Research Statement

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The overarching goal of my research is the development of a unified pragmatist epistemology that avoids the typical pitfalls of anti-realism and psychologism, thus preserving the objectivity both of truth and of warrant. My central strategy for vindicating important domains of our beliefs that cannot be justified (nor confuted) by independent evidence is to identify great goods for human life that we can realize only by accepting—that is, committing ourselves to reason and act on the basis of—claims that are epistemically basic in the domains in question. These goods, I argue, pragmatically warrant us in accepting those basic claims, and so, in turn, in accepting that the beliefs they support are justified. My position is a species of *hinge epistemology*, which holds that justification (in many domains, anyway) is founded on general propositions that can't be epistemically warranted. But it differs from other species of this view in explaining the legitimacy of our nevertheless holding these propositions, not in merely psychological or constitutivist terms, but in *normative* ones: by appeal to practical reasons.

Thus far, my research has centrally concerned this epistemological strategy's contributions for traditional problems in theoretical philosophy—especially skepticism about empirical justification—in dialogue with thinkers in the American pragmatist tradition. But a secondary and growing area of my research concerns its potential contributions in metaethics, in dialogue with 20th-century thinkers influenced by existential philosophy (especially Hannah Arendt and Iris Murdoch). And inasmuch as the strategy rests on an appeal to the centrality of hope for knowledge (as well as that of love for morality), my research interacts significantly with issues in the philosophy of emotions as well.

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I came to this epistemological position out of a historical interest in pragmatism, and in particular in how pragmatists have attempted to account for the objectivity of epistemic reasons. Radical skepticism has always troubled me, and I've found congenial the pragmatist rejoinder that skeptical hypotheses may properly be dismissed if they make no difference to practice. But pragmatists have often appealed to dubious positions to buttress this rejoinder. In earlier generations, this was widely recognized—if not that the positions in question were dubious, at least that the pragmatists accepted them!—but recently it has become fashionable to deny this. Thus my interpretive work on pragmatism often aims at showing that some classical pragmatists really were, e.g., anti-realists about the material world:

- In **"Constitution, Causation, and the Final Opinion" (**History of Philosophy Quarterly**, 2023)**, I show that Peirce's suggestion that physical objects cause agreement about them doesn't conflict with his "idealistic" claim that for physical objects to be real *just is* for inquirers ideally to agree about them, since he follows Hume in holding that causal claims don't explain—but merely assert—patterns within phenomenal experience.

- And in **"Peirce's Theory of Perception: A Phenomenalist Interpretation" (under review)**, I contest the suggestion that apparently direct realist elements in Peirce's late theory of perception show that he abandoned his earlier idealist position. Those elements actually rest on Peirce's Berkeleyan account of physical objects as "composite photographs" of the mental images that serve as the immediate objects of our perception.

- Similarly, in **"C. I. Lewis was a Foundationalist After All" (**History of Philosophy Quarterly**, 2020)**, I argued (against every new reading of Lewis from the previous 35 years) that Lewis thought the only adequate response to radical skepticism must rest on a foundationalist construal of apprehensions of sense-data as basic beliefs, and on an analytical phenomenalist theory of empirical meaning to secure these apprehensions' bearing on our objective empirical beliefs. (And in **"C. I. Lewis's Two Pragmatisms," a planned extension of a dissertation chapter**, I'll argue that Lewis's apparently proto-Quinean pragmatic theory of the *a priori* is consistent with this phenomenalist foundationalism.)

But phenomenalism is a non-starter: it renders skepticism about other minds intractable, and it doesn't answer skepticism about our empirical beliefs, since it can't adequately justify the validity of induction.

Relativism about truth is a non-starter, too. And as I argued in **"Prospects for an Objective Pragmatism" (edited volume, 2017)**, psychologism about reasons is just as unpromising. What's fundamentally problematic in relativism is its suggestion that our beliefs are accountable to epistemic standards that are merely parochial rather than objective. But if our beliefs could only ever be grounded in contingent features of our psychology, not objective reasons, then this problematic feature would be preserved even if there is in fact a unique truth of the matter, or even if all human communities should in fact agree about what it is. More recent work builds on this anti-psychologistic theme:

- In **"Sellars's Core Critique of C. I. Lewis: Against the Equation of Aboutness with Givenness" (**_Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie_**, online 2022)**, I offered (among other things) a novel account of the essence of Sellars's famous "Myth of the Given." It consists in falling prey to psychologism about content: thinking that standing in a merely factual psychological relationship to a property suffices for awareness _that_ the object has that property.

- And in **"Of Hopes and Hinges: Peirce, Epistemic Constraints on Truth, and the Normative Foundations of Inquiry" (R&R)**, I develop the core of the positive pragmatist alternative I endorse. I criticize assimilation of our basic commitments in Peirce's epistemology to Wittgensteinian hinges. I argue that, for Peirce, such commitments are distinguished not by their psychological fixity, but by serving as a distinctive kind of _hopes_: we perceive the possibility of their truth favorably, partly because there is no positive evidence against them, but chiefly because it's only if we accept them that we can conduct inquiry in a particular domain and achieve necessary components of the human good. I argue that this appeal to hopes allows us both to differentiate these basic commitments from beliefs (because this favorable perception is different from feeling that the claim is true) as well as to explain why the norms governing them differ from those governing hopes generally (in particular, why they may legitimately guide our actions when hopes generally ought not do so).

This is the basis of the pragmatist account of empirical justification—and, especially, response to various forms of skepticism about the external world—that I develop. **"Inferentialism, Modal Anti-Realism, and the Problem of Affection" (edited volume, forthcoming)** offers an in-depth critique of Kant's and Sellars's modal anti-realism, but the central goal is a critique of their transcendental idealism as semantically self-undermining: if the form of the world did not correspond to the necessary structures of our concepts, then we could never coherently say so, since the very effort to describe the world would project onto it the structure we intend to deny that it has. My central concern, though, is with the proper answer, not to Kantian, but to Cartesian skepticism:

- **"Sellars's Two Responses to Skepticism" (under review)** begins with the interpretive claim that Sellars endorsed two independent responses to such skepticism: a transcendental argument from semantic externalism, and a purely pragmatic argument that reliable perceptual faculties are necessary for effective agency. I argue (drawing on discussions of the McKinsey Paradox) that the transcendental argument fails, while the pragmatic argument is promising.

- And in **"Perceptual Justification and the Demands of Effective Agency" (minor revisions, **_Synthese_**)**, I offer a full defense of (a modified version of) the latter argument. I take the great good of control over our empirical circumstances to render our goal of effective agency reasonable. But only if our perceptual beliefs are likely to be true—and only if we accept that this is so, assuming it as a premise for inference and a guide for action—will the success of our actions be due to our effective agency, not mere luck. Since we're warranted in taking the necessary means to our reasonable ends, we're warranted in accepting that our perceptual beliefs are generally justified, and so that skepticism about empirical justification is

false. (This is a "skeptical solution," but it's valuable nonetheless in enabling us to show, to the skeptic's satisfaction, the reasonability of our ordinary practices.)

In the long run, I plan for this research to culminate in two book projects. One, *Pragmatism and Objectivity: A Critical History*, will expand on my work on Peirce, Lewis, and Sellars to offer a historical survey of pragmatist approaches to epistemology, motivating the normative hinge epistemology I favor against anti-realist, naturalist, externalist, and other pragmatist alternatives. The other, *Regulative Hopes: A Hinge Epistemology*, will defend this proposal as a piece of substantive epistemology: analyzing the distinctive sort of hope to which it centrally appeals, justifying its presuppositions with respect to *a priori* reasoning and the epistemology of value, and identifying its implications for the rationality of our basic commitments concerning such domains as the external world, other minds, and morality.

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As this last remark suggests, like pragmatists such as Lewis and Sellars (as well as their hero Kant), I'm interested in this pragmatist epistemology for the contributions it can make not only in theoretical philosophy, but also in practical philosophy. My first refereed article, **"Sellars' Metaethical Quasi-Realism" (***Synthese***, 2020)**, offered a clear, unified reading of Sellars's (difficult and then-overlooked) metaethics. One flaw I noted was that, despite his attempt to provide for moral truths, Sellars failed to give an argument for the rationally obligatory character of the moral commitment he identifies as basic. (And in **"How (Not) to Be a 'Moral Anti-Anti-Realist': On McDowell's Metaethics," a planned extension of a conference paper**, I'll argue that McDowell's Wittgensteinian, quietist metaethical proposal fails for a similar reason: its defense of our ethical commitments might extend equally to obviously parochial commitments, e.g., to norms of etiquette.) In other work in progress, then, I draw on 20th-century figures beyond the pragmatist tradition, exploring arguments that might enable us to ground the rationally obligatory character of core moral commitments—and especially to construe them as hopes of the distinctive sort Peirce identifies.

- One ambitious proposal is Levinas's suggestion that only recognition of other persons as reason-giving for me can ground the meaningfulness of my thought. I think the argument is *too* ambitious, but it has the merit of displaying that the aim to satisfy an epistemic standard that transcends our capacity for verification is implicitly involved in any communal inquiry. I argue in **"What is the Practical Value of the Concept of Truth?" (planned extension of conference paper)** that this confutes Rorty's contention that the idea that inquiry aims at truth is pragmatically empty: rather, aiming at truth commits one to beginning inquiry from a place of acceptance without evidence, paradigmatically in receiving the testimony of others.

- A more modest, but more plausible proposal for showing the rational non-optionality of moral commitments lies in some reflections of Arendt's on the nature of personhood. In **"Hannah Arendt, Human Rights, and the Priority of Community" (under review)**, I present a nuanced reading of Arendt's critique of human rights on which Arendt maintains neither just the trivial claim that rights depend on political communities for their enforcement, nor the deeply dubious claim that moral rights depend on political communities to exist. I think Arendt's critique actually centers on the claim that our capacity for communal participation is metaphysically and axiologically *prior* to our bearing rights to liberty, property, etc., and that *that's* because, as she remarks in "On the Nature of Totalitarianism," "[f]or our individuality … we depend entirely on other people." It's only because I belong to a community governed by norms binding equally on all members that my speech is meaningful, my possibilities of action are safeguarded, and I am recognized and held accountable for what I do. And without that, Arendt suggests, I could never become a concrete self or forge a particular character at all. I plan to explore Arendt's argument further in my own voice, since if sound, it would yield a pragmatic argument of just the sort I'm looking for: inasmuch as becoming a concrete self is an all-important good for human life, then if I can achieve that good only if I accept that I am in community with genuine others and subject to norms that constrain how I may

permissibly treat them, it will follow that, pragmatically, I ought to accept this. The argument would thus supply the foundation of a pragmatist epistemology of other minds and morality.

- In **"What's Loving about the 'Loving Gaze'? – Accuracy and Positive Valence in Murdoch's Account of Attention" (R&R)**, I argue that the sort of loving attention Iris Murdoch identifies as the characteristic mark of the moral agent essentially tends toward viewing other persons, not more positively (Nancy Snow's sophisticated interpretation along these lines notwithstanding), but more accurately: freeing oneself from selfish biases to recognize their dignity and potential as rational agents, but also to assess their progress toward that potential with strict accuracy. Since this sort of attention—recognition of others' worth as rational knowers and agents, and evaluation of their behavior in this light—is precisely that to which our Arendtian "right to have rights" lays claim, the basic moral commitment that the good of concrete self-development arguably renders pragmatically reasonable turns out to be the commitment to a particular sort of love for other persons.