

## Eleanor Gordon-Smith

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### EDUCATION

**Princeton University**, Princeton NJ

Ph.D. Philosophy, November 2023

Dissertation: “The Ethics of Disbelief”

Advisors: Sarah McGrath and Gideon Rosen.

**University of Sydney**, Sydney Australia

B.A. (First Class Honours), Philosophy, 2014

Thesis: “Sexual Consent Under Conditions of Unknown Risk”

Advisor: Tom Dougherty

M.Phil 2015-2017 (terminated to enrol at Princeton)

Thesis: “The Role of Uptake in Refusal and Consent”

Advisor: Caroline West.

### INTERESTS

Areas of Specialization: Ethics, Metaethics, Epistemology.

Areas of Competence: Moral Psychology, Feminist Philosophy, Philosophy of Language, Political Philosophy.

### PUBLICATIONS

- “The Ethics of Disbelief”, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 2023 (forthcoming).
- “Contagious Inquiry”, *Philosophical Topics*, conditionally accepted, 2023.
- “Stop Being Reasonable”, University of New South Wales Press, 2019.  
*“A sharp-edged and deeply serious book about a mainstream myth that brings us much comfort but little progress: that we all know what rationality demands, and that more rational debate will set us free. Gordon-Smith shows us what it might really take, as she says, to ‘find our way back to the truth’. An excellent piece of philosophy”* – Amia Srinivasan, Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory, University of Oxford.

### HONOURS AND AWARDS

- **Honorable Mention, Plantinga Prize**, 2023  
The Plantinga Prize is administered by the APA to recognise essays related to theism, and awards up to two honorable mentions of \$5000. Awarded for “Not Enough Evidence, God! Why Deliberation Rules out Evidentialism about Reasons for Belief”, a prior version of a dissertation chapter.
- **Harold W. Dodds Fellow**, Princeton University, 2022-23.  
Students are nominated by their departments for the Harold W. Dodds fellowship, a competitive fellowship awarded by the Graduate School to exceptional students in their later years of study. The fellowship provides funding in excess of base stipend rates to students displaying the highest scholarly excellence in graduate work.
- **Graduate School Teaching Award**, Princeton University, 2023.  
Graduate Students are selected from the University for “significant and exceptional contribution to undergraduate teaching”. Students are nominated by their departments and the selection committee includes Deans in Academic Affairs and Senior Staff for Teaching and Learning. Each awardee receives \$1000.
- **Early Career Women in Philosophy Visiting Program**, ANU, 2023.  
Recognizing outstanding PhD students and early-career researchers for visiting fellowships.

- **Laurance S. Rockefeller Graduate Prize Fellow**, University Centre for Human Values, Princeton University, 2021-22  
The Graduate Prize Fellow program recognizes and supports graduate students with distinguished academic records whose dissertation involves the critical study of human values.
- **Australasian Association of Philosophy Media Prize**, 2021  
The APA Media Prize recognizes a philosopher of distinguished academic record who has made sustained contributions to the public communication of philosophical ideas.
- **University Centre for Human Values Merit Grant**, Princeton University, 2017-18  
The Merit Grant adds is a financial prize in excess of base stipend rates for junior students working on topics in the study of Human Values.
- **Australasian Postgraduate Award**, University of Sydney —2017  
Australasian Postgraduate Awards are offered by the Commonwealth Government to students with exceptional postgraduate research potential. Funded \$20 000 for research into consent and refusal.
- **Wentworth Medal**, University of Sydney, 2015  
The Wentworth Medal awards \$10,000 annually to the best student essay as determined by the Deans of the Arts, Law, and Business faculties. The topic for 2015 was “Sticks, Stones, and the Bounds of Free Speech”.
- **Henry Lawson Prize**, University of Sydney, 2015  
Awarded annually to one student for outstanding writing.
- **Lithgow Prize IV**, University of Sydney, 2014  
Awarded annually to the student with the highest achievement in units of philosophy.
- **Merit Scholarship**, University of Sydney, 2014.  
Full tuition support for students of excellent academic potential. Recipients must maintain a Distinction Grade average for the duration of their degree.

## TEACHING

### **Assistant in Instruction**, Princeton University.

Phi307: Systematic Ethics Spring 2022, with Professor Sarah McGrath.

Phi202: Introduction to Moral Philosophy, Fall 2020, with Professor Johann Frick.

Phi202: Introduction to Moral Philosophy, Fall 2018, with Professor Sarah McGrath.

### **Lecturer**, University of Sydney.

Philosophy of Happiness, Summer 2017.

Introduction to Ethics, Summer 2017.

### **Assistant in Instruction**, University of Sydney.

Philosophy of Environment, 2017

Philosophy of Sex, 2016

Introduction to Philosophy (Society, Self and Knowledge), 2016; (Reality, Ethics, and Beauty), 2016

History of Ethics, 2015, 2016

Philosophy of Happiness, 2015

Decision Theory, 2015

## TALKS AND CONFERENCES

(†: selected by blind review. \*: invited.)

Philosophy Department, Princeton University, Spring 2023\*

“Philosophy and Giving Advice”, in conversation with Kwame Anthony Appiah, interviewed by

Barry Lam (UC Riverside, Hi-Phi Nation).

APA Central, February 2023†

Symposium Session: “The Ethics of Disbelief”

Chair, Madison Metaethics Workshop, 2023

UNC Chapel Hill Workshop in Normativity, 2022, 2023†

Commentator (Awarded to top 14 abstracts submitted to CFA).

Arizona Workshop in Normative Ethics, 2022.

Chair (Awarded to top 14 abstracts submitted to CFA).  
 Summer Institute on Practical Normativity, Humboldt University, 2022 †  
 “Normal Inquiry and the Norms of Inquiry”.  
 APA Pacific, April 2022\*  
 Commentator at Symposium: “Understanding and Emotion”.  
 Princeton-Humboldt Graduate Student Conference, 2021†  
 “The Ethics of Disbelief”.  
 Australasian Association of Philosophy Conference, 2021  
 “Dumb Things: The Epistemic Value of Making Mistakes”.  
 Southern Society for Philosophy and Psychology, 2020\* (Delayed due to COVID).  
 3rd Annual Moral and Political Philosophy Workshop, Dartmouth University, 2019\*  
 Summer Institute on Practical Normativity, ANU, 2019†  
 Brown-Princeton Moral Epistemology Workshop, 2018\*  
 Comments on “Rational Moral Ignorance” by Zach Barnett.  
 Australasian Philosophy Conference, 2017†  
 “Consent, Refusal, and Pornography”.  
 Proceedings of the Aristotelean Society, Open Session, 2016†  
 “Speech Acts and the Role of Uptake”.  
 Yale Postgraduate Conference, 2016†  
 “Refusal, Uptake, and the Meaning of ‘No’”.

### SELECTED PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The Guardian, [“Leading Questions”](#), Weekly Advice Column (Readership up to 800 000).  
 Guest Editor, Hi-Phi Nation, Slate Podcasts, 2023.  
 Griffith Review, [“Once Upon a Self”](#), 2023.  
 Essay for Australian literary journal on the ethical hazards of self-narrativisation.  
[“Conspiracy and Enlightenment”](#), in conversation with Slavov Žižek for the Festival of Dangerous Ideas, 2022.  
[“How to Be Perfect”](#) with Mike Schur, Director of The Good Place, Wheeler Centre, 2022.  
 This American Life, [“Here’s Looking at You, Kid”](#), 2017.  
 This American Life [“Hollaback Girl”](#), 2016  
 A series of original interviews conducted with men who catcalled me and my efforts to use reasoned argument to persuade them to stop.  
 Director and Producer of Narrative Ethics Podcast “Little Bad Thing”.  
 One true story each week about what moral lessons we can learn from the decisions we regret; centred around audio of original interviews.  
 Shortlisted, New Philosopher Essay Prize, 2017.  
 Producer and Presenter, The Philosopher’s Zone, 2016-17, ABC Radio National Australia  
 “Should Freedom of Speech apply to the Outrage Industry?”, ABC News, 2015.

### SERVICE

Reviewer: *Nous*(x1), *Journal of Political Philosophy* (x1), *Analysis* (x1), 2023  
 Graduate Student Representative, Philosophy Department, Princeton University, 2021-2.  
 Visit Week Committee, Philosophy Department, Princeton University, 2019-20; 2020-21.  
 Referee for the Princeton Workshop in Normative Philosophy, Princeton University, 2017-8.  
 Climate and Inclusion Committee, 2020-2022.  
 MAP Undergraduate Reading Group Co-Ordinator, 2019.

**REFEREES**

Sarah McGrath

Professor, Department of Philosophy  
 Princeton University  
[smcgrath@princeton.edu](mailto:smcgrath@princeton.edu)

Michael Smith

McCosh Professor of Philosophy  
 Princeton University  
[msmith@princeton.edu](mailto:msmith@princeton.edu)

Gideon Rosen

Stuart Professor of Philosophy  
 Princeton University  
[grozen@princeton.edu](mailto:grozen@princeton.edu)

Victoria McGeer

Senior Research Scholar and Lecturer  
 University Center for Human Values  
[vmcgeer@princeton.edu](mailto:vmcgeer@princeton.edu)

Barry Lam (for public philosophy)

Professor, Department of Philosophy  
 UC Riverside  
 Host and Producer  
 Hi-Phi Nation (Slate Podcasts)  
[barryl@ucr.edu](mailto:barryl@ucr.edu)

**DISSERTATION SUMMARY**

Early on in Descartes' *Meditations*, the meditator assures himself that his program of far-reaching doubt cannot go too terribly wrong. "No danger or error will result from my plan, and I cannot possibly go too far in my distrustful attitude. This is because the task now in hand does not involve action, but merely the acquisition of knowledge" (1641/1986, 15). Like the meditator, contemporary philosophers have often thought of withholding belief as a relatively safe doxastic option. My aim in this dissertation is to trouble this picture. I argue that withholding belief can carry serious moral costs, and examine how this challenges some widely held epistemic commitments.

1. *Icky Inquiry: Backtracking on Existing Beliefs in Morally Laden Cases.*

It can be morally egregious to treat certain questions as open, even if we eventually arrive at the correct beliefs. Consequently, I argue, morality can tell us not to re-open inquiry even when the norms of inquiry say re-opening would be permitted. I begin by getting clearer on 'backtracking inquiry', in which a thinker goes from believing an answer to a question to considering that question open. I show that it is ordinarily fairly easy to get epistemic license to backtrack; not even very well credentialed existing belief rules out the permissibility of backtracking. However, in some morally important cases, even temporarily treating the question as open seems like it can be a grave moral mistake. This is puzzling. Backtracking aims to deliver a *better* relationship to our beliefs; re-acquainting us with evidence, delivering better justification, or higher credence. In morally important cases, it's often thought these epistemic improvements come with moral improvement too. Thinkers who understand *why* their morally important beliefs are true, or who have greater justification or conviction, are widely thought to be in a better moral position than if they simply had true beliefs. So why would morality frown on re-opening inquiry when doing so can improve our moral position? I give an explanation via the moral value of tenacity. I give a schema for when thinkers may re-open morally important questions, based on the moral wrongs of risk imposition.

2. *Can Moral Encroachment be Asymmetrical?*

Some philosophers hold that believing p can be wrongful, and this supplies reason against believing p. They also claim an asymmetry: while morality can push us away from objectionable beliefs, it can never push us towards more morally emollient beliefs instead. Moral influence on the doxastic can thus be reconciled with the principle that thinkers should not believe p against the evidence. I argue this is not a

viable position. If any doxastic state can wrong, withholding belief can wrong. Anyone who thinks we have moral reason to avoid wrongful beliefs should agree we have moral reason to avoid wrongful withholding. This just is moral reason for belief, so either there is symmetrical moral influence on belief or none at all.

3. *Surprise! Deliberation Does Not Vindicate the Evidentialist.*

In this paper I show how the moral upshots of believing  $p$  could possibly weigh in deliberation about *whether*  $p$ , when at the moment it's widely thought they can't. Pragmatists and evidentialists alike have agreed that only evidence can feature in factual deliberation; even Pascal did not think the considerations of the wager could be efficacious in conscious deliberation about whether God exists. Consequently, one major challenge for defenders of moral reasons for belief has been to explain how such reasons could possibly psychologically *work*. I argue that in fact, all sides of the debate should deny that only evidence can weigh in deliberation. The thought "I have enough evidence now" can as well. Two upshots. First, we have a way to model how moral considerations can legitimately feature in deliberation: by supplying our thoughts about whether the evidence is enough. Second, 'transparency' — the phenomenon that deliberation about whether one should believe  $p$  is entirely exhausted by deliberation about whether  $p$  — turns out to be a non sequitur for reasons for belief, contra a number of widespread and plausible-seeming arguments. I sketch how the evidentialist could modify their position to better capture the spirit of their view, and outline a new way forward for the pragmatist-evidentialist divide.