action’

‘Aesthetic Agency and Aesthetic Ethics’

‘What Is the Topic of Ethical Philosophy? - An Argument for Ethical Deflationism’

Conferences Organized

Visitors’ Philosophy Conference IV: *Attention, Praxis & Metaphysics*, University of Pittsburgh, April 2021

Visitors’ Philosophy Conference III: *Agency, Responsibility & Rational Unity*, University of Pittsburgh, February 2020

Visitors’ Philosophy Conference II: *Dynamic Activity, Self-Knowledge & Ethics*, University of Pittsburgh, February 2019

Professional Service

Undergraduate Review Committee, University of Pittsburgh, Spring 2014

Philosophy Seminar Series Coordinator, University of Sydney, Spring 2012

Student-Faculty Colloquium Co-Coordinator, University of Pittsburgh, 2003-2005

Advising Experience

Alison Harwood, 'Everydayness in Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*,' Ph.D. thesis, University of Sydney, auxiliary supervisor 2011-2012

Teaching Experience

Teaching experience at the undergraduate level

Carnegie Mellon University:

Ancient Philosophy, Fall 2020
Continental Philosophy, Spring 2020
Critical Thinking, Spring 2020
Social Structure, Public Policy & Ethics,
Fall 2019

University of Pittsburgh:

Philosophy of Art, Spring 2021
Intro to Existentialism, Spring 2021
Metaphysics, Fall 2020
Concepts of Human Nature, Fall 2020
Intro to Philosophical Problems, Fall 2020
Intro to Biomedical Ethics, Fall 2019
Intro to Existentialism, Spring 2019
Intro to Philosophy of Mind, Fall 2018
Theories of Knowledge and Reality, Fall 2018
Intro to Existentialism, Spring 2018
Intro to Ethics, Fall 2017
Political Philosophy, Fall 2017
Philosophy and Public Issues, Summer 2017
Intro to Existentialism, Spring 2017
Concepts of Human Nature, Fall 2016
Intro to Ethics (two sessions), Fall 2016
Intro to Existentialism, Spring 2016
Philosophy of Religion, Fall 2015
Ethical Theory, Fall 2015
Intro to Existentialism, Spring 2015
Intro to Ethics, Spring 2015
Intro to Ethics, Fall 2014
Concepts of Human Nature, Fall 2014
Intro to Existentialism, Spring 2014
Social Philosophy, Spring 2014
Intro to Philosophical Problems, Fall 2013
Social Philosophy, Summer 2010
Intro to Ethics, Fall 2009
Concepts of Human Nature, Summer 2009
Intro to Logic, Fall 2008
Intro to Logic, Spring 2007
Intro to Ethics, Summer 2005

Teaching experience at the graduate level

University of Sydney:

Heidegger as Ethicist, Spring 2012
Philosophy of Action, Spring 2011

Teaching experience as a teaching assistant

Carnegie Mellon University:

AI, Society & Humanity, Fall 2019

University of Pittsburgh:

Philosophy & Public Issues, Fall 2010
Intro to Logic, Spring 2010
Social Philosophy, Spring 2009
Intro to Logic, Fall 2008
Intro to Ethics, Spring 2007
History of Ancient Philosophy, Fall 2006
Intro to Logic, Spring 2005
Intro to Ethics, Fall 2004

[Osher Lifelong Learning Institute](#)

Spinoza's *Ethics*, Summer 2021
Descartes's *Meditations*, Summer 2021
Aristotle's *Ethics*, Spring 2021
Philosophy of Action, Spring 2021
Aristotle, Hobbes & Schmitt: Three
Conceptions of the Political, Fall 2020
Utilitarianism and Its Discontents, Summer 2020
Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*,
Fall 2019
The British Rediscovery of Aristotle and Plato:
Anscombe, Foot and Murdoch, Spring 2019
Jean-Luc Marion's *God Without Being*,
Spring 2019
Marx's Humanism, Spring 2018
Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, Fall 2017
Heidegger in Post-War France, Summer 2017
Nietzsche and the Death of God, Spring 2017

Research Languages

German (reading), English

Awards and Fellowships

Post-doctoral Fellowship, University of Sydney, 2011-2013

Pre-doctoral Fellowship, University of Pittsburgh, 2005-2006; 2007-2008

Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship in the Humanities, 2003-2004

Lee Family Foundation Prize in Philosophy, University of Chicago, 2002

Phi Beta Kappa, member since 2001

Coursework [* indicates audit. Unless noted, all courses were taken at the University of Pittsburgh.]

Particularism and Ethical Theory* (Setiya)	Romanticism as Philosophy* (Redding, University of Sydney)
Topics in Ethics and Political Philosophy* (Otsuka & Thompson)	Aristotle's De Anima* (Allen)
Directed Study-Phil of Mind and Action (Brandom)	Frege (Ricketts)
Sellars* (McDowell)	Hegel* (Brandom)
Sellars* (Brandom)	Hegel* (McDowell)
Moral Theory* (Thompson)	Hume's Treatise* (Schafer)
Rationality* (Setiya)	Kant's Critique of Pure Reason* (Engstrom)
Advanced Logic/2 (Gupta)	Kantian Ethics* (Engstrom)
Topics in Phil. Of Language* (Brandom)	Leibniz (Rescher)
<i>Making It Explicit</i> * (Brandom)	Marx* (Thompson)
Topics in Contemporary Philosophy (Gupta)	Plato* (Allen)
Philosophy of Action (McDowell)	Plato (Moss)
Advanced Logic (Manders)	Wittgenstein (McDowell)
Metaphysics-Epistemology (McDowell)	Philosophy of Science (Griffiths)
Political Philosophy* (Thompson)	Ethics (Setiya)

References

Please note that all letters of reference can be requested by contacting Diana Volkar (dlv23@pitt.edu).

Robert Brandom (rbrandom@pitt.edu)
Distinguished Professor of Philosophy
University of Pittsburgh

John McDowell (jmcowell@pitt.edu)
Distinguished University Professor of Philosophy
University of Pittsburgh

David Macarthur (david.macarthur@sydney.edu.au)
Senior Lecturer in Philosophy
University of Sydney

Huw Price (hp331@cam.ac.uk)
Bertrand Russell Professor of Philosophy
Trinity College
University of Cambridge

Robert Batterman (rbatterman@pitt.edu) (teaching)
Professor of Philosophy
University of Pittsburgh

Kieran Setiya (ksetiya@mit.edu)
Professor of Philosophy
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Michael Thompson (mthompso@pitt.edu)
Professor of Philosophy
University of Pittsburgh

Paul Redding (paul.redding@sydney.edu.au)
Senior Lecturer in Philosophy
University of Sydney

Nuel Belnap (belnap@pitt.edu) (teaching)
Alan Ross Anderson Distinguished Professor of
Philosophy (Emeritus)
University of Pittsburgh

Thomas Berry (tberry@pitt.edu) (teaching)
Senior Lecturer and Director of Undergraduate Studies
University of Pittsburgh

Research Statement

The overarching theme of my philosophical work is the ethical significance of the metaphysics of agency. I maintain in particular that the applicability of ethical categories to agents and to their actions rests on the way in which agents and their actions manifest certain special sorts of unity. The example of Kant's shopkeeper—who treats his customers fairly only because doing so is profitable—will serve to bring into relief the ethical significance of the unity of actions and the unity of agents.

Consider first the alluring thought that *what* Kant's shopkeeper does in treating his customers fairly is *what* ethics requires, so that if there is anything ethically lacking in the shopkeeper's conduct, that must be because ethics requires more of us than that we act in accord with its requirements. To accept this thought at face value is to allow that our agency must manifest itself not just in action, but also in some other way. And then it is natural to assume that this other sort of manifestation is some "inner" element of agency—such as how we assess practical reasons, or how we are motivated to act—to which action as an outer element stands opposed. Thus we can arrive at the conviction that exercises of agency are *metaphysically heterogeneous composites*—that there is, in other words, a fundamental bifurcation in every exercise of agency between an inner and an outer element.

This view, which I call "bifurcationism," underlies much contemporary work on action, ethical value, and moral psychology. It figures, for example, in debates about consequentialism, which is the view that the ethical value of an action (which in this context becomes the "inner" element) is in some decisive sense logically posterior to the value of its consequences (the outer element). Deontologists, who disagree with consequentialism by reversing this posteriority claim, nevertheless agree that the distinction between actions and consequences is robust enough to underwrite a posteriority relation between the sorts of value that actions and consequences can have, and thereby endorse bifurcationism.

I argue that bifurcationism is false because it commits us to a bad response to what I call the Argument from Failure, which is a practical analogue of the Argument from Illusion. Trying to do A, according to this Argument, always leaves open the possibility that A will not turn out. (Here "trying" goes proxy for whatever any given bifurcationist regards as agency's inner element.) I argue that bifurcationists who prefer to avoid the conclusion that we can never do anything *but* try are obliged to maintain that it is possible to do A by at least some methods that leave open the possibility that A will not turn out. But this claim leaves bifurcationists in principle unable to account for the fact that, whenever we are trying to do something, we know that we are trying to do it. So the only viable response to the Argument from Failure that takes this fact seriously is to maintain that trying to do A can be sufficient for A's turning out, or in other words, that an agent's trying to do something can itself simply be her doing it.

This rejection of bifurcationism therefore obliges us to reconceive exercises of agency as *unities* of a sort in which inner and outer elements are not metaphysically heterogeneous. I find the clue to such a reconception in the notion of a task as it figures in the concept of multitasking, for if we can distinguish more than one task that an agent is doing at a time, then we can look to the principle that guides us in distinguishing tasks in order to discern how some of what she is doing is unified under one task rather than another. A task, then, is a kind of unity that subsumes everything an agent is doing in order to achieve a certain end. So the ends on which agents can act, and which serve to individuate tasks from one another, constitute the principles of these unities. On the basis of this concept, then, we can finally see how to reject the alluring thought with which the bifurcationist confusion began, and assert that what Kant's shopkeeper does just is not what ethics requires. For his activity is a unity whose principle is the (merely ethically neutral) end of profit.

The second sort of unity to which the example of Kant's shopkeeper points us can now come to light. For by selecting a merely ethically neutral end, the shopkeeper fails to unify himself with a sort of rational excellence that is available to him. In developing this point I proceed by a series of adaptations and adjustments of Kantian moral doctrine. The first concerns Kant's assertion that there is only one way to be attuned to practical reasons—respect *simpliciter*—sufficient to guarantee that actions prompted by it possess moral worth. I counter with the claim that respect is a genus having many species—honesty, benevolence, and the like—and that what Kant should have said is that only actions performed from one of the various motives that are respectful of the moral law possess moral worth. My second modification to Kantian doctrine is similar. Whereas Kant maintains that the content of the moral law must derive entirely from the concept of a practically rational being in general, I propose that this concept is also a genus having many species—human, (perhaps) dolphin, and so on—and that an action can possess moral worth if the motive that prompts it is an attunement to her species of this genus. This proposal entails that, in addition to the contradiction in conception and will tests, the maxim of an action must also pass what I call a “contradiction in species” test in order for it to be possible to perform it from respect for the moral law. A maxim you propose fails this test if it contradicts another maxim necessarily willed by any rational being that bears your species of practical rationality.

To this extent, then, my view aligns with the contemporary tradition of virtue ethics according to which practical rational excellence is a matter of the species of rational life one bears, but I believe that there is a decisive difficulty for the way in which this tradition tries to revive Aristotelian thinking about “forms of life,” and the goal of my future work is to clarify this difficulty and its consequences. The problem can be brought into focus by observing that the neo-Aristotelian cannot count hybrids like mules as living things, for the neo-Aristotelian conception holds not just that every living thing has a form of life, but also the genetic doctrine that it is impossible to have a form of life without being the offspring of other creatures that also have the same form. According to these principles, then, since the parents of a mule are not mules themselves, it cannot have received its mulish form from them, so that it cannot be alive. This result being unacceptable, it is necessary to develop an alternative understanding of the relevance of one's rational species (one's “form of life”) to one's practical rational excellence that avoids this genetic doctrine.