RESEARCH STATEMENT

ZOË A. JOHNSON KING

Some people try to act morally rightly; they want to act rightly, they think about what this requires of them (either on a particular occasion, or in general), and they do the things that they think are right, *because* they are right. I think that this is all good. But other philosophers disagree. My dissertation and further research therefore focuses on exploring the nature and defending the value of trying to act morally rightly *de dicto*. Three papers on this topic form my dissertation, and I have begun work on three more.

In the short term, I aim to publish the three papers mentioned in my dissertation abstract:

1. *Praiseworthy Motivations* (Thesis: If it is praiseworthy to be motivated by the right-making features, then then it is also praiseworthy to be motivated by rightness *de dicto*).
2. *Accidentally Doing the Right Thing* (Thesis: Someone non-accidentally does the right thing, and her action thus has moral worth, only if she was trying to act morally rightly).
3. *We Can Have Our Buck and Pass It, Too* (Thesis: An act's moral rightness is a good reason to perform it, and its right-making features are also good reasons to perform it).

I am also currently working on five new papers; three developing themes from the dissertation, and two beginning new projects. Here is a little about each of them:

"How to Be a Moral Fetishist" continues my defense of the value of trying to act morally rightly. I address the popular complaint that this constitutes an objectionable "moral fetishism". First, I suggest that many existing depictions of people trying to act rightly are caricatures displaying only the most odd or unnatural versions of this kind of motivation. Second, I argue that there is a kind of motivation by moral rightness that is extremely widespread and not at all odd or unnatural. I argue that, when we face a conflict between moral values and respond by deliberating about the relative importance of these values, this can only be explained by our being motivated to *strike the right balance* between the different values at stake. I then argue that this motivation – wanting to strike the right balance between the different values at stake – just *is* a species of wanting to act rightly. That is because moral rightness just *is* the property that an action has when it appropriately responds to all of the morally significant features of the situation. So being motivated to strike the right balance is one way for moral rightness *per se* to be the object of one's motivation. If this kind of motivation constitutes "moral fetishism", then we are all moral fetishists.

"Don't Know, Don't Care?" concerns responsibility for moral ignorance: ignorance of facts about which acts are right or wrong, what things are valuable or disvaluable, what obligations we owe to others, and so on. The existing literature on this topic falls into two camps. Some take a "voluntarist" approach to thinking about moral responsibility and use it to argue that we are rarely blameworthy for moral ignorance. Others take a "quality-of-will" approach and use it to argue that we are often, and perhaps always, blameworthy for moral ignorance. I take a third line: I argue that the quality-of-will approach, properly understood, does not entail that we are often blameworthy for moral ignorance. What it entails is that we are blameworthy for all ignorance that involves failure to care adequately about what is in fact morally valuable. It is unclear what proportion of moral ignorance meets this description. I then argue that it is possible to care adequately about the considerations that make an act wrong, while still failing to realize that it is wrong. I offer three cases to illustrate this point. I close by considering the kinds of caring responses that can reasonably be demanded of people, arguing that philosophers should shift our theoretical focus to this topic.

"Higher-Order Uncertainty" is about trying to act rightly when you aren't sure what the right thing to do is. The paper presents a puzzle for those who think – as I, and the majority of decision theorists, usually do – that the correct response to practical, moral, or epistemic uncertainty is to maximize expected value. The puzzle arises in addressing *higher-order uncertainty* about whether the correct response to uncertainty is, indeed, to maximize expected value. The puzzle arises for people, like me, who are fairly confident that the correct response to uncertainty is to maximize expected value, but also have some credence in a so-called "externalist" theory that holds that uncertainty is irrelevant to what one should do and uncertain agents should simply do whatever is in fact most valuable. (Versions of this position have been defended by Liz Harman and Brian Weatherson.) If the correct response to higher-order uncertainty is to maximize expected value, then we must find a way to incorporate our credence in externalism into our decision-making. However, I argue, there seems to be no good way to do this. The strategies I consider either fail to generate clear higher-order verdicts, or render an agent's credence in externalism normatively irrelevant, in the sense that it can never make any difference to what she should do. I first spell out this puzzle in the terms of standard decision theory, and then show that it has analogues in metaethics and in epistemology. I then offer three possible conclusions to draw from the puzzle.

"The Trouble with Standards of Proof" argues that there are deep and intractable epistemological problems with the canonical way in which legal theorists defend our choice of a standard of proof in criminal trials. The canonical approach posits an ideal ratio between two or more of the four possible trial outcomes (i.e. false conviction, false acquittal, true conviction, true acquittal), and then argues that a certain standard of proof is most likely to yield this ratio in the long run. But, I argue, we cannot apply any possible version of this approach without first determining the distributions of "apparent guilt" (i.e. the degree to which it is reasonable to believe a defendant guilty based on the trial evidence) among both the genuinely guilty and the genuinely innocent defendants in our trial system. And, I argue, it is impossible to determine those two distributions. I argue that this problem is considerably broader than has previously been recognized in the legal literature, and that optimism is unwarranted given information about the prevalence of misleading evidence and juror biases in our trial system. I then discuss three possible responses to the problem, arguing that none is fully satisfactory.

"Standing Up For Blame" (co-authored with Mariam Kazanjian) argues that philosophical accounts of blame fail to take adequate account of the way in which social standing affects our blaming practices. We argue that existing philosophical accounts of the so-called "standing" to blame confuse two notions. On the one hand, there is *moral* standing: the right to judge that someone has acted wrongly. We argue that there are no restrictions on moral standing, and that anyone may judge that another has acted wrongly provided that they have sufficient evidence to do so. On the other hand, there is *social* standing: the social capital that enables people to outwardly express the judgment that someone has acted wrongly, and receive uptake – i.e. agreement, the shared opprobrium of others in the social group, punishment of the offender – rather than disagreement, disbelief, or criticism of the person who is expressing blame. We then argue that these observations support a philosophical conception of blame that is far more minimal than most existing accounts. Existing accounts of blame typically make "hot" or "angry" reactions a necessary condition on genuine blame. Focusing on case studies involving victims of domestic violence and other forms of serious and prolonged abuse, we argue that this is exclusionary, as it ignores the blaming reactions of those who – owing to a lack of social standing – can do little more than privately judge that they have been wronged.

Drafts of "The Trouble with Standards of Proof" and of "Higher-Order Uncertainty" are available on my website. I am happy to provide drafts of "How to Be a Moral Fetishist" or of "Don't Know, Don't Care?" upon request. "Standing Up for Blame" is in the early stages and a shareable draft does not yet exist, but I am very happy to discuss it.

Once these seven papers are all completed and submitted for publication, I look forward to beginning some more new projects. Here are a handful of rough preliminary ideas for what I would like to write next:

1. A paper on the value of conceiving of oneself as *trying* to do something, rather than simply as doing it. This paper will argue that there is nothing wrong with promising to try to do something rather than simply to do it, and furthermore that promising to try can be more appropriate and respectful when there are salient potential obstacles to success. I will then argue that in moral cases there are typically salient *epistemic* obstacles; one may try to be fair, or to promote well-being, or similar, but be prevented from doing so by one's false beliefs about what (e.g.) fairness or well-being consist in. In these cases it is perfectly appropriate, and not a cop-out, to think of oneself as trying.
2. A paper on modesty. This paper will argue, *contra* the existing consensus, that this virtue does not require us to have false beliefs about our own accomplishments. Rather, it requires us to have *true* beliefs about the role luck has played in leading us to these accomplishments, and *true* beliefs about the relatively small differences between our accomplishments and those of others (in the grand scheme of things), coupled with a sincere commitment to continued self-improvement.
3. A paper on hypocrisy. This paper will argue that there is nothing wrong with hypocrisy: i.e., there is nothing blameworthy simply about applying moral standards – whether correct or incorrect – to others that one fails to apply to oneself. What is blameworthy, on my view, is (a) acting morally wrongly and (b) failing to live up to one's own moral standards. One should not blame others for wrongdoing that one engages in oneself, but that is because one should not engage in wrongdoing. And one should not both φ and blame others for φ-ing, but that is because one should not do things one takes to be morally wrong. In both cases, blaming other wrongdoers is the okay part.
4. A paper defending a view that I call "blame prioritarianism". This paper will challenge the view that we must blame people equally for equal wrongdoing in order to regulate our blaming practices in a manner that respects the equal moral dignity of persons. I will argue that this approach ignores the fact that we are in non-ideal circumstances, in which blame is already unequally and unfittingly distributed. Members of some privileged social groups enjoy less than their fair share of fitting blame for equal wrongdoing, while members of some marginalized social groups endure more than their fair share. I will argue that it better respects the equal moral dignity of persons for us to engage in corrective justice by distributing blame along prioritarian lines.
5. A paper defending a view that I call "radical internalism". This paper will argue that an internalist view of central epistemic concepts like knowledge, rationality, and justification is the best view to take under circumstances of widespread social oppression. It has become popular to think that the most "useful" versions of epistemic concepts under circumstances of widespread social oppression are externalist concepts, as these allow us to say, for instance, that someone who has in fact detected a sexist tone in her interlocutor's voice need not reduce her credence that the tone was sexist in the face of widespread denial by this interlocutor and by her apparent peers. This is supposed to tell in favor of externalism. I will argue that, since we all occupy complex social positions in networks of relative privilege and/or marginalization and nobody is well-positioned to recognize every form of oppression, we should instead adopt an internalist outlook in order to remain open to learning from others and thus to avoid sticking to oppressive guns. Moreover, I will argue, in seeking the most *useful* concepts we must not just look for concepts that entail claims we like the sound of, but for concepts that actually tell people how to form, maintain or revise their doxastic states. Since externalism notoriously fails to provide action-guidance, this tells in favor of internalism.