

Max Hayward
Research Statement

The core of my work is in ethics, metaethics and moral psychology, but my project crosses the boundaries of many subfields in philosophy where values and normativity are central, including rationality, epistemology, philosophy of mind, and political philosophy. My project advances three claims. First, I argue for a mind-dependent, “humanistic” understanding of ethical normativity. Second, I hold that normativity in apparently distinct areas is grounded in ethical normativity - ethics is “first philosophy”. And third, I suggest that seeing values as collectively invented opens up new approaches for practical normative philosophy. In making my arguments, I draw on the sentimentalism of Hume and Smith, and on the pragmatist tradition.

I claim that ethical normativity is fundamentally mind-dependent. Ethics is invented by humans, to solve the problems that mutually sympathetic agents find in living together. Ethical discovery is the discovery of solutions to the kinds of problems that humans find themselves facing. While views of this kind are familiar, my work attempts to re-orient the debate. Many philosophers see questions about the foundations of ethics as fundamentally theoretical, arguing for one view or another on metaphysical or linguistic grounds. I argue that the question of which metaethical view we adopt is a substantive, first-order moral question. And, contrary to many, I think that first-order considerations speak in favour of a variety of anti-realism. We should reject the search for non-natural, mind-independent, objective moral truths as morally objectionable: it makes moral life dependent upon abstractions remote from what we care about and ought to care about. By contrast, seeing norms of morality and practical rationality as collectively created by processes of interpersonal sympathy shows why they matter, and explains the goals and methods of moral inquiry. This view is advanced in “Ethical Nonnaturalism and The Limits of Rational Reflection in Ethics” (minor revisions at a well-known generalist journal), “Immoral Realism” (under review) and “The Route to Ethical Humanism” (in progress).

But it is not just ethical normativity that derives its authority from the practical interests of mutually sympathetic agents; the normativity of self-interest, practical reason and epistemology also derive from that of interpersonal ethics. In “Practical Reason, Sympathy and Reactive Attitudes” (forthcoming / published in early view in *Nous*) I argue that putative norms of “practical reason” gain their authority not from rationality as such, but from their role in facilitating interpersonal sympathetic relationships. In “Belief and Inquiry” (in progress) I argue for a form of epistemic pragmatism: while evidentialism seems an appropriate norm when focusing solely on individual beliefs, norms for belief are ultimately dependent on the normative considerations governing inquiry more generally, and inquiry should be seen as governed by practical reasons.

In philosophy of mind, I work on affective experiences like pain which are felt as good or bad. In “More of me! Less of me! Reflexive Imperativism about Affective Phenomenal Character” (under review, co-authored with Luca Barlassina) we argue that affective mental states have self-directed imperative content - they tell us to get rid of themselves or have more of themselves. “Affective experiences: intrinsic valence, subjective value” (in progress) explains how reflexive imperativism allows us to view the value of hedonic states as mind-dependent without the implausible implications of other subjectivist theories.

A future project builds on my work in the foundations of ethics to develop a distinctive methodology for normative work in political philosophy. Rather than attempting to justify or critique concrete political and social arrangements by reference to supposedly timeless moral principles determined in advance, I ask how a given political, economic or social arrangement affects the collective invention of morality over time, through the way in which they shape interpersonal psychological relationships. I am particularly interested in the way in which wealth inequalities and cultural

polarisation warp relationships of sympathy and self-esteem. In so doing, I argue, they hamper a society's ability to engage in a collective normative conversation or debate that can respond to new challenges in a way that is sensitive to the needs and interests of all. But since the problems I find with inequality and polarisation are fundamentally focused on their psychological effects, I suggest that we can explore interventions focused primarily on the psychological level: focused, that is, on facilitating the kinds of sympathetic relationship needed to undergird moral conversation.