

## Joe Nelson

### *Curriculum Vitae*

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### **Education**

PhD Candidate, Department of Philosophy, Duke University (2013-Present)

Dissertation: *A Defense of Basic Prudential Hedonism*

Committee: Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (chair), Jennifer Hawkins, Gopal Sreenivasan, and David Wong.

Bachelor of Arts, *summa cum laude*, University of Minnesota, Twin Cities (2010)

### **Areas of Specialization and Competence**

- AOS: Ethics
- AOC: Metaethics, philosophy and public policy

### **Conference Presentations**

“Hedonism and Life Comparisons”

- Pacific APA, 2020 meeting.
- North Carolina Philosophical Society, March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019.
- South Carolina Society for Philosophy, March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

“Love and Psychological Egoism”

- North Carolina Philosophical Society, 2020 meeting.

“On Appeal to Prudential Intuition”

- Minnesota Philosophical Society, October 26<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

### **Awards and Fellowships**

- Duke University Certificate in College Teaching (In progress)
- South Carolina Society for Philosophy Graduate Student Essay Prize (2019)
- North Carolina Philosophical Society Graduate Student Essay Prize (2019)
- Duke University Summer Research Fellowship (Summer 2017)
- Graduate Fellow, Kenan Institute for Ethics (2014-2015 academic year)

## Teaching Experience (Duke University, Except Where Noted)

### As Sole Instructor

- PHIL103S: Introduction to Philosophy (Fall 2016, Fall 2017, Spring 2018)
- PHIL104S: Introduction to Philosophy through Ethics (Summer 2017)
- PHIL150: Logic (Spring 2017, Summer 2018, Fall 2018, Summer 2019, Fall 2019)
- PLCY340: Justice in Public Policy (Spring 2019, at UNC-Chapel Hill)

### As Teaching Assistant

- PHIL201 History of Modern Philosophy (Prof. Andrew Janiak, Spring 2016)
- PHIL170 Business Ethics (Prof. Wayne Norman, Fall 2015)
- PHIL101 Introduction to Philosophy (Prof. Andrew Janiak, Spring 2015)
- ISIS110 Information, Society, and Culture (Prof. Orlin Vakarelov, Fall 2014)

### Other

- Writing Studio Consultant (Thompson Writing Program, 2019-2020)

## Graduate Coursework

### Courses Taken for Credit:

COURSE NAME	INSTRUCTOR	TERM
Comparative Ethics	David Wong	Fall 2013
The Ethics of Believing	Allen Buchanan	Fall 2013
Contrastivism	Walter Sinnott-Armstrong	Fall 2013
Proseminar in Ethics	Wayne Norman	Spring 2014
British Empiricism	Michael Ferejohn	Spring 2014
Collections and Collectivity	Katherine Ritchie	Spring 2014
Metaethics (at UNC-CH)	Geoff Sayre-McCord and Simon Blackburn	Fall 2014
Moral Disagreement	David Wong	Fall 2014
Proseminar in M&E	Alex Rosenberg and Felipe DeBrigard	Fall 2014
Moral Psychology (at UNC-CH)	Susan Wolf	Spring 2015
Aristotle's <i>Metaphysics</i>	Michael Ferejohn	Spring 2015
Utilitarianism (at UNC-CH)	Susan Wolf	Fall 2015
Ideology	Allen Buchanan	Fall 2015
Philosophy of Biology	Robert Brandon	Spring 2016
Logic	Carlotta Pavese	Spring 2016

### Audited Courses:

COURSE NAME	INSTRUCTOR	TERM
The Scientific Revolution	Andrew Janiak	Fall 2014
Free Will and Moral Responsibility	Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Peter van Inwagen	Spring 2015
Sidgwick's <i>Methods of Ethics</i>	Jennifer Hawkins	Spring 2016
Well-Being	Jennifer Hawkins	Spring 2017
Bioethics	Jennifer Hawkins	Spring 2018

## **Dissertation Abstract**

My dissertation takes up the challenge of defending an unpopular theory in the philosophy of well-being: basic prudential hedonism (BPH).

BPH says that all and only pleasures, broadly construed, have intrinsic welfare value; all and only pains, broadly construed, have intrinsic welfare disvalue; pleasures and pains are to be understood in purely phenomenological terms; and the amount of welfare in any given period of a person's life is determined (in principle) by adding up the amount pleasure experienced by the person during that time and subtracting all the pain experienced by the person during that time.

Conventional wisdom has it that this theory is implausible. Welfare hedonism some contemporary defenders, but as far as I know, none of them accept my version of the view. Against this trend, I argue that BPH is preferable to every other major positive theory of welfare. This requires confronting fundamental and undertheorized issues concerning methodology and epistemology in value theory.

My dissertation contains four chapters. In the first chapter, I define BPH, provide a set of minimal adequacy conditions for theories of welfare, and show that BPH meets them (though others do too). In the second and third chapters, I rebut the two main sorts of objections to hedonistic theories of welfare. In the final chapter, I offer a criterion of theoretical simplicity, and argue that it gives us a reason to favor BPH over other minimally adequate theories.

The main criticisms of BPH fall into two camps. First, there are the criticisms of BPH as a theory of hedonic states. It is alleged that our considered judgments do not support a view of pleasure and pain, broadly construed, as unified categories with some common feature that allows them to be quantifiable, commensurable, and opposite in the way that BPH contends. Second, there are the criticisms of BPH on evaluative grounds. It is alleged, most often on the basis of life comparison thought experiments, that our considered judgments do not support the view that all and only pleasures have intrinsic prudential value.

I interpret each sort of criticism as hinging on an explanatory claim: that the best explanation of our considered judgments in these areas is incompatible with BPH being true. Accordingly, I respond to each kind of criticism by proposing alternative explanations of these judgments that are compatible BPH. My explanations account for our judgments equally well; do not imply skepticism about prudential value; and do not leave the philosophy of welfare methodologically bankrupt. The plausibility of these explanations nullifies the objections.

These sections leave BPH at a stalemate with other minimally adequate theories of welfare. I attempt to break this stalemate by pointing to a distinct advantage of BPH: that it is simple, in the sense that it makes fewer fundamental claims than its rivals. I offer two arguments to this effect. First, I argue that in making fewer fundamental claims about both hedonic states and intrinsic prudential value, BPH has greater epistemic probability than other minimally adequate theories. Second, I argue that not treating this kind of simplicity as a desideratum leaves us without an adequate rationale for rejecting theories that assign intrinsic value to an indefinitely, and implausibly, large number of things.

## **References for Joe Nelson**

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong  
Chauncey Stillman Professor of Practical Ethics  
[walter.sinnott-armstrong@duke.edu](mailto:walter.sinnott-armstrong@duke.edu)

Jennifer Hawkins  
Associate Research Professor of Philosophy  
[jen.hawkins@duke.edu](mailto:jen.hawkins@duke.edu)

Gopal Sreenivasan  
Lester Crown University Professor of Ethics  
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David Wong  
Susan Fox Beischer & George D. Beischer Professor of Philosophy  
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