

Zachary Thornton

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AREA OF SPECIALIZATION

Metaphysics

AREAS OF COMPETENCE

Epistemology, Philosophy of Language, Ethics, Logic, Early Modern Philosophy, Aesthetics, Philosophy of Gender and Race, Eastern Philosophy

EDUCATION

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC

Ph.D., Philosophy

Expected May 2024

Dissertation: "Identity and its Significance"

Committee: John T. Roberts (adviser), Jim Pryor, Thomas Hofweber, Trenton Merricks

MA, Philosophy

May 2020

Thesis: "Distinct Indiscernibles and the Nature of Identity"

Committee: Carla Merino-Rajme (adviser), John T. Roberts, Gillian Russell

Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI

Bachelor of Arts, Summa Cum Laude in Philosophy, Phi Beta Kappa

May 2017

Thesis: "Possible Difference as Distinctness"

Advisor: John Grey

FELLOWSHIPS AND AWARDS

Applied Epistemology Fellow

Fall 2022 – Present

Visiting Scholar at the University of Virginia

Fall 2022

Mary Williams Fellowship

Fall 2022 – Spring 2023

Bertha Williams Fellowship

Fall 2018 – Spring 2019

Summa Cum Laude, *Michigan State University*

May 2017

Phi Beta Kappa, *Michigan State University*

March 2017

PAPERS *(Available Upon Request)*

The Identity of Necessary Indiscernibles

Forthcoming at Philosophers' Imprint

Abstract: I propose a novel metaphysical explanation of identity and distinctness facts called the Modal Proposal. According to the Modal Proposal, for each identity fact – that is, each fact of the form $a=b$ – that fact is metaphysically explained by the fact that it is necessary that the entities involved are indiscernible; and for each distinctness fact – each fact of the form $a \neq b$ – that fact is metaphysically explained by the fact

that it is possible for the entities involved to be discernible. I argue that the Modal Proposal has greater payoffs at less cost than any of its competitors. It gives simple, uniform, and intuitive explanations of identity and distinctness that conserve longstanding philosophical insights about identity that go back to Leibniz. It does this while making our fundamental base more parsimonious, determining whether controversial cases of identity or distinctness are possible, and expanding our understanding of these central philosophical relations.

Counting by Discriminability

Under Review

Abstract: Many metaphysical theories or principles entail that there is an abundance of entities beyond what we normally comprehend. For example, Ontological Plenitude states that for each object, there are numerous distinct objects coincident with it that differ in their modal properties. The ontological abundance posited by these theories or principles seem to make our ordinary counting judgements false. In this paper, I defend a general solution to counting problems. I argue that when we count, we do not do so by counting every distinct object in a domain, but rather that we count the number of discriminable objects in a domain, where some object x is discriminable from object y iff we are able to employ the relevant kind of knowledge that x and y are distinct. In ordinary contexts, it is not appropriate to employ one's knowledge of the existence of the unfamiliar entities posited by metaphysical theories or principles. For this reason, these objects are not discriminable and we do not count them in ordinary contexts. In ordinary contexts, the objects we count are just those that we ordinarily acknowledge. So, on my view of counting, our ordinary counting judgments come out true, even if we accept a theory or principle that entails an abundant ontology.

What Matters When Becoming a Vampire?

Work in progress

Abstract: This paper is about what matters in survival – that is, what makes survival first-personally normatively significant. In it, I argue that what matters in survival is multidimensional, meaning that the normative significance of survival involves multiple independent dimensions of value. These dimensions are the value associated with our *agency* (i.e. good and bad actions) and the value associated with our *subjectivity* (i.e. good and bad experiences). I argue that in certain personal transformations, such as L.A. Paul's case of becoming a vampire, no future person's actions can be good or bad for you, though there is a future person (namely, the vampire) whose experiences can be good or bad for you. Since value associated with agency and value associated

with subjectivity can come apart, they are distinct dimensions of value. And since what matters in survival involves both, it is multidimensional.

The extant views of what matters in survival, such as Merricks (2022), cannot accommodate the idea that what matters in survival is multidimensional. To accommodate this idea, I develop a fine-grained conceptualization of what matters in survival based on a distinction between a future person having *all of* what matters in survival to you and having *only some of* what matters in survival to you. In cases like becoming a vampire, a future person has only some of what matters in survival to you because they are missing a dimension of what matters in survival. This conceptualization has important upshots such as: (i) it supports a new argument against the view that identity is what matters in survival, (ii) it offers new ways of thinking about life after personal transformations, and (iii) it opens new interpretations of classic cases in the personal identity literature, such as Parfit's tele-transporter case.

TALKS

“Covert Counter-Speech” <i>The PPE Society 7th Annual Meeting</i>	November 2023
“Surviving Temporary Transformations” <i>North Carolina Philosophical Society, Duke University</i>	March 2023
“Life-and-Death Branching and Everettian Probability” <i>UNC-KCL conference, King’s College London, London, UK</i>	July 2019
“Distinctness as Possible Difference” <i>Issues on the Impossible VII, Bratislava, Slovakia</i>	June 2019
“Distinctness as Possible Difference” <i>New Mexico-Texas Philosophical Society, San Antonio, TX</i>	April 2019
“Distinctness as Possible Difference” <i>Northern New England Philosophical Association, University of Vermont</i>	October 2018
“Distinctness as Possible Difference” <i>Minnesota Philosophical Society, Rochester, MN</i>	October 2018

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Sole Instructor, UNC-Chapel Hill

Asian Philosophy	Spring 2024
Race, Racism, and Social Justice: African American Political Philosophy	Summer 2023
Understanding Bias and Heuristics: An Introduction to Critical Thinking	Summer 2022

<u>Mind, Matter, and Metaphysics: The Philosophy of Experience and Reality</u>	Fall 2021
<u>Moral and Philosophical Issues of Gender in Society</u>	Summer 2021
<u>Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art</u>	Spring 2021
<u>Early Modern Philosophy</u>	Fall 2020
<u>Existentialism</u>	Summer 2020
Teaching Assistant, UNC-Chapel Hill	
Introduction to Ethics	Fall 2019
Introduction to Philosophy	Spring 2020
Roberson Scholar Honor's seminar: Practical Ethics	Spring 2022
Teaching Assistant, Johns Hopkins Center for Talented Youth	
Bioethics	July 2018
Corps member, City Year	August 2017 – May 2018
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Small group instructor of 3rd grade class at the Curtis Guild Elementary School in Boston ▪ Trained in cultural competency, emotional support, and ELA teaching 	
Tutor, Philosophy Department at Michigan State	August 2016 – May 2017
SERVICE (at UNC unless otherwise noted)	
Graduate Representative, Graduate Committee	September 2021 – August 2022
PPE Hiring Committee	Spring 2022
UNC Parr Center for Ethics Outreach	
National High School Ethics Bowl Championship Judge	2018 –Present
Seymour Community Center Discussion Series	Fall 2023
Galloway Retirement Community	Spring 2022
Carrol Woods Retirement Community	Fall 2019 – Spring 2020
Atria Retirement Community	Spring 2019
Organizer, 2019 Perspective Graduate Student Visitation	Spring 2019
Graduate Representative, Undergraduate Policy Committee	September 2018 – August 2019
President, Philosophy Club, <i>Michigan State University</i>	August 2016 – May 2017
Undergraduate Representative to Advisory Policy Committee <i>Department of Philosophy at Michigan State University</i>	January – May 2017
Eagle Scout, <i>Boy Scouts of America</i>	September 2013
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Held senior leadership positions for 3 years ▪ Lead and participated in community service projects, including work at the Greater Lansing Soup Kitchens, Good Will, and Volunteers of America 	
Student Ambassador, <i>People to People</i>	2011, 2012

- Represented American students for cultural exchange in China and Australia
- Cultural Competency training
- Service days including work with Chinese special education students

GRADUATE COURSEWORK

Co-designation: <i>Jim Pryor</i>	Audited Fall 2022
Personal Identity: <i>Trenton Merricks</i>	University of Virginia, Audited Fall 2022
Kant's <i>Critique of Pure Reason</i> : <i>Markus Kohl</i>	Audited Spring 2022
Moral Responsibility: <i>Susan Wolf</i>	Audited Spring 2022
Identity: <i>Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra</i> and <i>Donald Baxter</i>	Central European University, Summer 2021
Aristotle's <i>Metaphysics</i> : <i>C.D.C. Reeve</i>	Spring 2021
Moral Theory: <i>Susan Wolf</i> and <i>Doug MacLean</i>	Spring 2021
Thomas Hofweber's <i>Idealism and the Harmony of Thought and Reality</i>	Fall 2020
Later Wittgenstein: <i>Alan Nelson</i>	Fall 2020
Marx's <i>Capital</i> : <i>Robert Paul Wolff</i>	Spring 2020
Conceptual Engineering: <i>Thomas Hofweber</i>	Spring 2020
Social Philosophy of Language: <i>Gillian Russell</i>	Fall 2019
Alex Worsnip's <i>Structural Rationality</i>	Fall 2019
Plato's <i>Republic</i> : <i>C.D.C. Reeve</i>	Fall 2019
Humeanism in Ethics and Metaethics: <i>Simon Blackburn</i> and <i>Sarah Stroud</i>	Spring 2019
Intentionality and Consciousness: <i>Carla Merino-Rajme</i>	Spring 2019
Normative Epistemology: <i>Alex Worsnip</i>	Spring 2019
Theoretical Virtues in Science: <i>Marc Lange</i>	Fall 2018
Mathematic Logic: <i>Thomas Hofweber</i>	Fall 2018
Quantum Mechanics and its Interpretations: <i>John T. Roberts</i>	Fall 2018
Propositions: <i>Ram Neta</i>	Fall 2018

LETTER WRITERS

John T. Roberts. Professor of Philosophy, UNC-Chapel Hill (jtrosap@email.unc.edu)

Jim Pryor. Professor of Philosophy, UNC-Chapel Hill (jimpryor@unc.edu)

Trenton Merricks. Commonwealth Professor of Philosophy, University of Virginia (merricks@virginia.edu)

Teaching Letter: Mariska Leunissen. Professor of Philosophy, UNC-Chapel Hill (mleunissen@unc.edu)