RESEARCH STATEMENT

Many of us think—or at least hope—that it matters whether we live our lives one way versus another. The central aim of my research is to understand what the world must be like for there to be truth of this kind, and for us to think and know about it. Naturally, this requires work and occasionally commitment to views in non-normative areas of philosophy. But what drives this work is concern with the fundamental normative question of what to do, rather than with drawing out the implications of a favored metaphysical or epistemological theory.

My inquiries are primarily metaethical because it is my view that in order to fully understand the content of ethics, one must understand its nature. My favored positive view takes this ‘nature-before-content’ approach to its extreme. I hold that one—perhaps the only—solution to certain classic metaethical challenges (e.g., Moore’s Open Question Argument) would be to show that specific normative-descriptive supervenience relations are entailed non-obviously by certain (arguably conceptual) truths about the nature of normativity. Ultimately, the hope is to provide a kind of transcendental argument for a substantive normative view: Merely by asking the question of what to do, we rationally commit ourselves to the right answers. Further development of this view will be the purview of my first book, Transcendental Normativity, in which I will argue that our best hope for jointly vindicating a number of fundamental metaethical intuitions is to hold that the correct substantive normative view follows from them. Furthermore, I will argue that this view’s best expression is a form of naturalism (as opposed to possible non-naturalist or expressivist cousins).

Other projects explore the implications of these fundamental intuitions for alternative metaethical views. For instance, many hold that normative truth must be objective. On Leaving Room for Doubt: Using Frege-Geach to Illuminate Expressivism’s Problem with Objectivity (under review) explores this claim’s implications for normative expressivism: Expressivists face a challenge to offer a semantics that accords with the logical structure of normative thought and language. While this “Frege-Geach problem” is a central focus of much critical work on expressivism, it is widely recognized that most who reject the view do so for other reasons—in many cases, precisely because it is hard to see how expressivism could be compatible with normative objectivity. I set out to show how the Frege-Geach problem can be used to vindicate this worry. I argue that those who hold that normativity must be objective should accept (at least as coherent) that there might be no normative truth. But, I argue further, expressivists are unable to accept this, given how they respond to the challenge to explain normative contradiction and disagreement (part of Frege-Geach). This paper was one of 9 selections (out of 184 submissions) for the 2014 Bellingham Summer Philosophy Conference and a top-4 runner-up for the 2014 Marc Sanders Prize in Metaethics.

Perhaps the most common metaethical intuition concerns normative supervenience. My current project, Non-Naturalism and the Conceptual Necessity of Supervenience, considers supervenience’s implications for normative non-naturalism: Simon Blackburn’s famous challenge to realists to explain why the normative supervenes has been a focal point in recent discussions about the theoretical costs of non-naturalism. (For one, in David Enoch’s Taking Morality Seriously, which I reviewed for the Journal of Value Inquiry in 2012.) I argue that we should see Blackburn’s challenge as a demand to vindicate the conceptual necessity of supervenience. I contend that this is likely to make more dialectical progress than current focus on the metaphysical challenge to explain particular supervenience relations between normative and descriptive properties. I then explain what a non-naturalist would have to do to meet this challenge.
My most recent project, A Hard Look at Moral Perception (Philosophical Studies 2014), considers the implications of moral perception for moral epistemology. A major impetus for defending moral perception, I suggest, is the appealing prospect of subsuming moral epistemology under the (relatively comfortable) umbrella of the perceptual or empirical. I argue that though moral perception may be possible, this loftier epistemological goal is almost certainly unreachable.

My next project, Responding to Reasons, follows current work on parallels between practical and epistemic normativity. In recent papers, Julia Markovits and Mark Schroeder defend similar accounts of morally worthy action and knowledge, respectively. Schroeder’s view is, I contend, susceptible to a variety of Gettier cases. Given the parallels between the views, it becomes possible to generate “practical Gettier cases” for morally worthy action. I explore the implications of such cases for the prospects of offering a superior account of both morally worthy action and knowledge.

I also have a number of non-metaethical projects, many fueled by an affinity for collaborative work. David Shoemaker (Tulane) and I have an ongoing program in experimental philosophy on the relationship between ignorance and moral responsibility. We have completed three relevant studies. The results of the first two appear in [Insanity, Deep Selves, and Moral Responsibility: The Case of JoJo (Review of Philosophy and Psychology 2010)] and [Huck vs. JoJo: Moral Ignorance and the (A)symmetry of Praise and Blame (forthcoming in Oxford Studies in Experimental Philosophy)]. We will be presenting the third—concerning the relationship between judgements of praise/blame and judgements about the deep self—at “Experimental Philosophy of the Self,” a workshop at NYU taking place in December 2014.

First-Personal Authority and the Normativity of Rationality (Philosophia 2010; co-authored with Christian Coons (Bowling Green)) addresses an exchange between Niko Kolodny and Nicholas Southwood. We argue that Southwood’s arguments for the normativity of rationality fail, and that we should take seriously Kolodny’s claim that rationality is merely apparently normative. My [Brown on Mackie: Echoes of the Lottery Paradox (Philosophia 2012)] is a reply to a critical paper on Coons’ work on error theory, inspired by Coons’ and my discussion of one of his central arguments (which plays a key role in Transcendent Normativity).

To Inspect and Make Safe: On the Morally Responsible Liability of Property Owners (Ethical Theory and Moral Practice 2014; co-authored with Peter Jaworski (Georgetown)) addresses an apparent stalemate over the justification for holding owners legally liable for damages caused by their property. We argue that in some cases—but only in some cases—property owners qua owners are morally responsible for such damages. We discuss how recognition of this fact might help move the legal debate forward, and offer a novel account of what explains owners’ relevant moral responsibility. In a related paper, Do Property Rights Presuppose Scarcity? (Journal of Business Ethics 2013), I argue that the standard intuitive argument for the claim that property rights presuppose scarcity fails, and consider the implications of this fact in a world in which technological advancements have the potential to greatly increase the number of non-scarce good types.