

Aaron Wolf

Curriculum Vitae

(Web version omits talks and work in progress, contact me for complete CV)

Employment

Lecturer, Colgate University. Philosophy and University Studies. 2015–present.

Education

2015 PhD Syracuse University — Philosophy
2006 BA Muhlenberg College — Philosophy

Dissertation: *Where the Reasons Come From*

Supervisor: Ben Bradley

Committee: David Sobel, Janice Dowell, Hille Paakkunainen, Daniel Star (*external*)

Areas of Specialization

Ethics and Metaethics

Areas of Competence

Metaphysics, Philosophy of Mind, Early Modern

Other Teaching Interests

Political Philosophy, Technology Ethics, Logic

Publications

“Reviving Concurrentism about Death,” (2018) *Journal of Value Inquiry*, vol. 52, no. 2: 179–185

“Giving Up Hume’s Guillotine,” (2015) *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 93, no. 1: 109–125

Teaching Experience

Colgate University

PHIL 312: Contemporary Political Philosophy

PHIL 101: Introduction to Philosophical Problems

CORE 152: Challenges of Modernity

Ithaca College

PHIL 212: Introduction to Ethics

PHIL 101: Introduction to Philosophy

Syracuse University (*= as TA)

PHI 175: Introduction to Social and Political Philosophy

PHI 311: The Rationalists

PHI 192: Introduction to Moral Theory

PHI 107: Theories of Knowledge and Reality

ECS 392: Ethical Aspects of Engineering and Computer Science*

PHI 251: Introduction to Logic*

PHI 191: Ethics and Value Theory*

Other Professional Activity

Research contributor to Barry Lam's *Hi-Phi Nation* podcast (season 2), 2017

Graduate coursework

Logic & Language	Topics in Ancient Ethics	Image & Imagination
Critique of Pure Reason	Time, Change, & Identity	Young Ontologists
Philosophy of Language	Death	British Empiricists
Contemporary Epistemology	Realization & Causation	The <i>a priori</i>
Natural Kinds	Predication & Quantification	Foundations of Analytic Ethics

References

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Dissertation Abstract

The idea that our fundamental reason for doing something is that it would be good to do was once a standard (if not default) view, going back at least as far as Plato. But with the development of ethical naturalism, it has fallen out of favor. Contemporary ethics is now dominated by views that give moral primacy to natural, non-evaluative properties such as happiness, or extending life. On these views, the fundamental reason for, say, quitting smoking is not that quitting is good for you, it's that you'll live longer, full-stop. No appeal to goodness is needed. This approach has been popularized by A.C. Ewing, Elizabeth Anderson, T. M. Scanlon, and Derek Parfit, among others.

My dissertation offers a straightforward argument for the primacy of goodness. I bring together the Aristotelian idea that virtue requires being motivated for the right reasons with the Socratic view that we are motivated only by seeing some value in our actions. If these claims are correct, then the proper form of any moral explanation is that we should do things because they're good in some way. Both premises are intuitive, but vulnerable to powerful objections. Thus the first major task of the dissertation is to state versions of them that can withstand those challenges. To defend the Aristotelian premise, I also argue against Hume's rival *no ought from is* doctrine, showing that it cannot escape a basic dilemma about what counts as an ought-claim and so it is either false, or irrelevant to ordinary moral discourse.

The second major task is to defuse the chief argument against a value-first theory of reasons. Scanlon reasons that goodness contributes nothing to our reasons, because natural, non-evaluative properties already account for any reasons goodness might have given. I show that this style of argument leads to a regress in which reasons would become impossible to act on, and thus cease to be reasons.

Opponents of the primacy of goodness appear to confuse two distinct questions: what the most fundamental reasons are, and the metaphysical grounding of reason-giving properties. Running these together is a mistake. Pain consists in neurons firing, but that's no cause to think the fact that someone's neurons are firing in a particular way gives a better reason to alleviate their suffering than the pain itself does. A virtue of my approach is that it keeps these questions separate. Goodness gives our fundamental reasons, but natural properties explain the ground of those reasons. Minding the difference between these gives us a new path between the received options: a value-first theory of reasons with Platonic metaphysics and epistemology (Plato and Moore's views), modern naturalist theories (Brentano, Ewing, Anderson, Scanlon, and Parfit's theories), and Kantian approaches (internalist theories).