Research Statement

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It's uncontroversial that we can wrong others through our bodily actions. But what about our mental lives? Can we wrong our loved ones by failing to believe them? Do we owe it to our partners to maintain important, shared desires over time? Can we be blamed for losing faith in a relationship or a religious tradition that's both hurt and uplifted us? These questions point toward a largely unexplored domain of moral responsibility—-one that my research program investigates through careful attention to messy, real-life cases that reveal the moral complexity of our inner lives.

My work argues that we possess far more control over our mental states than is often recognized in philosophy, but remains cognizant of genuine limitations (as in cases of eating disorders or intrusive thoughts). By examining cases from the news and everyday social life, such as a mother deliberating about whether to believe her daughter's report of sexual assault, a friend who quietly decides we're not worthy of her respect, and the harms we inflict through gossip even when conveying true information, I demonstrate that many of our most difficult moral challenges occur not in the realm of bodily action, but in domains of interpretation, belief formation, and attitude regulation. This approach reveals forms of responsibility, harm, and wrongdoing that have been insufficiently theorized in contemporary ethics. My research thus builds toward a more complete and socially engaged understanding of mental agency that takes seriously both our robust capacities for mental self-direction and the moral stakes of how we exercise them.

1 The Ethics and Phenomenology of Belief

The central questions driving my dissertation concern the nature of doxastic agency: What control do we have over our beliefs, and what moral obligations does this control create? These questions emerged from my engagement with the #MeToo slogan "Believe Women," which appears to issue a moral imperative about what to believe—but how can we be commanded to believe if belief is largely involuntary?

In my first chapter (currently R&R at *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*), I argue that the philosophical literature has overlooked a crucial distinction between different types of motivating reasons in doxastic deliberation. Attending to this distinction reveals that when we deliberate about what to believe, we often grapple with how to weigh or evaluate reasons—a question that, contra the transparency thesis defended by Shah, Velleman, and others, does not simply collapse into the question of whether p is true. This creates genuine space for non-evidential considerations, including moral ones, to function as reasons for belief.

My second chapter extends this analysis by comparing belief formation to language acquisition, arguing that both can be extended actions requiring sustained effort over time. Just as a parent can undertake the project of learning sign language to communicate with their deaf child, we can undertake projects of belief formation; both can be extended actions over which we have robust control. Doxastic involuntarism (the thesis that we cannot believe 'at will') is either false, or its implications for the ethics of belief have been overstated.

Building on these insights, my current work examines cases where moral duties of beneficence and nonmaleficence create obligations to believe. In one paper, I analyze a mother deliberating whether to believe her daughter's report of sexual assault despite feeling she has insufficient evidence. I argue on the basis of ordinary moral duties of beneficence and nonmaleficence that the mother ought to believe her daughter if she can. Failing to believe our loved ones, even by suspending judgment in the face of insufficient evidence, can in some circumstances be a kind of moral and doxastic wronging. This is because what we believe and fail to believe about our loved ones not only influences our actions, but can go against their interests in and of itself. Moreover, building on insights developed in the first two chapters, I argue that belief is well within this mother's control. The balance of moral considerations thus suggests that the agent morally ought to believe her daughter, even if that means inducing belief through means we would consider irrational.

By building on these insights, we can defend the #MeToo slogan "Believe Women" as a legitimate moral imperative. Rather than simply reminding us to treat women's testimony as evidence, the slogan provides indirect moral reasons that attach to and intensify the weight of victims' testimony. The language of popular discourse can be given a philosophically rigorous defense (presented at the conference "Ethics in Motion: Feminist Ethics and #MeToo" in May 2025).

2 Phenomenology of Agency and Control

My investigation of mental agency extends beyond belief to examine the phenomenological dimensions of control more broadly. In my dissertation's third chapter (published in *Synthese*, 2025), I develop a novel argument against reductive sensory theories of consciousness by focusing on the phenomenology of losing control over urges, particularly in eating disorders. While the literature on agentive phenomenology has focused primarily on controlled bodily movement, I argue that examining cases where agents feel they lack control over mental states reveals important limitations in reductive approaches. The well-documented feeling of lacking control over eating urges that characterizes binge eating episodes cannot be adequately explained by theories like Jessie Prinz's (2007) and Tye's and Wright's (2011), which reduce agentive phenomenology to the phenomenology of the familiar sensory modalities.

This work on the phenomenology of control connects to broader questions about moral responsibility for mental states. In ongoing research, I examine what the feeling of lacking control over our motivations reveals about the nature of desire and urge-control, and how these phenomenological facts bear on questions of responsibility.

Another current project investigates the feeling of effort that sometimes accompanies doxastic deliberation—the special effort we expend when attempting to reason carefully or impartially. I argue that this phenomenology indicates that certain aspects of doxastic deliberation, such as focusing attention or weighing reasons, are genuine mental actions. This complicates standard involuntarist pictures of belief and supports a more nuanced view of doxastic agency.

3 Social Dimensions of Mental Agency

My interest in mental agency naturally extends to examining how our mental states and practices shape social relationships and moral communities. One place this comes out is in my work on gossip, which explores how informal information-sharing practices create moral obligations regarding our attitudes toward

others.

Consider a common defense of gossip: "I'm just telling the truth—if Sam didn't want everyone knowing he cheated on Charlie, maybe he shouldn't have done it!" This intuition seems compelling across many cases, from workplace harassment to embarrassing social behavior. After all, how can simply telling the truth about someone wrong them? Yet this framing obscures a deeper puzzle. When I learn through gossip that Annie (a distant acquaintance) cheated on Omar, this single piece of information may now constitute 100% of my salient beliefs about her character. Even if Annie is generally trustworthy and kind (even if she deeply regrets her infidelity), my limited knowledge creates a distorted overall impression of who she is. While my belief that she cheated may be true and in itself harmless, the resulting *belief-set* about her character is unduly negative.

This distortion can be genuinely harmful: it shapes my affective attitudes toward Annie and my disposition to interact with her in ways that may damage her socially and relationally. The typical worry about gossip focuses on its frivolousness or the spread of false information, but I argue that the primary harms derive from gossip's tendency to distort our overall belief-sets about people's characters and, consequently, to alter our affective states and dispositions to interact with them.

This reveals the moral tensions surrounding gossip: it serves crucial social functions by helping vulnerable people avoid harm, deterring misconduct, and (as a reliable character from Jane Austen's *Persuasion* notes) making "one know one's species better." But it also creates these distinctive moral risks. These insights connect my broader themes about mental agency to questions of social epistemology. If we can wrong others through our private attitudes and if we possess significant control over our mental lives, then the ethics of gossip depends critically on how we as listeners regulate our responses to the information we receive, and whether we as speakers can expect our audiences to do the same.

4 Mental States and Relational Harm: A New Framework

One area I am currently developing concerns how we can harm others through what might be called "thought crimes," particularly within our close relationships. This work addresses a significant gap in the philosophical literature by examining how our private mental states can directly impact others' wellbeing, even when our external behavior remains unchanged. The framework builds on two major theories of welfare. Both desire satisfaction theory and objective list theories predict that successful relationships are central to human wellbeing. Relationships appear on any plausible objective list of goods, and they represent something the vast majority of people deeply want. Crucially, relationships are constituted at least in part by the mental states that parties hold toward each other—our beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and intentions. Even if relationships aren't entirely constituted by these mental states, what we think and feel about each other can immediately affect relationship quality by influencing factors like mutuality, care, affection, authenticity, and closeness. This means that my beliefs and attitudes about my friend have a direct impact on the quality of our friendship, independent of any changes in our interactions or behavior. When I come to disrespect or lose trust in someone I'm close to, our relationship deteriorates even if I never express these changes outwardly. This represents a form of harm that has been insufficiently recognized in philosophical discussions of how we can wrong others.

An important dimension of this work concerns what I call "relational unmooring," a unique form of harm that occurs when someone's perception of a close relationship differs dramatically from its reality.

Consider someone like Thomas Nagel's character in his essay "Death" (1979), who believes their friend loves and respects them, when in reality that friend harbors resentment and merely pretends affection. The person living under this misapprehension suffers a distinctive kind of harm to their wellbeing, regardless of their friend's successful performance of care. Presumably it is something like this which makes the Experience Machine seem so horrific. While I acknowledge that truth-telling isn't always the highest moral priority (particularly when disclosure might lead to catastrophic outcomes), I argue that authentic, reality-grounded relationships are generally essential for human flourishing. This creates complex moral situations where we may be obligated to reveal difficult truths or otherwise signal changes in our feelings toward someone, even when doing so will cause immediate pain. The alternative—allowing someone to live in a fundamentally inauthentic relationship—may ultimately be worse for their wellbeing.

This framework connects productively with my other work on mental agency by providing concrete examples of how we can wrong others through mental states alone. It offers a substantive answer to skeptics who question whether purely mental actions can wrong others (i.e., doesn't wronging require harm?): here is one way that our mental lives can make others better or worse off. The work also complements my research on doxastic wronging, where I argue that we can harm loved ones by suspending judgment on their testimony even when evidence is insufficient for belief. Similarly, it connects to my analysis of gossip, where I contend that the primary harms typically stem from changes in our mental attitudes toward each other rather than from the communicative acts themselves.