Research Statement

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I work in philosophical borderlands, mostly in the space between theoretical and normative philosophy. I do this in part out of a methodological conviction, that the theoretical and the normative parts of philosophy put important constraints on one another—in short, that philosophy hangs together. Partly I do it because, heuristically, the borderlands between philosophical subfields are fertile, offering unexplored problems and puzzles. But mostly the issues there are fascinating and deep; in investigating what we *can* do, for example, we often learn about what we *ought* to do. In a large part of my work I try to do exactly that when it comes to what we may call the *attitudes*. I'll describe that project first. But I have two other ongoing projects that I will also briefly describe, one on conversational ethics, and one in epistemology. Though very different from one another, they all aim at harmony between the theoretical and normative.

There seems to be a basic contrast among different kinds of attitudes, and a lot of consequences downstream from this contrast. This contrast is best approached with examples. Take a simple one. There's a longstanding controversy in classical studies: was there a unique author, Homer, who wrote the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*? This is the *Homeric question*. Let 'Homerism' name the proposition that there was, and 'anti-Homerism' name the proposition that there was not. And let H be the true proposition belonging to the set {Homerism, anti-Homerism}. H is true, no doubt about that; it could not fail to be. And yet, I have some difficulty in believing H. One natural explanation of this is that, somehow, it is irrational to believe H in my circumstances. After all, supposing that H is anti-Homerism—that there was no such person—I could believe it, for example by wild guess. But if I believed H given how I defined it, it would not be by wild guess; so then why is it irrational? Somehow, I need to be able to identify which of Homerism and anti-Homerism H is. Rational belief has this identificational requirement. But for some reason, non-doxastic attitudes like desire, admiration, and regret don't. I can admire, say, whoever sacrifices a great deal to help those in need without being able to identify a single such person. Or I can want a friend to pursue whatever career makes them happiest without knowing anything at all about what career that is. These attitudes don't have an identificational requirement.

To explain this, I argue that we need to think of all attitude formation, doxastic and

non-doxastic alike, as choices. The *difference* between them that I just sketched would result from differences in what they're choices *among*, along with some rational principles that govern choices among options more generally.

Independent of the right explanation, though, the contrast generates important structural differences in normative theories of doxastic and non-doxastic attitude formation. For doxastic attitudes, what we get is exactly what we might have expected: the epistemology we're familiar with. *If* I could rationally believe H in my evidential circumstances, just by naming it in a clever way, then epistemology would be trivialized. More strikingly, because non-doxastic attitudes *aren't* subject to the identificational constraints I mentioned, analogues of epistemology for those attitudes will look *very* different. As I said, for example, I can admire whoever makes huge sacrifices for people who need help, even if I can't identify a single such person. Or I can want a friend to do whatever will make her happiest, even if I have no idea what that might be. Whether I admire or desire well is not subject to empirical misfortune in the way that believing is—if my heart is in the right place, I can be guaranteed to admire or desire well, even if good epistemic intentions can't guarantee successful belief. So, I ought to. Even stranger, perhaps, the contrast gives rise to large amounts of ignorance about the *objects* of our non-doxastic attitudes. If I want you to do whatever makes you happiest, then if that's retiring to New Zealand, then I want you to retire to New Zealand, even if I have no idea that I do. Or so I argue, anyway—everything I just said are matters of ongoing controversy!

The contrast also has some linguistic consequences. Consder "conditional attitude reports" like "if I hurt your feelings last night, I really regret that". They might look like counterexamples to *modus ponens*. After all, one can say them seemingly truthfully even when one doesn't know that the antecedent is true, and then a third party who does know it's true can detach the consequent, inferring the speaker regrets something they don't know they did. If I'm right, this isn't problematic, though I admit it is counter-intuitive.

I think Plato saw all of this in an inchoate way, even the conditionals. In the *Gorgias* he uses this sort of contrast to argue that we desire all and only what is in fact good. That can be interpreted as a way of taking what I said about how we ought to form non-doxastic attitudes two paragraphs ago to an extreme—if we *can* desire all and only what's good, which (he thinks) we can because our desire is not subject to identificational constraints, then we ought to; and if it's obvious we must, and we can, then maybe we *do*. This argument is sketchy, especially its second step. But I argue that even the first inference is bad; though non-doxastic attitudes aren't subject to the very strict identificational constraints to which doxastic ones are subject, they are nevertheless subject to *some*. It will be difficult to describe exactly what those constraints are, but it seems that to admire someone, we need to identify some substantively admirable property that we admire in a person. We can't, in other words,

admire whoever's admirable. The same goes with desire and the good (or what's desirable).

The next project is one in conversational ethics—what do we owe one another as good interlocutors? I've approached it from two different angles. In the first, I tried to expand the debate about norms of assertion by generalizing it. Typically philosophers are interested in the communication of just one attitude in speech: belief, through assertion. But we communicate a lot of other attitudes to the people we talk to, like our anger, our amusement, and our desires. The communication of belief through assertion is just one very important case. And once we expand our purview of what our given norms are supposed to explain, we see—I think—that we need to change their form somewhat. Often norms of assertion, like the famous knowledge norm, are what we might call "fittingness-based"; they need to be made with what would be the fitting version of the mental state. I suggest we replace this with "rightness-based" norms; that's because it is right (appropriate) to communicate even unfitting amusement, because amusement is a good mental state to have, most of the time. And even when we make this modification, we can still recover the knowledge norm in cases where it really matters that what's communicated is knowledge, and where it's easy to hedge when one doesn't know. The more general view I came to is that linguistic norms need to be motivated by plausible ethical considerations.

This work led me to look at the main theory in conversational ethics, the one implicit in Grice's work on pragmatics. According to that general picture, a good interlocutor is a cooperative one: someone who gives their interlocutor the most useful information they can to achieve their goals. In that way, good conversation is oriented toward persuasion. But this picture conflicts with a kind of conversational ideal, a person who gives their interlocutors the best reasons *not* to believe what they say. I argue that the Gricean picture has to be revised to account for this. I assimilate it to cases in ethics where one *binds oneself* to plans made for when one might be irrational, as with giving someone your car keys before you get drunk. Giving our interlocutors the best reasons not to believe what we say is a good thing to do because it protects our interlocutors from our potential irrationality in evaluating the strength of reasons.

My last project is in epistemology and involves similar considerations. Here, too, I ask: how can we and ought we to cope with certain recognizable limitations in our rationality or self-knowledge? Suppose I think my fundamental epistemic rules might be irrational, for example. How can I change them rationally? If they are coherent, they will simply endorse themselves. And yet the rules I started with as a child, even the fundamental ones, were deeply flawed; somehow I grew out of them, though. I suggest that to find our ways out of this dilemma, we occasionally ought to simply adopt the fundamental epistemic rules of those that we think are epistemically or practically successful and *try them on*. If we come to endorse how things are going for us, epistemically or practically, then we ought to keep

them; but if not, we ought to return to our prior state. This process is analogous to John Stuart Mill's "experiments in living", aimed at solving similar problems in the ethical case (the ultimate idea, I think, goes again back to Plato, though).

Finally, I am interested in what we ought to do when we don't know what we *believe*. Take someone who thinks that some politician lied, for example. If we are conceptually unsophisticated, we won't know exactly what someone who believes that will believe, in more informative terms anyway. Does it require intent to deceive, for example? Yet these differences often matter a lot to the rationality of the belief itself, and to the rationality of other beliefs and actions. Suppose, e.g., we think it involves intent to deceive, but it doesn't. Should we infer that the politician intended to deceive, given what we *think* we believe, or should we not, given what we actually believe? Most of what we can say here is unsatisfying. And because of that, I argue, we ought not to fall into situations like that, if we can avoid them. And the best way to avoid them seems to me to be to *learn philosophy*, to learn the concepts and distinctions that philosophers have worked on for millennia. (That it has not always done so successfully or even nearly so is an important objection to answer.) In this work, then, I will offer an argument to the effect that people ought rationally to learn philosophy in order to overcome these sorts of limitations.