

Research Statement

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My primary research interests lie at the intersection of meta-ethics and philosophy of language from a neo-pragmatist perspective. I have additional interests in the origins of normativity, the philosophy of human rights, and issues in the study of race, gender, and social justice.

In a research project that evolved out of my dissertation research, I am thinking about an under-discussed and under-theorized bifurcation in our use of the term ‘moral’ and its cognates. When talking about morality we might be talking about actual human moral systems (religious or cultural codes of conduct) or we might have in mind any sort of reasoning that seems appropriate to deciding how to act when our actions affect others or, perhaps, things that are valued by others. In fact, we often take actual human moral systems to be both authoritative yet open to criticism on moral grounds. In this way, moral discourse seems to function in as a mechanism both of enforcement and of revolution. The practices of deploying extant moral systems, I want to argue, is ontologically dependent on the more basic practice of moral discourse (in the general sense). By applying the framework for use-based analyses of meaning that I have developed in my dissertation, I hope to show that various pragmatic and epistemic features of moral assertions (in the general sense) make them particularly well suited to be adapted for the use we find for them in cultural and religious codes of conduct.

Another project that I plan to pursue in the coming years is an account of the nature of human rights. Human rights play a central role in our contemporary geo-political order, yet their philosophical foundations have been suspect from the very start. It is contested whether they are best understood as artifacts of positive law or as something more akin to moral claims. The former makes their universality suspect, while the latter raises all the problems of metaethics, including worries about the cultural relativity of morality. Extant essentialist and agreement theories of human rights fail for a variety of reasons. I hope to argue, however, that if we conceive of the international human rights culture as a global discursive practice, we can come to a better understanding of the kind of authority that human rights claims have, the kinds of reasons that can appropriately be given in their defense, and the kind of actions that violations of human rights norms can sanction by developing an account of the pragmatic, epistemic, and inferential structure of human rights claims, legislation, and prescriptions as speech acts.