

## Research Statement

Seyed Yarandi

### My Current Research

My current research focuses on the practice of dissuasion, i.e., the intersubjective epistemic activity whose aim is to change another subject's belief. This is a familiar practice that we witness almost every day around us, e.g., when a conservative attempts to change the mind of a liberal in a conversation. In my research, I aim to explore the following questions. Does the practice of dissuasion express any significant intersubjective epistemic state, e.g., the state of disagreement (i.e., a state in which the involved parties hold conflicting attitudes)? Can we theorize the practice of dissuasion as a series of *perlocutionary acts*<sup>1</sup>? If yes, is performing a dissuasive perlocutionary act governed by a specific norm? In performing a dissuasive perlocutionary act directed against the belief that *p*, should a subject only limit herself to offering a reason against *p*?

I am also interested in the relevance of the practice of dissuasion to some metaethical questions. In fact, this research project has grown out of my dissertation in which I study moral semantics and moral disagreement. Some of the relevant questions are as follows. Can a moral relativist legitimately perform a dissuasive perlocutionary act directed against another subject's moral beliefs? Is there a difference between dissuading from a normative belief and dissuading from a non-normative belief? Can we legitimately use reasons for or against holding a belief (sometimes called *the wrong kind of reasons*) to make a dissuasive perlocutionary act directed against a moral or normative belief?

Despite its significance, the practice of dissuasion is an underexplored subject in philosophy. This is partly due to a prevalent skepticism about the possibility of theorizing about the nature of perlocutionary acts in general. My project, therefore, has a bigger significance than just explaining the practice of dissuasion. It seeks to show that we can develop a systematic theory of perlocutionary acts like dissuasion similar to illocutionary acts like assertion. Moreover, it aims to demonstrate such a project is not only possible but fruitful as it has interesting consequences for different areas of philosophy like metaethics and epistemology.

My project has an interdisciplinary aspect to it. Unlike philosophers, psychologists have produced a vast literature on different aspects of our practice of persuasion, dissuasion, and convincing. Though such studies can never replace a proper philosophical exploration of the subject, by relying on their contributions it is possible to develop an empirically informed conception of dissuasion.

I am currently working on three journal articles related to my research project. The first article, "*Dissuasive Attempts and Epistemic Expectations*", argues that the notion of perlocutionary acts

---

<sup>1</sup> That is what we do by saying something. A perlocutionary act is individuated by the impact that it aims to bring about. For instance, by uttering a sentence, I can aim to convince, scare, or inspire. Note that one can perform a single perlocutionary act while performing different illocutionary acts, e.g., while asserting a proposition or asking a question.

provides us with the basis for understanding the practice of dissuasion. Then, I investigate whether there is a norm for dissuasive perlocutionary acts. I suggest that a subject must not perform a dissuasive perlocutionary act without having a particular type of epistemic expectation that I call *an opposing attitude*, i.e., the expectation from her epistemic peers to drop the type of belief that she targets in her dissuasion. In my second article, “*The Typology of Dissuasive Perlocutionary Acts*”, I focus on the differences between the types of dissuasive perlocutionary acts. I begin by arguing that the activity of dissuasion always involves exchanging reasons. However, that does not imply that all dissuasive perlocutionary acts against the belief that *p* provide a reason against it. To show this, I discuss linguistic exchanges in which in addition to providing reasons, the dissuader asserts propositions that do not provide any evidence against her targeted belief. But asserting them helps her to dissuade the other subject. So, we need to distinguish between *reason-based dissuasive perlocutionary acts* (which communicate a reason against the targeted belief) and *auxiliary dissuasive perlocutionary acts* (which do not communicate such a reason). Then, I taxonomize reason-based dissuasive perlocutionary acts based on the kind of reasons that they provide. In my third article, “*The Activity of Disagreement: its Nature and Epistemic Significance*”, I explore what it means to engage in an activity of disagreement, sometimes colloquially referred to as “a dispute”. According to a common conception, a dispute involves no more than expressing conflicting attitudes. The paper provides an example-driven argument against this conception of the activity of disagreement. As an alternative, I suggest that a dispute is a series of dissuasive attempts in which the involved parties express their epistemic expectations.

## **Future Directions for Research**

I plan to start two different research projects on two topics: doxastic wronging and Avicenna’s two-way distinction between *qua matter* and *qua genus* modes of conceptualization. I shall briefly explain each project.

### **The First Project:**

Can we wrong each other with our beliefs? Does a white supremacist wrong Black folx just because he holds racist beliefs? Is a psychiatrist morally criticisable for what she mistakenly believes about the credibility of her client? A well-established orthodoxy in analytic philosophy answers firmly in the negative to these questions. Two reasons are often cited for this orthodox view. First, morally criticizing a person for her beliefs presupposes that forming a belief is not just a matter of properly responding to evidence. The subject should also be sensitive to relevant moral considerations. But in forming a belief, the one and only aim is to capture the truth, and as far as truth is concerned, moral considerations are simply irrelevant (Shah 2006, Williams 1973). Second, wronging can happen only by voluntary actions over which we have proper control. Beliefs belong to the realm of involuntary states, and a subject cannot be morally criticized for what she does not have control over (Keller 2004, Gendler 2011). As a result, *doxastic wronging*,

i.e., wronging through beliefs, is an ill-formed notion, and there is no room for *doxastic moral responsibility*, i.e., an agent's moral responsibility about her beliefs or other cognitive states.

For my project, I aim to contribute to the small but growing camp of philosophers who reject the well-established orthodoxy and defend the possibility of doxastic wronging (Basu 2019, Basu 2018, Schroeder 2018, Basu & Schroeder 2018). I will explore the nature of our doxastic moral responsibility and its practical implications. The subject invites interesting questions at both abstract and more concrete levels. Among them, there are three questions on which I will focus in my research. At the more abstract level, first, I aim to investigate in which way moral considerations are relevant to the aim and formation of belief. Second, I want to explore what a defensible account of our responsibility for our beliefs (what I called doxastic moral responsibility) would look like. At a more concrete level, I will investigate the practical significance of holding others morally responsible for their beliefs. To this end, I will focus on a bioethical question: how can a mental health practitioner wrong her patient with her beliefs?

## **The Second Project**

One of the most perplexing aspects of Avicenna's philosophy is his distinctions among different modes of conceptualization. Among them, a distinction has proven to be of long-lasting significance for both the post-Avicenna tradition and for some contemporary Persian scholars of his philosophy (Soleymani Amiri 2017, Ghavem Safari 2010, Mesbah 1990). That is his two-way distinction between *qua matter* and *qua genus* modes of conceptualization. To conceptualize, say animality, *qua matter* is to grasp the essential elements of animality in a concept without any additional feature or condition. By contrast, to conceptualize animality *qua genus* is to grasp its essential elements in a concept alongside other features and conditions. Avicenna does not have a fixed name for the distinction between these two, but for ease of exposition, I call it *the two-way distinction*.

Despite the significance of the two-way distinction, it has rarely been the subject of an independent study in the Western scholarship on Avicenna (Benevich 2019, McGinnis 2007). The bulk of the contemporary Western scholarship on Avicenna's discussion of the modes of conceptualization concerns his tripartite distinction regarding essence (i.e., his distinction between *essence qua essence*, *essence qua universal*, and *essence qua embeddedness in particulars*) and the two-way distinction is mainly discussed in connection with it. However, understanding the two-way distinction is essential in comprehending a range of Avicenna's arguments and the views of other philosophers in the post-Avicenna era.

In my research, I pursue two related aims. First, I plan to provide a textually well-informed analysis of Avicenna's conception of the two-way distinction. He discusses the distinction at some length in both the first book of *Būrhan* and the fifth book of *Ilāhīyyāt* in *The Cure*. He also uses the distinction to address a series of questions and puzzles in his logic, physics, and psychology. A plausible interpretation of his conception requires a careful study of all his discussions. Moreover, I aim to study the connection between this notion and Avicenna's approach to *why-demonstration* (i.e., a demonstration that provides a causal explanation of why its conclusion is true.). For Avicenna, why-demonstrations play a key role in our scientific

inquiries. My project, therefore, can potentially shed light on his philosophy of science and epistemology.