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Areas of Specialization

Philosophy of Mind, Moral Philosophy

Areas of Concentration

Philosophy of Action, Philosophy of Biology, Philosophy of Science, Bioethics

Education

Harvard University, Ph.D. candidate in Philosophy 2001-present, Ph.D. expected 2010
Stanford University, M.A. in Philosophy 2001, B.A. in Philosophy with Honors 2001

Dissertation

Title: Reasoning as Action

Abstract: Reasoning is a process by which individuals can acquire or abandon attitudes on the basis of other attitudes to which they are rationally related. Many philosophers take there to be prescriptions associated with reasoning, yet many also take reasoning to be an essentially passive cognitive process. I show that these commitments are incompatible and argue that individuals engage in reasoning as a kind of action, one that is the psychological analogue of rational discourse. Reasoning is a psychological activity in which an individual makes rationally related sub-vocalized utterances towards answering a question. The sub-vocalized utterances made in reasoning instantiate the attitudes involved in it. The proposed account allows us to reconceptualize the frame problem, weakness of will, and self-deception.

Committee: Peter Godfrey-Smith, Susanna Siegel, Douglas Lavin

Presentations at Harvard University

Papers presented to the Harvard Workshop on Metaphysics and Epistemology:
“Is Intentional Action a Causal Process?”, Spring 2008
“Reflections on Reasoning”, Fall 2007
“Explicit Reasoning”, Spring 2007
“Reports of Reasoning and the Problem of Transparency”, Fall 2006

Papers presented to the Harvard Workshop on Moral and Political Philosophy:
“The Formula of Universal Law”, Fall 2005
“Laws”, Spring 2005
“Agential Participation”, Fall 2004

Awards

- 2008 Graduate Society Dissertation Completion Fellowship, Harvard University
- 2008 Nominee for Levenson Memorial Teaching Prize, Harvard Undergraduate Council
- 2005 Nominee for Levenson Memorial Teaching Prize, Harvard Undergraduate Council
- 2005 Harvard CUE Award for Excellence in Teaching (Fall)
- 2004 Harvard CUE Award for Excellence in Teaching (Fall)
- 2004 Harvard CUE Award for Excellence in Teaching (Spring)
- 2003 Nominee for Levenson Memorial Teaching Prize, Harvard Undergraduate Council
- 2003 Harvard CUE Award for Excellence in Teaching (Fall)
- 2002 Harvard Graduate Society Summer Fellowship
- 1998 Philip K. Rhineland Award, Stanford University Philosophy Department Prize
- 1997 Major Grant, Stanford University Undergraduate Research Program

Teaching Experience

Primary Instructor at Harvard University:

- Fall 2006 Undergraduate Seminar: *Practical Reasoning*
- Spring 2006 Undergraduate Seminar: *Practical Reasoning*

Primary Instructor at Philosophy Discovery Institute, Stanford University:

- Summer 2004 High school Seminar: *Bioethics*
- Summer 2003 High school Seminar: *Bioethics*

Teaching Assistant at Harvard University:

- Spring 2010 *Aesthetics*, Richard Moran
- Fall 2005 *Recent Ethical Theory*, Douglas Lavin
- Spring 2005 *Are There Any Moral Truths?*, Niko Kolodny
- Fall 2004 *Introduction to the Philosophy of Law*, Douglas Lavin
- Spring 2004 *Philosophy of Science*, Peter Godfrey-Smith
- Fall 2003 *Issues in Ethics*, T.M. Scanlon

Teaching Assistant at Stanford University:

- Fall 2000 *Greek Philosophy*, Chris Bobonich

Spring 1999 *Consciousness*, John Perry
Fall 1998 *Greek Philosophy*, Chris Bobonich

Graduate Coursework (* indicates that the course was audited)

Metaphysics, Epistemology, Language, and Mind:

Vagueness, Richard Heck
Epistemology, Scott Sturgeon
Philosophy of Mind, Jim Pryor*
Color, Alison Simmons and Jim Pryor
Realism and Antirealism, Thomas Scanlon
Rationality and Irrationality, Matthew Boyle*
Metaphysics, Ned Hall*

Moral Philosophy and Philosophy of Action:

Practical Reason and Ethics, Derek Parfit
Practical Reason, Melissa Barry
Practical Reason (Mellon Seminar), Christine Korsgaard*
Practical Reason, Douglas Lavin*
Action, Christine Korsgaard
Philosophy of Action, Richard Moran
Philosophy of Action (Mellon Seminar), Christine Korsgaard*
Philosophy of Action, Douglas Lavin*
Contemporary Ethical Theory (Mellon Seminar), Christine Korsgaard*
Feminist Perspectives in Moral Philosophy, Melissa Barry

Philosophy of Biology:

Evolution and Cognition, Peter Godfrey-Smith*
Foundations of Evolutionary Theory, Peter Godfrey-Smith*

History of Philosophy:

Early Modern Theories of Mind, Alison Simmons
The Later Philosophy of Wittgenstein, Warren Goldfarb
Pragmatism, Peter Godfrey-Smith*

Academic Service

2009-10 Assistant to the Head of Undergraduate Studies, Harvard Philosophy Department
2004-5 Co-organizer of the Harvard-MIT Metaphysics and Epistemology Reading Group
2004-5 Graduate student representative to the Harvard Philosophy department faculty

References

Peter Godfrey-Smith Professor of Philosophy, Harvard University

Susanna Siegel
Douglas Lavin
Matthew Boyle

Professor of Philosophy, Harvard University
Associate Professor of Philosophy, Harvard University
Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Harvard University

Dissertation Abstract

Reasoning is a process by which individuals can acquire or abandon attitudes on the basis of other attitudes to which they are rationally related. Many philosophers take there to be prescriptions associated with reasoning, for example, that one ought not to reason to the negation of p from p alone. Yet, many philosophers take reasoning to be an essentially passive cognitive process. I argue that these commitments are incompatible: if individuals ought to reason in certain ways, then reasoning requires their active involvement.

I argue that individuals are actively involved in their reasoning by engaging in reasoning as a kind of *action*. Taking inspiration from empirical work suggesting that ‘higher’ cognitive processes in human beings are internalizations of human social activities, I argue that reasoning is the psychological analogue of rational discourse. Rational discourse is a social activity in which individuals make rationally related vocalized utterances towards answering a question. Reasoning is a psychological activity in which an individual makes rationally related sub-vocalized utterances towards answering a question. I distinguish theoretical and practical reasoning by examining differences between theoretical and practical discourse.

The sub-vocalized utterances made in reasoning appear to have semantic content, and I argue that they have content as non-communicative uses of natural language, specifically, the contents had by communicative utterances they resemble. As contentful elements of our psychology, the sub-vocalized utterances made in reasoning *instantiate* the attitudes involved in it and vindicate a brand of voluntarism about attitude acquisition.

On the Agential account of reasoning I develop, reasoning is tied to action, natural language, and human individuals. I argue that the account provides a *paradigm* of a rationally structured, goal directed, psychological process, relative to which other processes are more or less similar and the category of ‘reasoning’ is demarcated.

I end by detailing how the proposed Agential account of reasoning enables us to reconceptualize three further issues. The *frame problem* is typically cast as a problem of how to select relevant attitudes from a pre-existing store from which to begin reasoning, but it is recast as one of how to model situation-specific reasoning. *Weakness of will* is typically cast as a phenomenon of irrationality in which individuals fail to act in accordance with their better judgment, but it is recast as one of motivational pathology in which the acts of sub-vocalized utterance with which reasoning ends fail to motivate action. *Self-deception* is often cast as a phenomenon of division within the self in which individuals knowingly adopt inconsistent attitudes, but it is recast as one of bad faith in which individuals avoid engaging in reasoning to avoid answering their questions.