

Eric Sampson

Research Statement

My research so far has been in ethics, epistemology, and their connections. It's now common to speak of both moral and epistemic reasons, (dis)value, virtue/vice, duties, (im)permissibility, (ir)rationality, consequentialism, supererogation, akrasia, and so on. For a long time, the moral and epistemic versions of these concepts were theorized in isolation from one another. Recently, however, philosophers have seen that these domains are intimately connected such that insights from one sub-discipline can shed light on the other. My research continues this trend. Here's a rough outline of how I see that research going in the near future.

1. The Metaphysical, Epistemological, and Semantic Significance of Normative Disagreement

In the immediate future, I'll work on publishing the remaining papers in my dissertation having to do with intractable normative disagreement, especially among philosophers.

- In **“Can We Rationally Believe Conciliationism?”** (under review), I argue that recent attempts to defend Conciliationism—a prominent and fairly skeptical view about how to respond to peer disagreement—against its well-known self-undermining problem are not successful and that the problem is unlikely to be fixed given its structure.
- In **“The Semantic (In)significance of Fundamental Normative Disagreement”** (full draft), I argue that semantic challenges to ordinary normative belief intended to vindicate expressivism or co-reference failure about normative discourse overgeneralize. If they succeed, they would, contrary to what their proponents argue, vindicate global expressivism (i.e., expressivism about *all* apparently descriptive discourse) or global co-reference failure, which is deeply implausible.
- In **“Intellectual Courage in the Face of Intractable Normative Disagreement”** (full draft), I argue that we can sometimes be justified in believing that our normative views are correct even when they are, and have been for generations, the subject of deep disagreement among philosophers. I do this by developing a novel account of intellectual courage and argue that, just as there are practical goods for which it's worth risking your practical welfare, there are intellectual goods for which it's worth risking your intellectual welfare.

I'll also be working on a closely-related paper, which I presented at the Penn Bioethics Bootcamp.

- In **“What Good are Bioethicists if they Disagree So Much?”** (in prep) I argue that attention to the pervasiveness of disagreement in bioethics reveals that bioethicists, as a group, can, at best, be better than most other groups at providing *defensible* views about bioethical questions. A defensible view is one that is fairly well-supported by reasons though not necessarily *best* supported. Bioethicists are not, I argue, especially better than most other groups at discovering the moral (or bioethical) *truth*. This has implications for how bioethicists ought to be regarded when they serve in an advisory role for hospitals and policy-makers.

2. The Source of Normative Reasons

I have a long-standing interest in the source of normative reasons—roughly, the question of whether the reasons there are for agents to act and believe in certain ways depends on their desires or whether their desires ought to conform to the mind-independent reasons there are. What hangs on this debate? For one, the authority of morality. If all our reasons are grounded in facts about what would serve our desires, and we have no desire that would be served by acting morally in some context, then we have no reason to act morally in that context. If, however, our reasons are not grounded in facts about our desires, but exist independent of them, then there is space for morality to provide agents reasons for action. In short, the great “Why be moral?” question is at stake. This debate has stagnated a bit due to its extensive reliance on intuitions about what reasons there are. I hope to advance the debate by moving it to new ground: comparing competing views' ability to account for normative *weight*.

- In **“What if Ideal Agents Disagree?: A Dilemma for Idealizing Reasons Subjectivism”** (accepted at *Philosophical Studies*, pending final review) I present a dilemma for the most popular version of anti-realism about practical normativity: idealizing reasons subjectivism. This is the view that an agent's reasons for action are grounded, not in her actual pro-attitudes, but rather by what her pro-attitudes *would* be if she were fully non-normatively informed and ideally structurally rational. I argue that this view presupposes that, for any agent with an irrational set of attitudes, there is one uniquely rational set that that agent would have if she were to undergo the relevant idealizing process. I argue that this assumption is false and that it raises two puzzles for idealizing subjectivism: one about the *existence* of practical reasons and another about their *weight*. I argue that when idealizing subjectivists try to solve the second puzzle, they confront a dilemma. This second puzzle and the associated dilemma constitutes a powerful, but as-yet unnoticed, difficulty for idealizing subjectivism.

- In **“Can Reasons Subjectivism Account for the Weight of Practical Reasons?”** (in prep) I argue that subjectivism is plausible only to the extent that it can be fitted with a plausible account of the *weight*, or *strength*, of practical reasons. I explore subjectivists’ prospects for formulating a plausible theory of weight by considering the extant proposals. I argue that things do not look promising, and that this fact counts significantly against the plausibility of reasons subjectivism, in both its actual and idealizing incarnations.

3. The Standards of (Practical and Epistemic) Rationality

I’m interested in the standards of rationality, both for its own sake and because it bears a great deal on debates in ethics and epistemology. For instance, whether the standards of rationality are fairly permissive or fairly restrictive has big implications for how we ought to respond to disagreement in philosophy and whether idealizing reasons subjectivism is plausible.

- In **“What Makes Something Rationally Evaluable?”** (full draft) I complete the formula “A mental state is rationally evaluable iff (and because)...” Beliefs and intentions are paradigm cases of rationally evaluable mental states. Hunger pangs, experiences of dizziness, and the pain of a bee sting are paradigmatically not rationally evaluable. What distinguishes these mental states? An obvious answer: the rationally evaluable mental states are held for normative *reasons*. The others are not. I argue that this is false, and that even if it weren’t, it would at best secure *extensional* adequacy, not *explanatory* adequacy. That’s because mental states can be irrational even if they’re well-supported by reasons since well-supported mental states can fail to cohere. Thus, I defend against (many) objections the following formula “A mental state is rationally evaluable iff and because it *could* admit of a reasons-for-which explanation and it has propositional content” (since having propositional content is a necessary condition for something to enter into coherence relations).
- In **“Do the Standards of Rationality Depend on Resource Context?”** (under review) I argue that the answer is no. Poor people sometimes knowingly undermine their own goals by, e.g., playing the lottery or borrowing from loan sharks. When they do, are they acting irrationally? The orthodox answer is “yes”, but defenders of ecological rationality have argued “no”. On their view, the norms of practical reasoning depend on that agent’s resource context (roughly, how rich or poor they are). If this is correct, the orthodox view that the same norms of practical rationality apply to all agents needs revision. I argue that a close look at the empirical work commonly thought to support ecological rationality reveals that these revisions are unmotivated. What’s at stake here? If the ecological view is correct, government agencies attempting to help people escape poverty ought to re-design their incentives so that these agents can rationally respond to them. But if I’m correct, resource-scarce agents *do* act irrationally in the cases under discussion, and we shouldn’t be shy about saying so. We do them no favors by declaring them rational when they undermine their own aims. Instead, we should try to understand the causes of their irrational behavior and seek to intervene in ways that help.

4. Moral and Normative Error Theory

I got interested in ethics and metaethics by reading J.L. Mackie and other error theorists. They wondered how robust realism about morality is compatible with a scientifically respectable view of the world. They thought the two were incompatible. My first two articles, **“Parsimony and the Argument from Queerness”** (*Res Philosophica*) and **“On Believing the Error Theory”** (*Journal of Philosophy*) were defenses of robust realism against error theorists’ arguments of this kind. My fourth publication, **“The Self-Undermining Arguments from Disagreement”** (*Oxford Studies in Metaethics*) was largely inspired by Mackie’s argument from relativity for moral error theory. I continue to be interested in the error theory.

- In **“Moorean Arguments against Normative Error Theory”** (full draft) I defend Moorean arguments against error theory from recent criticisms by error theorists. Normative error theorists think that there are no normative properties. One way for non-error theorists to respond to their arguments is to offer a Moorean argument to the conclusion that the error theory is false. This involves appealing to a highly plausible first-order normative claim as a premise and inferring from it that there is at least one normative truth. Recently, normative error theorists have argued that, while Moorean arguments are *generally* good philosophical arguments, there is something problematic about Moorean arguments against the normative error theory *specifically*. The strategy they employ is to debunk, in one way or another, the Moorean normative premise by offering an explanation for that premise’s plausibility that makes no reference to the *truth* of that premise. I consider these debunking objections and argue that they fail since they either rely on false claims or the Moorean premise can easily be revised to avoid the debunking explanation. If I am correct, then non-error theorists are justified in appealing to Moorean arguments just as they always have. This is good news because Moorean arguments against normative error theory are, in my view, among the most compelling arguments in all of philosophy.