

# Samuel Dishaw

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Harvard University 857-930-9120  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

AOS Ethics, Social Philosophy, Epistemology

AOC Political Philosophy, Practical Ethics (especially ethics of AI),  
Metaethics, Philosophy of Law

EDUCATION **Harvard University**  
PhD Philosophy, 2016-2023  
Dissertation: *Understanding Morality With Others*  
Committee: Selim Berker, Christine Korsgaard, Susanna Rinard, John  
Bengson (UT-Austin)

**University of Edinburgh**  
Visiting Research Scholar, 2015  
Sponsor: Matthew Chrisman

**Université de Montréal**  
MA, Philosophy, 2014-2016  
Thesis: “*L’éthique et sa place dans la nature*”  
Supervisor: Christine Tappolet

**Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg**  
Visiting student in the department of philosophy, 2013

**Université de Montréal**  
BA, Philosophy, 2010-2014

DISSERTATION ABSTRACT Thinking about morality is hard. Why should we have to understand for ourselves what morality requires, when we might rely instead on the judgment of those who know better? I defend a surprisingly neglected answer to this question: because we owe it to each other to understand, together, what morality requires of us. In the course of defending this view, I make progress on a number of closely related topics, including the nature of puzzlement, the demands of solidarity, and the success conditions of apology and interpersonal justification.

IN PREPARATION “Solidarity and the Work of Moral Understanding” (*R&R*, Philosophical Quarterly)

“The Object of Moral Understanding” (*R&R*, Ergo)

“Moral Understanding Between You and Me” (*Under review*)

“Puzzlement as a Guide to Understanding” (*Under review*)

AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

Graduate Fellowship, Edmond J. Safra Ethics Center 2020-2021

Certificate of Distinction for Teaching, Harvard University 2019  
(for *Saints, Heretics, and Atheists*)

Certificate of Distinction for Teaching Harvard University 2018  
(for *Inequality*)

SSHRC Doctoral Scholarship 2016-2020

Graduate Faculty Excellence Award 2016  
(University of Montreal)

FRQS Master’s Training Scholarship 2015-2016

Joseph-Armand Bombardier Master’s Scholarship 2014-2015

PRESENTATIONS

“Solidarity and the Work of Moral Understanding”  
Northwestern University Society for the Theory of Ethics and  
Politics (NUSTEP), Evanston, 2023

“The Moral Relationship”  
Neuchâtel University Philosophy Colloquium, 2023

“Moral Understanding Between You and Me”  
Humboldt Normativity Conference, 2022  
British Society for Ethical Theory Graduate Conference, 2021  
Manchester Political Theory Workshop on Recognition, 2021  
Moral Psychology and Rationality Workshop, University of  
Copenhagen, 2021

“Puzzlement as a Guide to Understanding”  
Inquiry Work-in-Progress Network, April 2022  
Syracuse Graduate Philosophy Conference, April 2021

“The Puzzle of Lucky Right Action”  
Southampton Normativity Conference, June 2019

Tulane Philosophy Graduate Conference, 2019  
University of Pennsylvania Graduate Speaker Series, 2018

“The Epistemic Significance of Grasping”  
Edinburgh Epistemology Graduate Conference, 2017  
New Trends in Epistemology, University of Pavia, 2017

“Pragmatic Reasons for Belief and the Possibility of Rationality”  
Kings College Philosophy Graduate Conference, 2016

COMMENTARIES Rachel Achs & Oded Na’Aman, “The Subtleties of Fit”  
St. Louis Annual Conference on Reasons and Rationality,  
2022

Russ Shafer-Landau, “Moral Intuitions and Moral Disagreement”  
Faces of Disagreement, University of Montreal, 2016.

TEACHING As Primary Instructor  
*Truth, Lies and Democracy in the Digital Age* (Summer 2022)  
Harvard University Summer School

As Embedded EthiCS Lecturer  
Harvard Department of Computer Sciences

“Democracy, Ignorance and Power Over Others” (Spring 2021)  
“Ethical Reasoning in AI for Social Impact” (Spring 2021)  
“Moral Responsibility and Social Networks” (Spring 2021)

“The Ethics of Data Visualization” (Fall 2020)  
“Permissible Defense Against Neural Fake News” (Fall 2020)  
“Fair Queuing” (Fall 2020)

As Teaching Assistant  
Harvard Philosophy Department

*The Art of Living* (Spring 2020)  
Instructor: Samantha Matherne

*Saints, Heretics and Atheists* (Spring 2019)  
Instructor: Jeff McDonough

*Inequality* (Fall 2018)  
Instructor: Lucas Stanczyk

CONFERENCE  
ORGANIZING

2021 The Rights Workshop, St-Andrews University, co-organizer  
(June 2021, with Daniel Muñoz and Joe Bowen).

2019 The Rights Workshop, MIT, co-organizer (2019, with Daniel  
Muñoz and Joe Bowen).

2019 Harvard-MIT Philosophy Graduate Conference, co-organizer  
(with Megan Entwistle).

2018 Harvard-MIT Philosophy Graduate Conference, co-organizer  
(with Zachary Gabor).

LANGUAGES

French (native)  
German (intermediate)  
Latin (reading knowledge)  
Ancient Greek (reading knowledge)

GRADUATE  
COURSEWORK

(\*not taken for credit)

*\*Bernard Williams*, Richard Moran  
*\*Beccausal Relations*, Selim Berker  
*\*Risk in Law and Society* (Princeton), Lara Buchak, Johann Frick and  
Renee Jorgensen  
*\*Normative Categories*, Selim Berker  
*\*The Good*, Christine Korsgaard  
*History of Modern Moral Philosophy*, Christine Korsgaard  
*Modal Logic*, Mark Richard  
*\*Ethics of Climate Change* (MIT), Casper Hare and Kieran Setiya  
*\*Killing and Letting Die in Public Policy*, Frances Kamm  
*Topics in Political Philosophy*, Lucas Stanczyk  
*\*Kant's Ethical Theory*, Christine Korsgaard  
*\*Bioethics*, Frances Kamm  
*Medieval Philosophy*, Jeffrey McDonough  
*Norms of Belief*, Selim Berker and Susanna Rinard  
*Method, Essence and Intuition in Metaethics*, John Bengson  
*Explanation*, Edward Hall and Brad Skow  
*Egalitarianism*, Gina Schouten  
*Practical Reasons*, Jeff Behrends  
*\*Speech Acts*, Richard Moran  
*Understanding*, John Bengson  
*Hume's Ethical Theory*, Christine Korsgaard

## REFERENCES

Selim Berker (Dissertation Supervisor)  
Alford Professor of Philosophy, Harvard University  
Harvard.phil.recs@gmail.com

Christine Korsgaard  
Arthur Kingsley Porter Research Professor, Harvard University  
Harvard.phil.recs@gmail.com

Susanna Rinard  
Professor of Philosophy, Harvard University  
Harvard.phil.recs@gmail.com

Jeff Behrends (Teaching Reference)  
Senior Research Scholar in Philosophy, Harvard University  
Harvard.phil.recs@gmail.com

## Understanding Morality with Others

This dissertation is about a moral ideal: the ideal of moral understanding. Much attention has been paid to moral understanding as an individual achievement that reflects well on its possessor. I defend the ideal of moral understanding on different grounds, focusing on the irreducibly *interpersonal* aspects of its importance.

On the view I defend, the importance of moral understanding is irreducibly interpersonal twice over. First, we have directed obligations to aim at moral understanding: I may owe it to you, specifically to understand some aspect of moral reality. Second, the kind of moral understanding we ought to achieve is one that involves other moral agents: moral understanding that is *shared* between ourselves and others.

One motivation behind this view is to vindicate the thought that moral understanding is distinctively valuable, as compared to moral knowledge. Yet a popular view in epistemology is that understanding, in general, reduces to knowledge. If that view is right, moral understanding cannot be more valuable than moral knowledge. Nothing can be more valuable than itself.

Is understanding reducible to knowledge? I argue that it is not. Consider that understanding has a non-privative, polar opposite: puzzlement. To be puzzled is to be in a state of incomprehension. Puzzlement is not the mere absence of understanding. A reductionist theory of understanding should be able to account for the difference between puzzlement and the mere absence of understanding. Knowledge-based reductionism fares poorly on this count: puzzlement is not analyzable in terms of knowledge, its absence, or its supposed polar opposite. This provides strong reason to think that understanding is simply a distinct state from knowledge.

Having defended the distinct nature of understanding in general, I turn to the distinct importance of understanding in the moral domain.

My analysis begins with the observation that an understanding of moral matters can be shared with another person. When you and I share moral understanding, we understand moral matters *together*, in a way that can't be reduced to each of us having moral understanding on our own. I argue that two central moral practices. —justifying our actions to others and apologizing for wrongdoing—always require shared moral understanding in order to be successful. Thus, whenever I owe you a justification or an apology, I thereby owe it to you to bring it about that we share moral understanding.

What is the broader *social* importance of moral understanding? Consider relationships of solidarity. Those who suffer at the hands of an injustice are better situated to know about it. This thought has been taken by some to entail that solidarity is essentially deferential: we ought to rely on the moral beliefs of those with whom we are in solidarity. I argue that this natural view is mistaken. Its advice is often self-undermining: when we receive conflicting moral testimony, it requires us to be in solidarity with no one. Even when its advice is not self-undermining, it leads to an unfair distribution of epistemic labor. Solidarity, I thus argue, requires more than mere deference. Moreover, the deference view has trouble making sense of the fact that solidarity relations are often symmetric: we can stand in solidarity with one another. In these cases, I argue, we owe it to each other to come to a shared moral understanding of the injustice we oppose. Such shared moral understanding is simply part of what it is for us to stand in solidarity with each other. We stand in solidarity with each other when we come to understand, together, that the injustices we suffer individually are injustices we face together—when our individual moral understanding is raised to collective consciousness.