

# BENNETT ECKERT-KUANG

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## AREAS OF SPECIALIZATION AND COMPETENCE

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**AOS:** Ethics, Philosophy of Action

**AOC:** Applied Ethics (esp. Ethics of Technology), Kant, Political Philosophy

## EDUCATION

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**Ph.D.** Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Philosophy 2021–2026 (expected)

Dissertation: *Norms and Natures: Foundations for Pluralist Constitutivism*

Committee: Kieran Setiya (chair), Tamar Schapiro, Jeremy Fix (University of Oxford)

**B.A.** Northwestern University, Philosophy 2016–2020

Thesis: *Controlling Our Principles*

Advisor: Kyla Ebels-Duggan

## PUBLICATIONS

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[How to Be a Constitutivist](#). *Ethics*. Forth.

[Purely Instrumental Agents Are Possible](#). *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*. Forth.

[Kant on Self-Legislation as the Foundation of Duty](#). *European Journal of Philosophy* 33 (3): 910–926. 2025

[Kantian Ethics](#) (Kyla Ebels-Duggan and Bennett Eckert). *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Ethics, 2nd Edition* (ed. Christian Miller). Bloomsbury: 308–335. 2023

## UNDER REVIEW AND IN PROGRESS (DRAFTS AVAILABLE ON REQUEST)

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“Two Concepts of Constitutive Standards,” promised to a special issue of *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* pending final review (final submission date: 31 Dec 2025)

“Acting for Another’s Sake,” in progress

## PRESENTATIONS (\* = POSTER)

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“Two Concepts of Constitutive Standards”  
*Constitutivism in Ethics and Epistemology Workshop* September 2025

“Can Constitutivists Explain What We Owe to Each Other?”  
*Joint Session of the Aristotelian Society and the Mind Association* July 2025

“Does Training Generative AI Violate Intellectual Property Rights?”  
\**MIT Ethics in Computing Research Symposium* May 2025

“AI Art and Aesthetic Value”  
\**Philosophy of AI Summer School at the University of London in Paris* July 2024

“Kant on Self-Legislation as the Foundation of Duty”  
*American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Meeting* January 2024

“What is a Form of Rational Agency?”  
*MIT Work in Progress Workshop*

November 2023

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## COMMENTS

On Kieran Setiya’s “What is a Right?”, at *MITing of the Minds*

January 2022

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## TEACHING

### As Teaching Assistant at MIT

<i>Minds and Machines</i> , for Matthias Michel	Spring 2025
<i>Ethics of Computing</i> , for Brad Skow and Armando Solar-Lezama	Fall 2024
<i>Ethics of Technology</i> , for Kevin Mills	Spring 2024
• Lecture: “Is AI Art Theft?”	
<i>Classics of Western Philosophy</i> , for Bridget Brasher	Fall 2023
• Lecture: “Kant’s <i>Groundwork</i> ”	
<i>Moral Problems and the Good Life</i> , for Sam Berstler	Spring 2023
• Lecture: “Kant’s <i>Groundwork</i> ”	
<i>Problems of Philosophy</i> , for Kevin Dorst	Fall 2022
• Lecture: “Parfit on Personal Identity”	

### Pedagogical Training

Kaufman Teaching Certificate Program, MIT Teaching + Learning Lab	2024
Corrupt the Youth Volunteer Training	2024

### Teaching in High Schools

Corrupt the Youth, Boston Chapter	2024–Present
Assistant Lincoln-Douglas Debate Teacher, Greenhill School	2017–2024
Summer Lincoln-Douglas Debate Instructor, Global Debate Symposium	2016–2022
Summer Lincoln-Douglas Debate Instructor, Victory Briefs Institute	2016–2017
Assistant Lincoln-Douglas Debate Teacher, Harrison High School	2016–2017

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## PROFESSIONAL AND DEPARTMENTAL SERVICE

Teaching Development Fellow for Philosophy, MIT Teaching + Learning Lab	2024–2025
Co-Organizer, MITing of the Minds Alumni Conference	2025
Co-Organizer, Practical Philosophy / Value Theory Reading Group, MIT	2022–2025
Reviewer for Harvard-MIT Graduate Conference (3x)	2022, 2024, 2025
Graduate Representative to the Committee on Department Life, MIT	2022–2023

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## AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

Social & Ethical Responsibilities in Computing Scholar, MIT	2024–2025
• Project Group: “Data Ownership & AI”	
MIT Presidential Fellow	2021–2022

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## GRADUATE COURSEWORK (\* = AUDIT)

Logic for Philosophers (Skow and Khoo, MIT)	Spring 2025
*Philosophy of AI Summer School (University of London Institute in Paris)	Summer 2024

*Kant's Second <i>Critique</i> (Schapiro, MIT)	Fall 2023
Kant's First <i>Critique</i> (Spencer, MIT)	Spring 2023
Political Philosophy (Skow, MIT)	Spring 2023
Animal Ethics (Schapiro and Setiya, MIT)	Fall 2022
Bernard Williams (Moran, Harvard)	Fall 2022
Topics in Moral Philosophy (Hare, MIT)	Spring 2022
Metaethics (Schapiro and Khoo, MIT)	Spring 2022
Proseminar II: Contemporary Analytic Philosophy (Byrne and Setiya, MIT)	Spring 2022
Topics in Aesthetics (Skow, MIT)	Fall 2021
Insincerity (Berstler, MIT)	Fall 2021
Proseminar I: Early Analytic Philosophy (White and Setiya, MIT)	Fall 2021
Group-Based Morality (Stephen White, Northwestern)	Spring 2020
Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle (Kraut, Northwestern)	Spring 2018

## REFERENCES

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*\*For confidential letters of recommendation, please reach out to Christine Graham (cgraham@mit.edu).*

### **Kieran Setiya**

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de Florez Professor, Department of Linguistics and Philosophy  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

### **Tamar Schapiro**

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Professor, Department of Linguistics and Philosophy  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

### **Jeremy David Fix**

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Associate Professor of Ethics and Moral Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy  
University of Oxford

### **Kyla Ebels-Duggan**

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Professor, Department of Philosophy  
Northwestern University

### **Brad Skow** (teaching letter)

bskow@mit.edu

Laurance S. Rockefeller Professor, Department of Linguistics of Philosophy  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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### *Norms and Natures: Foundations for Pluralist Constitutivism*

We are subject to moral norms: for instance, to help others in need, to refrain from gratuitously harming them, and to not interfere with their autonomous choices. In virtue of what are we subject to these norms? My dissertation defends a novel version of constitutivism according to which they are grounded in our nature as rational agents capable of acting *for the sake of* one another—that is, capable of acting from ‘person-directed’ attitudes like respect, care, and love.

My view is best described in contrast with its competitors. On the one side, some contemporary Aristotelians argue that the moral norms are grounded in our nature as human beings: moral virtues are part of a characteristic, flourishing human life. I call this position ‘humanism.’ On the other side, while certain contemporary Kantians agree that moral norms are grounded in our nature, they think all possible rational beings are subject to the same moral standards and so must be grounded in our nature just as *rational* beings—not as specifically *human* beings. They must be grounded in the nature of rational agency *as such*—something that all possible rational agents share. I call the position ‘monist constitutivism.’

My dissertation defends ‘pluralist constitutivism,’ which charts a middle path between humanism and monist constitutivism. Moral norms are grounded in our *kind* of rational agency—in particular, in the capacity to act for another’s sake. With Kantians, I agree that moral norms are grounded in our *rational agency* rather than our specifically *human* nature, because the capacity to act for another’s sake could in-principle be shared with non-humans. With Aristotelians, I agree that moral norms are grounded in *our kind of* rational agency rather than rational agency *as such*, because not all possible rational agents are capable of acting for another’s sake.

**Chapter One**, “Purely Instrumental Agents Are Possible” (*PPR*, forthcoming), argues against the Kantian, ‘monist’ ambition to ground moral norms in the nature of rational agency *as such*. A familiar worry for Kantian constitutivists is that rational agency as such is too thin to ground moral norms because of the possibility of *purely instrumental agents*, who can reason about how to realize their ends but not which ends to pursue. Since morality is in part about *which* ends to pursue—not just taking the means to our ends—no recognizably moral norms can be derived from the nature of purely instrumental agency. I defend the possibility of such agents against objections from Christine Korsgaard, Rory O’Connell, and Sebastian Rödl. Monist, Kantian constitutivism is thus false. However, the lessons are not entirely negative. First, the argument shows that if constitutivists want to vindicate moral norms, they must be pluralists. Second, while extant arguments against purely instrumental agents’ possibility are unsound, they are still informative. They suggest *we* aren’t purely instrumental agents and shed light on the nature of our agency—by suggesting, for instance, that the line between our instrumental and non-instrumental rational capacities is less sharp than is typically assumed.

**Chapter Two**, “How to Be a Constitutivist” (*Ethics*, forthcoming), develops and defends my version of pluralist constitutivism. Because pluralist constitutivists can say that moral norms are constitutive of *our kind of* rational agency even if they’re not constitutive of rational agents as such, it is compatible with the possibility of purely instrumental agents. What, though, is a *kind* of rational agency? The *problem of proliferation* says that pluralists have no principled method for saying which differences between agents count as differences in kind, so just any difference between agents might count as a difference in kind. For instance, agents who are ‘future-Tuesday-indifferent’ might differ in kind from those who care about future Tuesdays. I respond by defining kinds of rational agency in terms of irreducibly distinct *forms* of reasons-explanations. Such explanations might cite a further intended end (‘A acted in order to  $\Psi$ ’), a believed proposition (‘A acted on the ground that  $p$ ’), or a *person* for whose sake one acts (‘A acted for B’s sake’). This strategy avoids the problem of

proliferation: it defines kinds of agency in terms of their *form* of motivation, not their motivation's content. Kinds of agency correspond to *different ways of acting for a reason*, not to *acting for different reasons*.

**Chapter Three**, "Acting for Another's Sake," applies the framework from Chapter Two to argue that the capacity to act for another's sake is a *kind* of rational agency. It corresponds to reasons-explanations with a distinctive form: 'A acted for B's sake,' rather than 'A acted in order to realize an end' or '...on the basis of a proposition.' Further, I argue that acting-for-another's-sake has internal standards: it can be done well or poorly *qua* acting-for-another's-sake. Surprisingly, these standards track commonsense deontological morality. In particular, I argue that I act-for-your-sake *well* only if (1) I treat you with respect—rather than mere care or benevolent concern—and (2) I am disposed to act for *any person's* sake. In short, I can only act for a given person's sake well if I'm disposed to treat *everybody* with respect. Morality is an internal standard of acting for another's sake, and so is grounded in the nature of our rational agency.