I. Research

I am primarily interested in practical philosophy broadly construed, where that includes any question having to do with human agency and the norms that govern it. My work usually starts from some rather basic, intuitive idea that I find attractive in Kant’s ethics. My hope is to invite into the conversation any reader who feels the force of that intuitive idea, whether she identifies her own approach as Kantian or not. For example, I was motivated to write two early articles on the moral status of children because I felt the force of the strong anti-paternalism that is characteristic of Kant’s ethics. How can a strong anti-paternalist justify something as supposedly natural as paternalism towards children? (See “What is a Child?” and “Childhood and Personhood.”) My more general interest in rigorism and nonideal theory stemmed from my attraction to Kant’s ideal of moral virtue as adherence to principle, “come what may.” How can one who is committed to this ideal justify the actions she feels forced to undertake as necessary evils? (See “Compliance, Complicity, and the Nature of Nonideal Circumstances” and “Kantian Rigorism and Mitigating Circumstances.”)

The challenge in each of these articles was to do justice to both idealistic and pragmatic impulses, without appealing to an unsystematic hybrid of Kantian and consequentialist commitments. I found that in order to do this, I had to think very hard about a much more fundamental idea in Kant’s ethics, namely that the moral value of an action depends, somehow, on its intrinsic character rather than on its results. Does one who feels the force of this idea have to reject the equally natural thought that the right action, whatever it is, has to do some good in the world? (See “Three Conceptions of Action in Moral Theory.”) My answer is no. There is a non-consequentialist sense in which right action has to do some good. It has to contribute to realizing the ideal that is already implicit in its character, where this is different from producing an independently defined result. But it can only do this if certain background constitutive conditions hold.

The most controversial feature of the positive view that emerges from these papers is my claim that the principles that make an action right are constitutive of it, in the same way that the principles that define practices and games are constitutive of the actions falling under them. Because practices and games are normally established by convention, this can make it sound as if it commits me to the view that moral principles are conventional. But my claim (or at least my conjecture, inspired by Kant) is rather that morality is a necessary practice, a game we have to play. As I see it, one of the fundamental tasks of practical philosophy is to explain why this is so. My post-tenure project bears on this task, though not in an immediately recognizable way. I will explain that connection shortly.

The project is on inclination and its role in action. At the time I started writing on this topic, I was not trying to engage with foundational questions. I was simply motivated by yet another intuition that is prominent in Kant’s ethics. This is the intuition that agency involves self-government, and that self-government involves exercising some kind of authority over our inclinations. Anyone who feels the force of this picture has to confront
the question, “How are we related to our inclinations, such that we can exercise authority over them, and such that, when we are doing so, we are thereby governing ourselves?” In thinking about this, I came to identify an important question for action theory, namely, “Are we related to our inclinations as things that happen to us, or as our doings?” The ancients were centrally concerned with something like this question, but it has become clear to me that contemporary action theorists tend to gloss over it. Part of the problem is that they rely on a deeply ambiguous concept of desire, one that both does and does not refer to the motives that require governing in the context of autonomy. (See “What are Theories of Desire Theories of?”) The deeper reason is that most contemporary theorists of mind and action rely on a causal/functionalist approach, one that is not addressed to the agent’s perspective. I believe the concepts associated with self-government, including the will/inclination distinction as such, only become relevant from the agent’s perspective. I also believe the philosophy of action can and should be addressed directly to that perspective, rather than to the perspective of the philosophical social scientist. One aim of my book is to provide a partial defense of this underrepresented methodology, which I take from Kant, Rawls, and Korsgaard. (See my commentary on Bratman, “Let’s J!”)

In “The Nature of Inclination,” I argue that inclinations are neither happenings nor doings. That dichotomy is false, in that it does not make room for the idea of a passion, a form of motivation with respect to which we are distinctively passive. In order to explain what an inclination is, qua passion, I argue that we have to see our inclinations as attributable to a motivational source that is in some sense “us” and in some sense external to us. I call this the “inner animal,” and I conceive of it as an essentially unreflective, but still agential capacity that is not to be identified with the capacity to which we attribute our actions. In my (very condensed and incomplete) book draft, I call this the “reactive self,” and I distinguish it from the “reflective self.” Although something like this distinction is arguably evident in the work of Plato, Aristotle, and Kant, it is absent from the two most prominent conceptions of “desire” in the contemporary literature. These I call the “brute force view” and the “practical thinking view.” Neither of these views makes room for a deep distinction between our reactions and our actions generally. I think this is a serious error, one that leaves philosophical puzzles unresolved, because it reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the basic problem we face as reflective animals who have to act.

The real challenge of the project is to explain how we can be aware of this duality, from the agent’s perspective, while still maintaining a coherent conception of ourselves and our actions. (I made a rather tortured, first-pass attempt at this question in “Foregrounding Desire: A Defense of Kant’s Incorporation Thesis.”) The challenge on this front is to avoid both a crude dualism and a simplistic monism, each of which is deeply problematic. One attractive alternative to both dualism and monism is the “constitution model,” according to which the reactive and reflective selves are functionally defined constituents of a unified practical order (Korsgaard, Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, Integrity). In the book draft, I argue that although the constitution model represents a sort of ideal that we should strive towards, it cannot be taken as a description of the basic problem we face as reflective animals. The reactive self, on my view, exercises an instinctive mode of agency, and so cannot govern itself reflectively as a participant in a constitutional order. Hence
the picture of our relation to our inclinations has to be even less familiar, and perhaps less intelligible, than the constitutional picture. It has to be a bit more like Plato’s “many-headed monster” than his law governed polity. This is to be expected, I argue, because being a reflective animal is not like being anything else.

Although I differ from Korsgaard (or from a natural misreading of Korsgaard) on this point, my deepest claims provide indirect support for her account of the foundation of morality. Korsgaard claims that morality is inescapable because acting is inescapable, and acting is structured by constitutive norms. That it is so structured, she argues, stems from the fact that the basic practical problem we face as human beings is one of having to constitute ourselves. Many of those who reject Korsgaard’s view find this last idea unintuitive, and so regard the argument as a whole as question begging. I now see my project as providing largely independent support for Korsgaard’s conception. In the book draft, I argue that to have an inclination to φ is to be drawn out of yourself, in such a way as to make it necessary for you to reintegrate. Will power is the capacity to get and keep hold of yourself, so that you can engage with your inclination on its merit, as if it were simply an argument, or a proposal to the legislature. Because my argument takes shape primarily from puzzles internal to the concept of inclination (as something that “inclines without determining the will”), rather than from a prior commitment to Korsgaard’s theory, I believe it will make a genuine contribution both to our understanding of ourselves and to the justification of fundamental practical norms.

II. Teaching

The most valuable pedagogical lesson I have learned during my years of teaching at Stanford is that teaching is not performance; it is communication. The more I focus on connecting with the students, where that involves understanding where they are coming from, the more effective I am as a teacher. A precondition of building that connection is an atmosphere of trust. Students have to feel they are safe to tell me where they are coming from. They have to be assured I will not judge or embarrass them in front of others. At the same time, they do not want to be coddled or babied. They set high standards for themselves and they want me to set high standards for them. They want to be treated like the intelligent grown ups they (almost) are. So the challenge is to create a safe, comfortable class environment while making it clear to them that I demand excellence.

The main way to create an atmosphere of trust in the classroom is to create a sense of community. By learning each student’s name (or sincerely trying to, in my course of over 100), I show them that they are not anonymous observers. I encourage them to learn one another’s names, and to interact directly with one another in class and via online forums. My aim at every moment is to convey the sense that our class is a “we,” a community of inquiry. As for demanding excellence – my overall intellectual aim is to cultivate reflectiveness, along with the ability, through speech and writing, to be reflective along with others. I tell students this requires “thinking in slow motion,” focusing on concepts and assumptions that seem clear and obvious, and asking just how clear and obvious they really are. This requires a patient intellectual disposition, something I tell them it is increasingly hard to cultivate in our culture. One of the most helpful pieces of advice I
can give my students is to try to speak and write in short sentences. By making the effort to shorten their sentences, they naturally impose discipline on their thinking. I also try to encourage them to take a “growth mindset” rather than a “fixed mindset” with regard to their philosophical abilities (Dweck 2012). There is impressive evidence that this is particularly crucial for members of underrepresented minorities.