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Research Overview

My research, which comprises work in moral and political philosophy, moral psychology, philosophy of religion, and Africana philosophy, examines aspects of human life that alienate us in various respects from ourselves, and from the projects and relationships that enable us to live morally good and meaningful lives; and it examines attitudes – namely, *faith*, *trust* and *love* – that help remedy these forms of alienation and bind us to sources of meaning and value in life. My work may be organized into three main strands, which I describe below, and which focus on faith, trust, and love respectively.

Faith

The first strand, which is marked by its engagement with literary work and with scholarly work in psychology and theology, addresses largely neglected topics concerning the nature and significance of faith. It is, of course, unsurprising that secular philosophy has devoted little attention to faith. Because the significance of faith is typically associated with theism, it may seem that a careful study of faith has little to offer secular philosophy. Furthermore, in the absence of religious beliefs or commitments that might lead one to value certain types of faith, philosophers may be, not just indifferent to faith, but hostile to it. Philosophers prize rationality, and so they may dismiss faith as an objectionable form of *irrationality*.

But, I argue, it would be a serious mistake for philosophers of any sort to dismiss faith altogether. Whether or not some version of theism holds, certain secular forms of faith in people and in our deepest values – as distinguished from faith in God or in religious tenets – are centrally important virtues; that is, they are traits that are morally admirable, or admirable from some

broader perspective of human flourishing. For example, imagine a civil rights activist who works to secure just treatment for an oppressed racial minority. The activist's faith in the political leaders and citizens who accept, or even support, oppressive institutions may prompt him to pursue a campaign of non-violent resistance that seeks not only to eliminate injustice, but also to convert one's oppressors and enter into community with them. Or imagine a first-generation college student – a child of Mexican immigrants to the United States – who discovers, upon entering college, that many of her classmates and teachers harbor deep prejudice concerning Mexican-Americans' drive and intellectual ability. The student's faith in her own competence and in the quality of her own character may help counteract her doubts about her ability to succeed. Or imagine someone who encounters skeptical challenges that shake his conviction that human life is worth living, and suppose he cannot address these challenges to his satisfaction. This person's faith in his deepest ethical convictions may quiet his doubts. I argue that a careful study of these types of faith, and the roles they play in human life, promises to deepen our understanding of aspects of moral and political life, and aspects of human flourishing, that are poorly grasped.

I discuss various forms of secular *faith in people* in two inter-related articles. In an early, foundational article entitled “**Faith in Humanity**,” I argue that having a certain limited form of faith in other people's moral decency, namely, the sort of faith that the political activist in the example above has in his fellow citizens, is an important moral virtue. I argue that having this sort of faith in people tends to prompt them to act rightly, helps us avoid treating them unjustly, and – crucially – draws us into a morally important form of community with them. In “**Three Varieties of Faith**,” I argue that, in addition to having faith in humanity, a virtuous person has two other forms of faith in people, namely, a kind of faith in people to whom she bears certain personal relationships – for example, her spouse or her child – and a kind of faith in herself. Bringing together these varieties of faith in people enables us to recognize certain limited, but

important, respects in which, ideally, relations among members of the moral community mirror relations between friends, family members, or members of certain other personal relationships that we expect to find in a good human life. This recognition deepens our understanding of the nature and appeal of the sort of moral community to which we should aspire.

In “**Living with Absurdity: A Nobleman’s Guide**,” I draw on Leo Tolstoy’s memoir *A Confession* to characterize a kind of secular *faith in our deepest values*, and to argue that such faith is part of an appealing response to the philosophical problem of life’s absurdity. In the memoir, Tolstoy recounts falling into despair after coming to believe that human life is meaningless and absurd. Although his account of the phenomenology of this crisis is illuminating, his response to the crisis – namely, embracing a religious tradition that he had previously dismissed as “irrational” and “mingled with falsehood” – seems unpromising, at best. Nevertheless, I argue, Tolstoy’s account of his response makes a valuable contribution to contemporary thought about the meaning and absurdity of life. First, I draw on Tolstoy’s memoir to explain how our recognition that life is absurd threatens to alienate us from centrally important features of our lives. I then draw on Tolstoy’s account to characterize a form of faith in our deepest values, and I explain how such faith can counteract this alienation and enable us to live wholeheartedly.

In an article in progress, I extend my exploration of the nature and significance of secular faith. Philosophers like John Dewey, and more recently, Thomas Nagel and Ronald Dworkin, have tried to characterize a kind of religious attitude that we can adopt, and which contributes to our flourishing, whether or not we believe that anything like God exists. In “**The Religious Outlook**,” I draw on Fyodor Dostoevsky’s early novel *Notes from a Dead House* – a largely autobiographical account of life in a Siberian prison camp – to characterize an important aspect of the religious attitude that these later accounts neglect, namely, a kind of faith that helps shape how we see ourselves, the people

around us, and the world we inhabit. I argue that Dostoevsky's fiction helps us better understand how the religious attitude, with its characteristic type of faith and associated way of seeing, enables us to recognize and appreciate human worth, and sources of meaning in life.

Trust

The second strand of my research rests on the familiar view that conforming to moral ideals enables you to avoid a profound form of alienation from other, equally reasonable people, and to live in a valuable form of community with them, even though their interests and aims may be considerably different from yours. There are, in other words, a staggering number of people on the planet, and their various interests come into sharp and frequent conflict. On the one hand, it is appropriate for each person to devote some special attention to her own private interests and to the interests of people close to her, but on the other hand, there is a sense in which each of us is just one person among others, and no one is any more or less significant than anyone else. Both of these judgments are central to the living of our lives. If we pursue our private interests in a manner that is unconstrained by recognition that we are no more or less significant than other people, we alienate ourselves from people around us and experience profound isolation. If we recognize that each person is just one among others, but fail to grant that we may sometimes devote special attention to our own projects and relationships, we cut ourselves off from important sources of meaning and value in life. Conforming to moral ideals is appealing and important partly because it enables us to live in a manner that gives expression to each of these judgments: a morally virtuous person sometimes pursues her private interests, but does so in a manner that draws her out of her solitude and into valuable forms of community with others.

Discussions of this view in the literature focus on respects in which, to enter into relevant forms of community, we must limit our outward behavior, and thereby leave room for others to

pursue their own reasonable aims. By contrast, my work focuses on respects in which entering into these forms of community depends not only on our outward behavior, but also on features of our inner, psychological lives, namely, on our *trusting* people and being *worthy* of their trust. This emphasis on the inner life helps us better understand the role that morality occupies in our lives, and better appreciate the appeal and importance of conforming to moral ideals.

I appeal to this conception of morality, and to this examination of our inner lives, to develop novel answers to vexing questions concerning the nature, value, and justification of moral rights. It is a commonplace that there are limits to the ways we can permissibly treat people, even in the service of good ends. For example, we may not steal someone's wallet, even if we plan to donate the contents to famine relief, or break a promise to help a colleague move, even if we encounter someone else along the way whose need is somewhat more urgent. In short, people have moral rights not to be treated in certain ways. Nevertheless, despite its deep intuitive appeal, the view that people have such rights has drawn considerable criticism, and attempts to provide a rationale for moral rights have been, at best, substantially incomplete. In "**Civic Trust**," I develop an account that helps make rights intelligible by identifying a morally significant relation we bear to people when, and only when, we observe their rights not to be mistreated in certain ways. Put briefly, observing people's rights is a condition for being worthy of a certain form of trust, and being worthy of such trust is an essential part of living with others in the sort of community that characterizes morally permissible interaction. By focusing, in ways other accounts do not, on the role that observing one another's rights plays in our psychological lives, this approach makes the structure of rights more intelligible, helps us better appreciate the force of our reason to observe one another's rights, and helps us better understand the kind of moral community to which we should aspire.

In “**A Better World**”, I clarify and defend the form of argument underlying a different approach to making rights intelligible – an approach that is distinct from, but compatible with, the approach I adopt in “Civic Trust.” Thomas Nagel, Frances Kamm, and Warren Quinn each argue that if we have rights, say, to freedom of religious expression and so on, then we have a certain desirable moral status, but if we do not have rights, then we have some other, less valuable status instead. So, they conclude, we would be better off if we had rights, and this somehow shows that we do, in fact, have them. Their arguments have the following form: if the truth of some moral theory – quite apart from the results of our believing or complying with the theory – would make for a better world, this provides evidence of the theory’s truth. Such arguments may seem to be obvious non-starters, but I argue that, when it is properly understood, this form of argument is valid in moral philosophy, and that recognizing its validity broadens our understanding of how to justify moral rights and other moral principles.

Love

The third strand of my research, which engages with literary work and with scholarly work in psychology, theology, and history, explores the nature and significance of love. More precisely, it examines grief over the deaths of people we love, the role of loving attention in enabling us to find sources of consolation in a world full of suffering, and the dynamics of love and shame in personal and political life. Turning first to grief, imagine that someone recovers relatively quickly, say, within two or three months, from grief over the death of her spouse, whom she loved and who loved her; and suppose that, after some brief interval, she remarries. Is there something regrettable about the fact that she feels better and gets on with her life relatively quickly? In “**Grief and Recovery**”, which is co-authored with Erica Preston-Roedder, we respond to two arguments that give an affirmative answer to this question. The first, which is due to Dan Moller, states that such a quick recovery is regrettable because

it means that the now-deceased person was *unimportant* to the survivor. The second, which derives from classic literary discussions of grief, states that such a recovery is regrettable because it constitutes a failure of solidarity, a way of being alienated from the person who died. Responding to these arguments promises to mitigate certain anxieties about whether we do well by the people we love after they die. Furthermore, it helps us grasp more fully what it means to be important to these people, and to stand in solidarity with them, during their lives.

In an article in progress entitled “**Rebellion,**” I describe a kind of existential problem that Fyodor Dostoevsky raises in his novel *The Brothers Karamazov* – namely, determining how to live with clear eyes in world full of atrocities, without abandoning one’s deepest ethical convictions or succumbing to despair – and I reconstruct Dostoevsky’s view that a form of loving attention may help us address this problem. *The Brothers Karamazov* is a catalog of human afflictions: characters labor under the crushing weight of extreme poverty, they are ravaged by war and disease and mental illness, and they experience and engage in horrific forms of physical and emotional abuse. But they navigate these ills in a variety of ways. While some fall into despair, or develop festering resentments that erode their humanity, others find consolation, satisfaction, and even joy amid the sorrows. I consider how these latter characters – and Dostoevsky himself – find these forms of happiness by cultivating loving attention, which they direct at the natural world and at other people. Furthermore, I explain how finding these forms of happiness helps Dostoevsky’s characters, and may help us, live, and even flourish, in a broken world.

Finally, my exploration of the dynamics of love and shame, and the significance of these dynamics for individual flourishing and for racial justice, is rooted in James Baldwin’s early novels, which are almost entirely neglected in professional philosophy, as well as aspects of his early essays that deserve more careful philosophical attention. On Baldwin’s view, humiliation – being

made to feel deeply ashamed of who we are – is the “central danger” of our social lives. Put briefly, we view ourselves, constantly and inescapably, through other people’s eyes, and our self-understanding and self-esteem depend largely on these other people’s real or imagined judgments about us, and about our characteristics. During childhood, we respond to, and often internalize, our parents’ judgments, and as we grow older, we come to respond to the relentless gaze of family members, friends, rivals, romantic partners, and the countless strangers whose judgments make up the dominant views in our community.

Herein lies the danger. All of us have shortcomings that others may recognize if they see us clearly. Furthermore, setting these shortcomings aside, all of us inhabit morally imperfect communities in which others may view us through the lens of some deeply entrenched, but wholly unwarranted, prejudice. So, all of us are vulnerable to being despised by those others on whom our self-understanding and self-esteem depend. When we are so despised, we are apt to become deeply ashamed of who we are, and such shame may wreak havoc with our own lives, and with our relationships with others. In other words, our shame may prompt us to respond in ways that alienate us, deeply and in multiple respects, from ourselves and from people around us. We cannot escape this danger entirely; it is simply part of being social creatures whose self-understanding and self-esteem depend on other, imperfect creatures’ judgments. Nevertheless, we can adopt attitudes and behaviors that mitigate this danger to some degree, enabling us to cope with it.

In three interrelated essays, I reconstruct Baldwin’s account of forms of shame, and associated forms of alienation, that characterize American life, and I explain how, according to Baldwin, we might mitigate the disastrous consequences of such shame through *love*. “**Divine and Mortal Loves**” explores Baldwin’s claim, in *The Fire Next Time*, that “If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, it is time we got rid of

Him.” I present Baldwin’s account of the danger of humiliation, and, focusing on the case of Black Americans, I explain why marginalized people are vulnerable to a particularly damaging form of humiliation. Drawing on the work of the theologian Howard Thurman, I explain how faith in a loving God can enable marginalized people to cope with this danger in a manner that renders them, in some sense, larger, freer, and more loving; and, drawing on Baldwin’s work, I sketch an account of how marginalized people may cope with this danger, not by relying on God’s love, but rather by relying on their love for one another.

I extend my reconstruction of this latter, non-theistic account in an article in progress entitled “**Some Uses of Irony.**” I characterize a kind of *love of the world* that, according to Baldwin, is manifest in elements of Black American culture ranging from the Black Church to jazz and the blues. On Baldwin’s view, this love leads many Black Americans to approach with irony those inevitable hardships that are beyond their control, and which threaten to overwhelm them. Such love thereby lends these Black Americans a kind of courage – a willingness to face painful and frightening realities – that helps them resist both the comforting fantasies they may be tempted to adopt and the corrosive distortions that others, who despise them, might attempt to impose on them.

Finally, in an article in progress entitled “**Love and Social Justice,**” I consider the origins and the dire consequences of a form of shame that many White Americans experience. Baldwin’s early work explores a contradiction that lies at the center of the American story, namely, the vast discrepancy between the ideals that Americans affirm, which state that all people are free and equal, and the lives that Americans lead, which rest on the often brutal subjugation and exploitation of Black people. On Baldwin’s view, dim recognition of this discrepancy generates a deep, but largely unacknowledged, sense of shame in many White Americans. Such shame renders these Americans unwilling to examine American history, or their own position within American

society, with clear eyes, and it thereby shields the nation's callousness and cruelty from sincere and effective moral scrutiny. In "Love and Social Justice," I reconstruct and defend Baldwin's view that, by bearing witness to the true character of American society and, at the same time, exhibiting a form of *loving acceptance* of White Americans, Black Americans may lead their White compatriots to face the disturbing reality of American racism – despite the shame this confrontation with reality arouses – and to work toward altering that reality. Put more broadly, I articulate and defend a version of a highly influential and widely admired – but also puzzling and potentially dangerous – ideal within Black American moral and political philosophy, namely, an ideal that directs us to respond to certain forms of wrongdoing and injustice with love.

Publications

Preston-Roedder, R. 2023. "Living with Absurdity: A Nobleman's Guide," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 87 (3): 664-687.

Preston-Roedder, R. 2023. "Divine and Mortal Loves," *Religious Studies* 59 (3): 533-548.

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Preston-Roedder, R. 2014. "A Better World," *Philosophical Studies* 168 (3): 629-644.

Preston-Roedder, R. 2013. "Faith in Humanity," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 87 (3): 664-687.

Articles in Progress

Preston-Roedder, R. "Love and Social Justice" (available upon request)

Preston-Roedder, R. "Rebellion"

Preston-Roedder, R. "Some Uses of Irony"

Preston-Roedder, R. "The Religious Outlook"