

# JEREMY DAVID FIX

Curriculum Vitae 10.05.17

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**Employment** AUBURN UNIVERSITY  
Instructor 2017-Present

**Education** 2008-2016 HARVARD UNIVERSITY PHD 11.2016  
2006-2008 UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MILWAUKEE MA 05.2008  
2002-2006 COLGATE UNIVERSITY AB 05.2006

**AOS** Ethics, Philosophy of Agency and Action, Metaphysics  
**AOC** History of Ethics, Political Philosophy, Philosophy of Mind

**Dissertation** **ACTING FROM THOUGHT ABOUT ACTION**

Committee: Christine Korsgaard, Edward Hall, Richard Moran, and Matthew Boyle  
I develop a version of *constitutivism* whose basis is a metaphysics of capacities of living things which says that a capacity is such that a single principle which describes its nature is normative for its development and exercise. I argue that when applied to our capacity to act, this metaphysics meets a basic challenge in action theory about how to fit our action into a general metaphysics of reality and a basic challenge in metaethics about the nature, scope, and structure of normativity. I argue that it explains different notions of possibility in various conditions of agency, such as ought implies can, the principle that it must be possible to violate normative standards, and the principle of alternate possibilities. Finally, I argue that it establishes a *synthetic* version of constitutivism that explains how knowledge of the nature of our capacity to act and thus of the normative standards that govern our exercises of it is a type of substantive self-knowledge.

**Papers** 'Intellectual Isolation' (*R&R at Mind*)  
'The House of Goodness' (*under review*)  
'Conditions of Agency' (*under review*)

**Awards** Emily and Charles Carrier Prize, Harvard University, 2017  
Best dissertation on a subject in social, moral, or political philosophy  
Francis Bowen Prize for 'The House of Goodness', Harvard University, 2016  
Best essay in moral philosophy  
GSAS Dissertation Completion Fellowship, 2015-6  
Edmond J. Safra Center for Ethics Graduate Fellowship, 2014-5  
Harvard University Certificate of Distinction in Teaching, Fall 2013  
Harvard University Certificate of Distinction in Teaching, Fall 2012  
Harvard Summer School Tuition Waiver, 2010  
Chancellor's Fellowship Award, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2006-7  
M. Holmes Hartshorne Award, Colgate University, 2006

**Talks** 'Acting in Error'  
.01.21.17 Temple University

'The House of Goodness'

·11.19.16 Speculative Ethics Forum, St. Johns University

·02.10.16 University of California, Riverside

'Intellectual Isolation'

·09.05.15 4<sup>th</sup> TVA Conference, University of Tennessee, Knoxville

## Teaching

*Auburn University*

Phil 1030 Ethics and the Health Sciences S18

Phil 1040 Business Ethics F17

*Harvard University as Instructor (tutorials for junior philosophy majors)*

Phil 98d Self-Consciousness in Action F13

Phil 98c Korsgaard, now and then S13

Phil 98b Self-Consciousness and Self-Knowledge F12

Phil 98a Intentional Action: Reduction and Constitution F12

*Harvard University as Teaching Fellow or Assistant*

Gov 94SAF Undergraduate Ethics Fellows Seminar S17 Applbaum

Phil 019 God, Perfection, and Evil F16 Chen

Phil 168 Kant's Ethical Theory S14 Korsgaard

Phil 178 Equality and Liberty F13 Scanlon

Phil 137 The Later Philosophy of Wittgenstein S13 Moran

Phil 012 Introduction to the Philosophy of Law S12 Lavin

Phil 173 Metaethics F11 Berker

Phil 161 Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity S11 Chen

Phil 007 Introduction to Ancient Philosophy F10 Jones

*University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee*

Phil 101 Introduction to Philosophy (INS) F07 S08

Phil 101 Introduction to Philosophy (TA) S07 Koethe

Phil 101 Introduction to Philosophy (TA) F06 Hinchman

## University Service

Assistant, Harvard Presidential Task Force on Inclusion and Belonging, 2017  
Coordinator, Harvard Practical Philosophy Workshop, 2011-12

## Academic Service

*Referee*

Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy

## References

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## Long Dissertation Abstract

Constitutivism says, roughly, that what something is determines how it ought to be, at least with respect to things that are by nature subject to normative standards. I develop a version of the view whose basis is a metaphysics of capacities of living things which says that a single principle describes the nature of a capacity and is thereby normative for its development and exercises. I argue that the basic metaphysics, independent of various substantive views about the nature of our agency that divide constitutivists, has explanatory power throughout practical philosophy.

In ‘The House of Goodness’, I explain how constitutivism says that a special relationship holds between certain general things and their particulars. In particular, the capacities of living beings exhibit this relationship: a capacity is such that a single principle describes its nature and is thereby normative for its exercise. I argue that capacities and other such genera establish internal normative standards for their particulars—a particular is good as what it is because and to the extent that it meets its principle, bad because and to the extent that it lacks them. I argue that this metaphysics meets a basic challenge of action theory about how to account for our action within a general metaphysics of reality without reducing our action to something else. The view instead fits our action into a general metaphysics of things with which it shares certain features while leaving room for its unique aspects, which transpose the metaphysics true of all of the capacities of the living and their exercises into the key of self-consciousness. Instead of falling outside of a metaphysics that accounts for everything else, the metaphysics of our action is a determinate form of the metaphysics of anything the living do. I also argue that this view meets a basic challenge of metaethics about how to account for the scope and nature of normativity and the different kinds of normative standards that apply to different kinds of things. To be active—to do something—is to exercise a capacity, and the nature of a capacity establishes a normative standard for its exercises. We make use of things in exercises of capacities, and the standards that apply to them derive from the nature of the capacities being exercised. In this way, the capacities of the living ground all normativity. Our capacity to act is self-conscious, though, which explains the unique role that its standard can play in its exercises.

In addition to that explanatory work, I argue in “Conditions of Agency” that this basic metaphysics of capacities can explain the notions of possibility within three conditions of agency: (1) *Ought implies Can*, which says that a principle governs my action only if I *can* comply with it, (2) *The Error Condition*, which says that a principle governs my action only if I *can* deviate from it, and (3) *The Principle of Alternate Possibility*, which says that I am responsible for acting or failing to act in some way only if I *can* do otherwise. I argue that the metaphysics of capacities makes two distinctions that explain how the notions of possibility in the conditions of agency differ from each other. The first distinction is between possessing a capacity from my state of development of that capacity. The second distinction is between two classes of what is possible with respect to a capacity: the class of *what I can do* given the capacity, which picks out the aspects of an exercise of that capacity that contribute to its success, and the class of *what can happen* given the capacity, which picks out the aspects of an exercise of that capacity that contribute to its failure. I argue that different conditions use different combinations of these distinctions to fix the notion of possibility in them. *Ought implies can* uses a notion of possibility fixed by what I can do given my capacity as I by nature possess. The error condition uses a notion of possibility fixed by what can happen given my capacity as I by nature possess it. The principle of alternate possibility breaks up into two conditions, one on responsibility for when I comply with a principle that governs my action and one on responsibility for when I deviate from a principle that governs my action. The former uses a notion of possibility fixed by what can

happen given my capacity as I have developed it, the latter a notion fixed by what I can do given my capacity as I have developed it.

Those first two papers explain some but not all of the explanatory work that the basic metaphysics of capacities can do. Of course, any version of constitutivism must in the end say something about the nature of our capacity to act and the normative standards for its exercise. The very generality of the metaphysics, applying to all of the capacities of living things, means that there is no direct argument *from it* to a view of our capacity to act. Still, I work within this metaphysics to defend a view of practical reason as distinct in kind or form from theoretical reason. Practical reason is our kind of will, our capacity to act—the shape that the will takes in a self-conscious being.

I first try to clear space for this view by arguing against familiar views of practical reason that conflict with it. These views in different ways try to explain practical reason in terms of theoretical reason. *Instrumentalists* think that the only roles for practical reason in our agency are to form means-ends beliefs and evaluate ends in light of other ends. A non-rational capacity—such as desire—supplies the ends. Practical reason works out consequences from them. *Intellectualists*, in contrast, think that theoretical reason also supplies ends for our action. These exercises of reason are theoretical, though, distinguished from others by their objects: reasons to act. Practical reason is not a special form of reason; instead “practical reasons” are a special content on which theoretical reason works. On both views, then, all exercises of reason are theoretical in nature. Against intellectualism, I argue that if practical reason is a species of theoretical reason, practical judgments cannot have authority over the will. Without that authority, though, I cannot act from my representation of a reason to act. I then argue that if I cannot act from those representations, those reasons and a species of theoretical reason about them cannot exist. Against instrumentalism, I argue that its claims about how to decide are ambiguous between descriptive claims and normative claims. Neither disambiguation does the needed explanatory work.

I finally turn to sketching the view that practical reason is our kind of will—the form that the will, or the capacity to act, takes in a self-conscious being. I derive an instrumental requirement from the idea of acting self-consciously. Most philosophers assume that constitutivists must say that we are subject to prudential and moral requirements only if we can also analytically derive them from the concept of self-conscious action. I argue, though, that this kind of derivation is unnecessary and does not fit with the idea that our capacity to act is the capacity of a living being just like any other. Just as the genus of a capacity for digestion can have different species whose bearers are to eat and drink different things and process them in different ways, so the genus of a capacity for self-conscious action can have different species whose bearers are subject to different normative standards in their exercises of those capacities as such. Just as we cannot analytically derive all the substantive normative standards that govern our digestion from the concept of digestion, so we cannot derive all the substantive normative standards that govern our action from the concept of self-conscious action. Practical reason is thus a genus with different species, and beings with different species are subject to different normative standards. I explain why this fact should not worry us when we wonder whether we are moral beings—that is, whether we are subject to moral and prudential requirements in action as such. This explanation shows that knowledge of the principle of our will is reflective knowledge that reflects the developed ethical character of the agent in question.