

Aaron Wolf

Curriculum Vitae

Last updated: June 1, 2017

Employment

Lecturer, University Studies Program, Colgate University. 2015–present

Education

2015 PhD Syracuse University
2006 BA Muhlenberg College

Dissertation: *Where the Reasons Come From*

The idea that values don't give normative reasons dominates current work in ethics. I show that this is due to a questionable inference pattern, analogous to causal exclusion in metaphysics and philosophy of mind. Used in the case of reasons, it generates a regress where reasons either alienate us or cease to exist. I argue that values give our most basic reasons, by appealing to updated versions of *ought implies can* and *the guise of the good*.

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, Engineering and Technology Ethics, Logic

Publications

“Reviving Concurrentism about Death,” forthcoming in *Journal of Value Inquiry*

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

Works in Progress

“Do Reasons Drain Away?” (under review)

“Motivational Ought Implies Can”

“New Versions of Hume’s Guillotine”

Talks & Poster Presentations

Motivational Ought Implies Can

2016 Pacific APA Meeting, poster

Do Reasons Drain Away?

2016 Central APA Meeting

2014 Rocky Mountain Ethics Congress (as “Against Rational Exclusion”), poster

Reviving Concurrentism about Death

- 2014 Central APA Meeting
 2011 Newcastle conference on “Death: Its Meaning, Morality, and Metaphysics”

Giving Up Hume’s Guillotine

- 2011 Society for Exact Philosophy Meeting
 2010 Creighton Club Meeting (New York State Philosophical Association)

Are Photographs Transparent? (with Bence Nanay)

- 2007 Canadian Society for Aesthetics session of the Canadian Philosophical Association Meeting

Teaching Experience**Colgate University**

Core 152: Challenges of Modernity 2015-2019, 6 semesters

Syracuse University

PHI 175: Introduction to Social and Political Philosophy Fall 2015, Fall 2013
 PHI 311: The Rationalists Spring 2012
 PHI 192: Introduction to Moral Theory Fall 2012
 PHI 107: Theories of Knowledge and Reality 2008-2015, 11 semesters

Ithaca College

PHIL 212: Introduction to Ethics Spring 2012
 PHIL 101: Introduction to Philosophy 2011-2013, 3 semesters

As a Teaching Assistant

ECS 392: Ethical Aspects of Engineering and Computer Science Fall 2011
 PHI 251: Introduction to Logic Spring 2007
 PHI 191: Ethics and Value Theory 2006-2008, 3 semesters

Professional Activity & Service

Comments on Gwen Bradford, “Uniqueness,” Rocky Mountain Ethics Congress, 2014
 Referee for Philosophy TA Summer Research Fellowships, 2014
 Referee for Philosophy TA Summer Research Fellowships, 2012
 Head instructor for PHI 107, 2010
 Referee for Philosophy TA Summer Research Fellowships, 2009
 Organizer, Philosophy Working Papers Group, 2008–2009
 Co-organizer, Syracuse Philosophy Graduate Conference, 2008 (with Kelly McCormick)
 President, Philosophy Graduate Students’ Organization, 2007-2008

Grants & awards

TA Summer Research Fellowship, Syracuse University, 2011
 TA Summer Research Fellowship, Syracuse University, 2007
 Phi Beta Kappa, Muhlenberg College, 2005

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

Ben Bradley Allen and Anita Sutton Professor of Philosophy Syracuse University	Hille Paakkunainen Assistant Professor of Philosophy Syracuse University
Bence Nanay Professor of Philosophy, University of Antwerp Senior Research Associate, University of Cambridge	Daniel Star Assistant Professor of Philosophy Boston University
David Sobel Irwin and Marjorie Gutttag Professor of Ethics and Political Phil. Syracuse University	Maura Tumulty Associate Professor of Philosophy Colgate University

Dissertation Abstract

A clear understanding of the normative world should involve an explanation of why we have the reasons we do. Yet common-sense thinking generates a puzzle. If there's a reason to do something, we can explain why that reason counts in favor of doing it with the fact that it would be good in some way. At the same time, it's also explainable by non-evaluative properties that make doing it good. Suppose the traffic gives us a reason to leave early for the airport. The deeper reason might be the non-evaluative fact that the traffic would cause us to miss our flight, or it might be the value of making the flight. Although both reasons are perfectly good at the everyday level, it would be wrong to say they both contribute to the fundamental normative story of why traffic favors leaving early. Because both are ways of calling attention to the same idea, that making the flight is our goal, they shouldn't be independent. One of these considerations is a reason only because the other is—if we considered them independent reasons we'd be double-counting. So which is the more fundamental one? Where does the reason really come from? I argue that value properties—like the value of making our flight—give the most basic, and therefore best, reasons.

Many contemporary philosophers take the opposite tack and point instead to value-making properties as the things that give the primary reasons, following the lead of A.C Ewing, Elizabeth Anderson, T.M. Scanlon, and Derek Parfit. It can seem as though values don't give any reasons at all, since good-making properties are sufficient on their own to generate all the reasons we have. Philosophers who think this way seem to be aligning the direction of normative explanation with the direction of metaphysical explanation. I argue that this popular view is mistaken by drawing a parallel to the mental causation debate in philosophy of mind. If reasons must be given by what would have been metaphysically sufficient to account for them, then a regress in which the power to give reasons drains away into unappreciable micro-properties seems inevitable. And if the most basic reasons are unappreciable, we are at the very least alienated from them, and they may not exist at all.

We can see why reasons have their source in values by reflecting on two well-known doctrines: *ought implies can* and *the guise of the good*. The former shows that (a) considerations that count in favor must also

be possibly motivating, otherwise the normative loses its connection to real actions. A plausible version of the latter is that (b) the most basic explanation of our motivations is that we see what we want as good or bad in some way. Both principles are intuitive, if controversial. I show that both (a) and (b) can withstand the usual objections while keeping their initial plausibility. This line of reasoning leads us to the proper form of normative explanation: x gives a reason because it is valuable in some way.

Opponents of the value-first view of reasons appear to confuse two distinct questions: what the most fundamental reasons are, and what the considerations that give reasons metaphysically consist in. Running these together is a mistake. Pain might consist of C-fiber firings, but that's no cause to think they give better reasons to alleviate suffering than the pain itself does. A virtue of my approach is that it keeps these questions separate. Values are fundamental to normative reasons, but value-making properties explain the ontological ground of those reasons. Minding the difference between these gives us a third way between the received options: the Buck-Passing or Fitting-Attitude views of Scanlon and others, and the non-naturalism of Moore and Plato. It secures a role for values in the normative world without the metaphysical and epistemic excesses of Mooreanism or Platonism on the one hand, and without alienating us from reasons on the other.