

# Some research projects for 2019–2025

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**General Plan.** During the next six years, I plan to put my knowledge of contemporary theoretical philosophy and some of my original, sometimes un-orthodox ideas about a range of systematic philosophical problems to work in order to acquire a broad research and teaching competence in the history of philosophy, particularly the Middle Ages and Early Modern philosophy. I think that this will contribute both to answering contemporary, systematic questions of great importance and to our understanding of our philosophical predecessors. In the following, I sketch a number of ‘points of contact’ where I think that substantial progress could be achieved by applying contemporary conceptual tools to historical problem sets that are often subtly different from current mainstream ways of formulating the questions involved. For reasons of space, I have limited myself to metaphysical points of contact – there are many of those in epistemology as well (such as the relation between Cartesian doubting and the reconceptualisation of Pyrrhonian scepticism, between knowledge of the self as structural in Hume and contemporary ‘Humean humility’, materially false ideas and illusions etc.).

**The problem of representation.** My ‘Habilitation’ project tries to answer the question what representation is: what is it in virtue of which some things (e.g. mental states) represent other things, and represent them as being so-and-so? Unfortunately, this fundamental question is rarely asked (and never, to my knowledge, satisfactorily answered) in contemporary philosophy; while much attention has been paid to different ways of modelling content, different types of content and the relation between the contents of different representational states, the in my view prior and more fundamental question in virtue of what content accrues to things in the first place, has so far only been considered within the relatively constraining framework of teleosemantics. Representation and intentionality, however, and at least as understood in a Brentanian way as the ‘mark of the mental’, are more than lawful correlation. But what are they? How does the representation relation produce states that are both meaningful and phenomenal, in the sense of there being something it is to be in them? The crucial idea, to be developed, examined and defended by the present research project is that it is of the very nature of representation that it has a two-fold character, both reaching out to things outside ourselves and locating ourselves with respect to them.

My starting point in the development of this idea and the form of representation I take as paradigmatic is **perception**. I start with an Aristotelian slogan – perception is intake of form without matter – and work my way ‘upwards’ the cognitive ‘hierarchy’. The central idea, to be found in *De Anima*, may be cashed out as follows: Perception naturally occurs, as a biological phenomenon. Its veridicality is primitive: we can never be deceived by it with respect to its proper objects. These proper sensibles are prior to their perception in the order of explanation: we explain sight as the sense that gives us colours, not colours as the things that are the objects of sight. In all types of perception, the medium is that of a transmission of form that is taken in by the alteration of the sense (where this alteration *is* the perception). Seeing perception as emerging in this way as the joint outcome of three factors – the form to be seen, the form transmitted and seen by the perceiver, and the intervening medium – allows, I hope to show, for its most puzzling feature: that representational properties are both intrinsic and relational.

**Intentionality.** Representational states being intrinsic, they ‘mirror’ the world as it appears to some perceiver, i.e. as perspectival and perceiver-oriented. Being relational at the same time, they also connect that perceiver to things outside of them, and make themselves evaluable in terms of what lies outside of them. Because an understanding of representation as self-location places the ‘subjective’ and ‘phenomenal’ elements in the *mode*, rather than the *content* of the attitude, allowing for an adverbialist, rather than propositionalist analysis of it, it makes an objectivist notion of content possible: representation is coformality, the sharing of ‘form’ between what is represented and what represents. As the medievals realised, the account of perception as intake of form may be generalised to representation more generally if, for more complex mental states, we draw an act/content distinction – as Duns Scotus did between the ‘subjectively’ present (accident of) thinking and the ‘objectively’ present external form. On such a generalised conception, the form taken in from some thing is what it is represented as; and to represent is as *F* is to have *F* as its form in mind.

**Formal objects.** To account for states that exhibit primarily not only representational or intentional features (as do, respectively, perception and intention/desire/wishing), but both in an equally fundamental way, a third primitive element is needed: an attitude the subject takes on what it represents. Such an ‘active’ component explains how the represented form is taken to be and relates it to the formal object of the mental state in question, thus generating its correctness conditions. In fear, for example, the subject both represents something as dangerous *and* has a negative, flight-inducing attitude towards it; in belief, the subject entertains a thought, and assents to it. In both cases, it is the attitude that ‘generates’ the content, as it were, as it takes the form (itself taken in a way) to relate to what it is a form of. With linguistic representation, finally, the form is externalised – it is the linguistic items themselves, taken in a way, that may be said to reach out to what they are about.

**PSR, grounding and metaphysical explanation.** The relation between the less and the more fundamental, in virtue of which the less fundamental is somehow ‘derivative’ or ‘nothing over and above’ the fundamental, has recently come into focus within the discussion of the grounding relation. Grounding is widely taken to be at the heart of a number of important philosophical claims: according to physicalism, mental facts obtain *in virtue of* neurophysiological facts; according to categoricism, dispositional properties are *grounded in* categorical properties; according to ethical naturalism, morally wrong acts are wrong *because* they have certain non-moral properties. Much progress has been made recently on how to understand such grounding claims, but the discussion has often been at a relative high level of abstraction, barely touching on concrete examples. As “grounding” has generally been taken to be ‘primitive’ (whatever this is taken to mean), its rather obvious interconnections to a broad range of ‘classical’ philosophical concepts have not been explored, apart from some rather isolated discussions of the so-called ‘Euthyphro problem’. Most obviously, the PSR stands out; I am convinced that a detailed examination of the history and development of the PSR in the medieval, early modern and German rationalist traditions will not just shed light on the contemporary debates, but allow for substantial progress, enriching the conceptual geography of the debate well beyond the boundaries of what contemporary metaphysicians have in mind.

**Aspects and non-fundamental entities.** The conceptual tools of the grounding debate are also, in turn, profitably applied to historical problems, making progress beyond the state of the art by considering three categories of non-fundamental, i.e. grounded objects, and analysing in some detail their perspectival character: (i) so-called ‘lesser entities’ such as boundaries, holes, sounds, as well as ephemeral or ‘non-canonical’ objects of perception; (ii) secondary qualities of external objects, such as colours, odours, tastes and textures, and so-called ‘response-dependent’ properties, such as normative, chromatic and locational properties; (iii) ‘phenomenal’ objects (*phaenomena*) in Kant’s philosophy, under the dual-aspect interpretation of it. In the first half of my present Berlin year, I have written a first draft of a dual-aspect interpretation of Kant that takes *phaenomena* to be aspects, rather than (as is done in all extant ‘dual-aspect interpretations’) as a special class of properties.

The distinction between **primary and secondary qualities** lies at the heart of the scientific world-view, and motivated its first incorporation, the mechanist philosophies of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Despite its huge importance, the characterisation itself has proved surprisingly elusive; what lies at the bottom of the distinction between properties such as extension, size, shape, motion and position on the one hand and colour, sound, taste, odour, heat, cold etc. on the other? It is often said that primary qualities are primary in the order of explanation, where the notion of ‘explanation’ in play here is of a distinctively ontological kind. Secondary qualities, the hypothesis to be explored says, are grounded in primary qualities – they are perspectival manifestations of the latter, part of reality, but not themselves fundamental. Such a conception in terms of relative fundamentality helps elucidate, in my view, the connections between secondary qualities and representation, in particular perspectival self-location perceptual content and moral judgments.

**Relations, relatives and relativity.** It is with respect to the reality of relations that we find perhaps the strongest contrast between pre- and post-Russell philosophy. While the tradition, with rather good but largely forgotten arguments, did not ascribe fundamental reality to relations and relative entities, relations are today rather casually considered ‘on a par’ with their monadic cousins. Recent work in metaphysics, however, casts doubt on such a conception. As I argue in the book ms., contemporary conceptions of relations succumb to what I call the ‘problem of converses’. The problem of converses arises from the fact that any account of relations according to which there are, or might be, non-symmetric relations, allows for what I call an ‘abstractionist’ definition of converse relations. Such converses then give rise to problems of ontological profligacy, metaphysical indeterminacy and infinite regress. Friends of relations have to accept that the facts of the cat being on the mat and of the mat being beneath the cat are different, that it is indeterminate which one is more fundamental and that the difference between the relations *being on top of* and *being under* cannot be specified without appeal to these very relations – a package of claims which I take to be a *reductio* of the assumption that there are fundamental relations. Aristotle, the medievals, Leibniz and Spinoza were thus right, the modern orthodoxy is wrong: relations are not what explains how the world forms an inter-connected whole, but are on the contrary viewpoint-relative and perspectival abstractions from prior structure. To make sense of such non-relational structure, some detailed examination of the history of philosophy is needed, in particular of the theories of mixture and of matter.

Pre- rather than post-relational order also allows for an attraction conception of **time and change**, that vindicates a roughly Aristotelian solution to the problem of the instant of change and allows for an independently motivated distinction between processes, temporally extended enduring things, and events, temporally extended perduring things. Processes are temporally extended not by happening over time, or by going on for some time (as do events), but by taking time or unfolding in time. Like enduring substances, they have their temporal parts atemporally and their temporal parts exist in virtue of them, thus extrinsically. But as events, they take up time and have a beginning and an end. Aristotle solves the problem of the instant of change by claiming that while the resulting state has a first instant, the process leading up to it does not. Absent an ontological distinction between processes and states, this solutions looks somewhat arbitrary. Interpreting change as processual, I claim, motivates the Aristotelian solution, sheds light on the medieval discussion and also helps fleshing out an adverbialist solution to the contemporary problem of temporary intrinsics.