

## **Research Statement**

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My current research projects lie in feminist philosophy, metaphysics, early modern philosophy (including Kant), and early analytic philosophy. After describing my current projects, I outline some long-term plans.

### **Feminist Philosophy**

I have two ongoing projects in feminist philosophy. The first project asks whether feminism can be reconciled with the patriarchal structures present in Islam. Most feminists and Islamic scholars have taken what I call a ‘textual approach’ to this question. This is an approach that proceeds either by reinterpreting Islamic texts in more egalitarian ways or by situating the text in its historical context in such a way that its message retains normative force only in a particular historical time and place. I argue that the textual approach generates a dilemma for the universality and objectivity of religious norms. This dilemma threatens the place of the text (specifically the Quran) in religious practice as a primary source of objective religious norms. The dilemma is this: either the textual approach succeeds in reconciling Muslim texts with a feminist outlook, or Muslims can recognize universal and objective religious norms, but not both. I develop a novel non-textual approach to reconciliation that does not threaten the normative force Muslims attribute to the Quran. My approach is revolutionary rather than apologetic, in that it carves out a central role for moral understanding in Islam-as-practiced. A draft of this paper is available.

Recent work in feminist epistemology emphasizes the importance of epistemic justice. Epistemic justice requires that we do not fail to believe speakers due to inappropriate prejudices. My second project in feminist philosophy investigates the limits of epistemic justice. I argue that the requirements imposed by epistemic justice generate an important puzzle when applied to the testimony of women who perpetuate practices that we find abhorrent. I focus on the practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). The practice of FGM is often propagated by women who take FGM to be a good. The question then arises: should we take their testimony attesting to the good of FGM as evidence for its good, or not? If we take it as evidence, we must allow that their testimony exerts some rational pressure against our belief that FGM is wrong. But we don’t think that there is any such pressure; our default view is that their testimony ought to be disregarded. Yet considerations of epistemic justice seem to demand that we do take women’s testimony about their own good as evidence about what is good for them (or, more strongly, as providing justification for believing what they say). Just as we wouldn’t discount a woman’s claim that an abortion would be better for her than continuing a pregnancy, or a woman’s claim that she feels undermined in certain situations due to harassment, we should not disregard a woman’s testimony when she earnestly insists that FGM is good for women. The puzzle that results from this tension between our view of FGM, on the one hand, and feminist considerations of epistemic justice, on the other, is distinctive and important. It is distinctive because, unlike more familiar puzzles of this kind, the puzzle does not presuppose liberalism, and so does not presuppose a general tolerance towards the practices of other social, ethnic, or religious groups. The puzzle is important because it forces us to articulate and defend the limits of epistemic justice. My own preferred solution to the puzzle appeals to a strong version of the claim that evidence should be sensitive to stakes. Because the testimony of

pro-FGM women would, if taken as evidence, risk serious harm to others (i.e. female children), it must clear a much higher bar before we can treat it as genuine evidence. I also argue that a parallel puzzle would still arise if our default view was not that a woman's testimony in the case of FGM ought to be disregarded, but instead that her testimony exerts rational pressure that simply falls short of providing justification for believing what she says. I extend my preferred solution to this parallel puzzle. I argue that due to the stakes involved, the testimony of pro-FGM women must clear a much higher bar before we can treat it as providing justification for believing what they say.

## Metaphysics

As I outline in my dissertation summary, my dissertation answers three longstanding challenges to the Principle of Sufficient Reason ('PSR'). Of these chapters, one—'Explaining Contingent Facts'—is forthcoming as an article in *Philosophical Studies*. The other two—'The Rationalist Commitments of Inquiry' and 'Relativized Fundamentality'—are under review. Since defending my dissertation, I have been a postdoctoral research fellow at Simon Fraser University, where I have built upon work done in my dissertation. In my paper 'Does Quantum Mechanics pose a Threat to the PSR?' (under review), I argue that contrary to the mainstream view, extant interpretations of quantum mechanics do not undermine the commitment to the claim that all facts (including quantum facts) have an explanation. In another paper 'The Case for Eliminating Identity', I argue (on grounds that trace to the PSR) that we should do away with a commitment to a relation of numerical identity. Drafts of all these papers are available.

Aside from the above papers, I have two ongoing projects in metaphysics. The first project, which descends from my dissertation, is a defense of a principle I call the 'ecumenicality constraint'. According to this principle, our theories about the core concepts used in metaphysical theorizing—concepts such as *explanation*, *dependence*, *ground*, *fundamentality*, *right*, *justified*, and so on—cannot be such that they trivially falsify substantive metaphysical theses. Thus, for example, a theory of rightness ought to accommodate specific instances—particularly those that are widely recognized—of what is right. Given that most philosophers think that it is right to relieve suffering, a theory of rightness that trivially falsified this claim (perhaps because it entails that suffering is not evil) would fail to be an adequate theory of rightness. I show that the ecumenicality constraint is widely endorsed, both implicitly (in the method-by-counterexample) and explicitly, particularly in the work of Fine (1994, 2013) and Wilson (2016). But while the constraint is widely endorsed, it has not been explicitly argued for. My aim is to fill this lacuna by providing an argument for the constraint.

My second project seeks to demonstrate the PSR's often-unrecognized significance for contemporary metaphysics. I plan to show that much contemporary metaphysics—particularly the large volume of work inspired by David Lewis—bears a tacit commitment to the PSR (and thus to rationalism). Lewisian metaphysics is generally taken to be antithetical to rationalism, so my project has significant implications for the shape of contemporary metaphysics. This project has a positive and a negative part. In the positive part I show that Hume's Dictum (a core tenet of Lewisian metaphysics that denies necessary connections between distinct things) derives its ultimate justification from rationalist (i.e. PSR-related) considerations. This is a positive result because, when combined with my earlier work defending the PSR, it provides a PSR-based argument for Hume's Dictum. In the negative part of my project I show that Lewisian metaphysics is unstable, for while it derives its ultimate justification from rationalist considerations, it embeds anti-rationalist elements. An exciting upshot of this

project is that it blurs the traditional divide between rationalist and empiricist metaphysics. Despite the status of Hume's Dictum as a traditionally empiricist tenet, my argument promises to establish its rationalist foundation. I take this blurring of the boundary between rationalist and empiricist approaches to be a virtue, since recent work in the history of philosophy has sought to undermine the assumption of a sharp distinction between them (see Della Rocca 2008).

### **Early Modern Philosophy (Including Kant)**

I have strong research interests in early modern philosophy (including Kant). I here describe two current projects in this area.

My first project builds on a paper I have forthcoming in the *Routledge Handbook of Metaphysical Grounding*. In that paper, 'Metaphysical Explanation in Spinoza and Leibniz', I argue that the notion of sufficient reason at play in Spinoza's and Leibniz's versions of the PSR closely maps onto the contemporary notion of metaphysical explanation. The present project focuses on the notion of a 'complete' explanation in Leibniz. Leibniz maintains that no infinitely descending explanatory sequence will suffice as a 'complete' explanation for an item in the sequence. For the explanation to be complete, the existence of the sequence itself would need to be explained. I explore the different ways in which this explanatory demand might be cashed out. I then argue that contrary to some interpretations, Leibniz is not committed to a self-explaining entity. Finally, I argue—on textual and philosophical grounds—that the demand for a complete explanation is ultimately satisfied for Leibniz by essences that are not themselves apt for explanation.

My second project critiques a prominent interpretation of Kant's 'humility thesis'—the thesis that things-in-themselves are uncognizable—and argues for an alternative reading. While Kant subscribes to the humility thesis, he also, in tension with that thesis, makes several claims about things in themselves: that they exist, that they ground appearances, that they are not in space and time, and so on. I argue against a strategy—most prominently defended by Desmond Hogan—for reconciling the humility thesis with Kant's claims about things in themselves. According to this strategy, claims about things in themselves do not violate the humility thesis so long as they are part of that thesis. In arguing for this claim, Hogan deploys (on Kant's behalf) a notion of a priori cognition on which to cognize a priori is to cognize through the ground. I show that Hogan's reconciliation strategy runs into difficulty, both as an interpretation of Kant, and as an independent philosophical position. I then propose a novel interpretation of the humility thesis that also appeals to cognition through the ground, but avoids the difficulties of Hogan's reading. A draft of this paper is available.

### **Early Analytic Philosophy**

I have a longstanding interest in the history of early analytic philosophy, particularly the work of Bertrand Russell. My first ongoing project in early analytic philosophy concerns Russell's Principle of Acquaintance. This principle states a necessary condition on understanding. It says that one must be acquainted with every constituent of a proposition one understands. There are at least two questions one might ask about this principle: (1) Why did Russell hold it? (2) Do *we* have any reason to hold it? I plan to answer both questions. The foundation for this project was laid in my 2013 publication in the *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*. I have subsequently presented early work from this project at an invited workshop

at the University of Stirling. A paper in which I trace Russell's commitment to the Principle of Acquaintance is currently forthcoming in *The Oxford Handbook of Bertrand Russell* (Ed. Kevin Klement).

A second project takes as its starting point the disagreement between Russell and Wittgenstein over whether Russell's multiple relation theory of judgment can rule out believing 'nonsense'. In 'How Nonsense Regulates Belief', a paper I have workshopped at several venues, I argue that belief is subject to a norm according to which, for every proposition *p*, one ought to believe *p* only if *p* is not nonsense (where nonsensical propositions are those that involve a violation of semantic categories). Call this the 'nonsense norm'. I show that the nonsense norm is both distinct from a truth norm for belief (i.e. believe *p* only if *p* is true), and no less fundamental than it. I also argue that the nonsense norm has its roots in the asymmetry between first and third personal access to the contents of our thoughts. A draft of this paper is available.

### Future Projects

I have several long-term research plans. In feminist philosophy, I will extend my proposal for a re-conceived relationship between the Quran and Islam-as-practiced to the Quran's treatment of homosexuality. While the Quran has much to say about the norms that govern how women should behave and how they should be treated, it has surprisingly little to say about gay men and women. Yet Islam-as-practiced is largely hostile towards homosexuality. I ultimately plan to publish a monograph that more fully defends and extends my proposal for reconciling Islam—and particularly the Quran—with a feminist outlook.

A second long-term plan is to publish a monograph on the Principle of Sufficient Reason. This project will expand the scope of my research on the PSR, while building on the foundations laid by my previous work. It will have three stages. I will first develop a definitive contemporary—yet historically informed—defense of the PSR. In my paper 'The Rationalist Commitments of Inquiry' I argue that we ought to be committed to the PSR. Yet demonstrating a commitment to the PSR is distinct from demonstrating the PSR's truth. I thus plan to provide a separate argument for the truth of the PSR. I will then establish some important ways in which the PSR reshapes contemporary metaphysics. In particular, I plan to build on my argument that Lewisian metaphysics harbours a tacit commitment to the PSR and is therefore unstable by showing that the argument extends to other prominent approaches to metaphysics. In the project's final stage I will look beyond metaphysics, and show how the PSR has revolutionary implications within contemporary ethics and philosophy of physics. I will focus, in particular, on how the PSR undermines the widespread commitment to primitive properties in meta-ethics, as well as primitivism in the philosophy of physics.

### Works Cited:

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