

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH INTERESTS

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My writing sample (“In Search of Direct Realist Abstractionism”) stresses the importance of philosophy of perception and theory of concepts for dealing with a traditional problem in epistemology (the question of foundationalism vs. anti-foundationalism). I see this piece as a cornerstone for future research, which also seeks to relate questions in epistemology to topics which are not traditionally epistemological.

First, a quick note about the epistemological relevance of some of my other completed papers. Although usually a question in the philosophy of mind or action theory, the question of whether and how we choose our beliefs is also connected to questions about epistemic justification. Whether we control our acts of inquiry and the belief contents resulting from them partially determines whether epistemic justification requires cognitive access to evidence, or merely an externally-evaluable reliability. In my paper with Gregory Salmieri (“How We Choose Our Beliefs”), we argue that that externalist critics of “doxastic voluntarism” are mistaken, and that there is an epistemically robust form of control over our beliefs. In a separate paper (“The Elusiveness of Doxastic Compatibilism”), I consider attempts by internalist epistemologists to defend of compatibilism about belief-control. I argue that such attempts fail and that one must either embrace externalism or a libertarian account of voluntary belief-formation.

My current works in progress take these papers as points of departure. The first derives from a point in my foundationalism paper, where I mention that anti-foundationalist views of justification derive plausibility from the need to rule out skeptical alternatives; anti-foundationalists say that these alternatives are ruled out only by invoking knowledge that epistemically basic beliefs should not presuppose. I suggest that this view depends on a permissive account of what is epistemically possible, but that such possibilities can be constrained by a burden of proof requirement. In my new project, I explain how this requirement grows out of recent internalist work on epistemic modality. In particular, taking a point about the individuation of belief states in “How We Choose Our Beliefs,” I suggest that epistemic possibilities are determinate only when they bear an inferential relationship to evidence, and that shouldering the burden of proof for epistemic modals depends on pointing to the presence of supporting evidence, not recognizing the absence of contradicting evidence.

My second project develops an analogy between the advocacy of the analytic/synthetic distinction and the representational theory of perception. Both involve a focus on isolated characteristics which serve as proxies for the awareness of greater wholes (analytic definitions in relation to whole concepts, mental images in relation to whole entities) and both lead to forms of doubt about the corresponding wholes (contingency about synthetic truths, and external world skepticism). I argue that just as we can solve external world skepticism by abandoning representationalism about perception and recognizing that we can directly perceive objects (even we do so by means of a process with characteristic qualia), we can adopt a view of concepts on which they refer to all characteristics of their referents (even if the defining characteristic is a productive means of generating inferences).

In future research projects, I also hope to explore the relationship between perception, theory of concepts, and inductive generalization. In line with other direct realists about perception, I think that some causal relationships can be directly perceived, and that this provides the basis for a form of inductive foundationalism which avoids Hume’s regress problems. Ultimately I hope to use all of this to isolate the causal relationships most salient to value properties, and to sketch a version of normative foundationalism needed for value naturalism.