

# Research Statement

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My research is primarily on topics in Analytic Metaphysics, with a focus on parthood, location, persistence, and ontology. I have a strong secondary interest in Philosophy of Religion, and have also done work relating Linguistics to both of these topics. And I am beginning to develop work on the Philosophy of Abuse.

I am currently finishing a book, *Parts Across Space and Time* (under contract with OUP and with an anticipated submission date of fall 2023), which draws together much of my work in Metaphysics. I also have several other large projects at various stages of development, which I anticipate will dominate my research for the next decade.

## Current Research

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My primary focus in Metaphysics is on parthood and location, where I examine the part-whole (i.e., mereological) structures of objects, and the structure of the relations material objects bear to space, time, and spacetime. Claims about these topics play crucial roles in almost every other area of Metaphysics, with immediate consequences for questions about how we persist through time, which sorts of objects exist, and how we should understand these metaphysical debates.

### *Parts Across Space and Time*

In my book *Parts Across Space and Time*, I argue for an intuitive theory of extension on which extension in any dimension requires possession of distinct parts. My claims about extension rule out several strange alternatives that have become popular, while also supporting Four-Dimensionalism about extension through time. I'll present this project in more detail, but will begin with a few notes on my methodology.

### Methodology

In my book, as well as in several previous publications it draws on, I use the methodology of taking strange cases and views seriously, in the pursuit of deeper understanding of and greater support for the more moderate views I endorse. I find this helpful in three ways.

First, considering strange cases allows us to pull apart distinct features that seem to always go together in ordinary cases. In widening the cases we consider, we can isolate components that are essential to our views, separating them from other commitments that often simply tag-along.

Taking strange cases and views seriously also allows us to give more robustly explanatory theories. Separating the impossible from the possible is important, but often we should do more: we should strive to explain *why* those things are impossible. We should examine impossible cases to find which features cause them to be ruled out. This not only supports our categorization, it also provides insight into the explanatory roles played by various components of our theories.

Finally, taking strange views seriously helps us more effectively argue against them. Simply dismissing radical views as strange will be unconvincing for those who do not agree. Instead, I argue via *reductio ad absurdum*: I grant my opponents every assumption they may want, then attempt to show their own views nonetheless fail on their own terms.

### Foundational Questions

When we give a theory of parthood and location, we want to complete the following steps:

- (i) identifying the mereological relations and locative relations, and determining which relations are defined in terms of which others,
- (ii) listing the axioms governing the instantiation of each kind of relation on its own, and
- (iii) determining the constraints on how the mereological relations and locative relations can be combined.

In *Parts Across Space and Time*, I start with widespread assumptions about how to complete the first two steps, and draw implications for the kind of theory we can give for the third step, looking at constraints on combinations of locative and mereological relations: I argue that anything that extends in time or space must have a distinct part contained in each region it fills.

### How Mereology and Location Relate

Many metaphysicians have opted for some extravagant views about possible ways things can extend. For instance, they have been inclined to claim that, contrary to what we may have thought, objects can be *multilocated* (a single object completely contained in multiple regions that don't overlap – e.g., being in *two places at once* as a time-traveller or a universal might be), or that objects can *span* regions (they can stretch across an extended area without having any parts, big or small, within that area – so, for instance, one such object might be a foot long without having two halves, or any smaller bits, making it up within that region).

I argue against these strange possibilities, in favor of a more moderate metaphysics. My central argument draws together several papers I've published throughout my career, each of them fitting like a puzzle piece into my larger picture. My argument comes in two steps.

First, drawing on my “Placement Permissivism and Logics of Location”, I argue, via *reductio ad absurdum*, that extended, simple regions are impossible. There are three options for what any given region might be like: (i) it may have some point-sized parts, (ii) it might have smaller and smaller parts, but no smallest parts, or (iii) it might have smallest parts that are larger than point-sized (and so are in that sense extended). I argue against both (ii) and (iii). Of central importance for my larger argument is my conclusion that even the mere possibility of extended, simple regions is in contradiction with any acceptable theory of location, and in fact, anything extended entity extends by being present in more than one disjoint (i.e., non-overlapping) region.

The second step of my argument involves arguing for my preferred way for how objects can extend across disjoint regions. There are three logical possibilities for how this could happen: (a) each of the disjoint regions contains a part of the object, and those parts are each distinct, (b) each of the disjoint regions contains a part of the object, and at least two of those parts are identical (which will involve multilocation), or (c) at least one of the regions does not contain a part of the object (which will involve spanning). I argue that (b) and (c) are metaphysically (and perhaps even analytically) impossible. My arguments against multilocation draw and expand on my “Multilocation and Mereology” and Time-Travel and Fundamentality”, arguing that multilocation is incompatible with plausible, widely-endorsed, arguably analytic axioms about each of parthood, fundamentality, and grounding. And to argue against spanning, I draw and expand on “The Overlap Problem”, arguing that if spanners are possible we will be able to generate cases that will require a new primitive mereological relation, or a new category in our ontology.

### Implications

If my arguments are right, the only option left is this: entities extend by having distinct parts contained in disjoint regions. That is: if you extend, it's by having smaller bits within every smaller region you fill. This has immediate implications for how things persist through time, if

we think this involves temporal extension. Many philosophers endorse what is often presented as the common-sense view: Three-Dimensionalism, according to which objects are wholly present at any time at which they are present at all. The competing view, Four-Dimensionalism, says that things are spread through time as they are spread through space, by having smaller parts at each of the smaller regions they fill. Here's where my claims are relevant. First, if we are extended in spacetime, Three-Dimensionalism seems to require multilocation through time, which I have argued is impossible. Second, incorporating arguments from "Refining Four-Dimensionalism", I argue that when properly formulated, Four-Dimensionalism follows as a direct consequence of my book's central thesis, for anything temporally extended. If I'm right, then, my views about extension tell us which theory of persistence is correct for those objects.

My arguments also have implications for how to understand debates about parthood, location, and persistence. I am not a deflationist, but my arguments provide support for some forms of deflationism about these debates. Consider: some philosophers think these debates are illusory; rather than producing substantive disagreement, engaging in these debates just involves describing the same thing in different ways. Some of these deflationists claim that there is just matter spread across spacetime, and we differ in how we use language to divide it up. But this assumption about how matter relates to spacetime is itself a substantive metaphysical claim, one that must be argued for. And it is one, interestingly, that my work supports. Thus, my arguments can be seen as friendly to these metaphysical deflationists because I begin by assuming their opponent's position (in taking these debates seriously), and end up arguing for a conclusion that is required for this particular version of deflationism. So while my work engages unapologetically and wholeheartedly in Metaphysics, it is informative for even the most Metaphysics-averse.

## **Future Research**

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Going forward, I have three other large projects that I anticipate will be my focus over the next decade. One of these is a book project about new options for how things break down into smaller parts. The second is on the possibility and rationality of atheistic prayer. And the third is a book applying philosophical tools to analyzing abuse and responding to common arguments surrounding it.

### ***Decompositional Plenitude***

My next project in Metaphysics, one that I have already been working on with my publication "Fusion First" and my draft "Decompositional Plenitude", is a re-examination of basic assumptions about our mereological relations and the axioms governing them. I argue we should reject the requirement that in order for some object to be a fusion of some parts, it cannot go mereologically beyond those parts (I'll explain this below). I support this by claiming first that our correct theory of our mereological relations removes any need for such a requirement. And second, that rejecting the requirement provides us with solutions to a host of metaphysical puzzles.

### **Mereological Relations Re-Examined**

It's widely agreed that our family of mereological relations include *parthood* (being some or all of something), *proper parthood* (being some but not all of something), *overlap* (having a part in common), and *fusion*. It is also widely agreed upon that you only need one relation to start with, and you can define the rest in terms of it. Usually, theorists take it to be arbitrary which relation is basic, typically opting for *parthood* or *proper parthood* as natural places to start. But this raises a puzzle: if mereological relations exist, are there multiple equally fundamental relations when just

one would do? Is there only one fundamental relation, and it's arbitrary which? Are these relations all just different ways of labeling a single mereological structure?

I argue (in "Fusion First") that we have reason to take *fusion* as our single primitive mereological relation. It is not an arbitrary choice. My argument is driven by close examination of our mereological intuitions, and insight into which axioms they support. I argue that the primary intuition that supports one of the most widely accepted axioms of Mereology, Weak Supplementation, actually supports a stronger principle. And interestingly, this stronger principle can only do the work our intuitions demand if it is understood in terms of a *fusion* primitive. Finally, I argue that once we take *fusion* as primitive, we no longer have formal reasons to claim that  $x$  fuses the  $y$ s only if every part of  $x$  overlaps at least one of the  $y$ s – or, put more simply, that the  $y$ s completely make up  $x$  only if  $x$  doesn't go beyond them.

### *A New Kind of Decomposition*

If we reject that restriction on *fusion*, we generate a view that I call 'Decompositional Plenitude': some entity,  $x$  is a fusion of some  $y$ s, even though  $x$  has a part  $z$  that has no parts in common with any of the  $y$ s. To explain via a quick example: suppose you think that the property *triangularity* is a fusion of a collection of other properties. We then face a puzzle of choosing between a collection of properties that includes *being 3-sided* and *being 3-angled*. Claiming it's a fusion of exactly one of the collections seems to require arbitrariness. Claiming it's a fusion of all the properties together seems to bloat the whole. And having two different kinds of triangularity seems like an over-proliferation of properties. But Decompositional Plenitude allows us to say that *triangularity* is a fusion of two distinct collections of properties, without being a fusion of all of them together, and even allowing the two collections to go mereologically beyond one another.

This view has a wide range of applications. If we apply it to the Problem of the Many, we can say that a single entity fuses each of several different collections of parts, without being a fusion of all of those collections together. If we apply it to the puzzle of mereological change over time (or space), we can capture senses in which entities are *entirely present* and *completely made of some parts* at a time while also made of different parts at other times, without contradiction, appeals to tense, or relativizing parthood. If we apply Decompositional Plenitude to social groups and to concepts, we can get a view that captures gradual change and context-sensitivity without positing ambiguity or proliferation of categories and kinds. These are just some of the many, far-reaching applications.

This view is a new take on the very foundations of our theory of parthood, and it will impact all kinds of areas of philosophy that depend on that theory. I take this to be the most exciting and fruitful work I've done in Metaphysics, and I am looking forward to exploring it in a book-length project.

### ***Prayer Without Belief***

I have a secondary research interest in Philosophy of Religion, and have written several papers on the Doctrine of the Trinity. But my main topic of interest going forward is the possibility and rationality of atheistic prayer.

It is widely thought that so-called "foxhole prayers", prayers offered by apparent atheists in times of desperation, are somehow defective. Either they involve a conversion (because atheists can't pray), or they involve some kind of irrationality or inconsistency (because the atheist is talking to an entity they believe doesn't exist). These sentiments are expressed not just by philosophers, but by members of the general public as well. Atheists sometimes desire to pray,

but are pushed away from it with accusations of irrationality or inconsistency. Those who consider themselves theists but who experience a crisis of faith may feel further distress in believing that they can no longer fully participate in their religious practices if they cannot pray without belief. These issues impact peoples' lives, and I think Philosophy can be helpful here.

In my paper "Atheistic Prayer", I use analogies to argue that not only can atheists rationally pray to God, they can also (if God exists) successfully engage in communicative exchanges with God and even build some sort of relationship with God, though they believe no such entity exists. Former theists who have suffered a crisis of faith, spouses/children/parents who attend church with theistic family members, and atheists in desperate circumstances, can all successfully and rationally engage in prayer.

Moving forward, I intend to pursue this project as a book targeted to a general audience. In addition to making my arguments about the possibility and rationality of atheistic prayer accessible to non-philosophers, I also intend to explore questions such as: What does it mean to pray to God? What is the content of atheistic prayers, and how is that content similar to conditional attitudes and assertions? What is the moral status of atheistic prayer: Is it required? Under which conditions may it be impermissible? And relatedly, what is its connection to religious seeking? Under what conditions should atheists be allowed to participate in religious practices more generally, especially those involving groups? And finally, is there a sense in which praying atheists should feel foolish, but theists or agnostics who pray should not?

### ***The Philosophy of Abuse***

The least developed of my future projects is also the one I'm the most passionate about. I have an emerging interest in the Philosophy of Abuse, and have been developing multiple papers on this, though ultimately I would like to write a book for a general audience, applying philosophical tools to this important subject.

Abuse is examined in Social Work, Psychology, Law, and Sociology (among other disciplines). Philosophy is not yet as fully part of this conversation as it should be. Ethicists often examine various kinds of maltreatment - domestic violence, sexual assault, bullying, etc. - but have been largely silent on abuse in general. But there is an opportunity here to apply tools of Philosophy in a way that complements and adds to work being done in other fields, in a way that can help survivors of abuse as they understand their experiences.

Many characterizations of abuse focus largely on features of an abuser, or on facts that can be established to outside observers; this helps when our goals are to intervene or to prosecute. But my focus (in line with some work in Psychology) is on facilitating recovery for victims. I've begun to develop an account of abusive action that does not entail anything about an abuser; my analysis places the focus on experiences of abuse and impact on victims. This kind of account allows us to separate issues of blame and immorality from topics of harm, support, and recovery. It also allows us to recognize that institutional maltreatment is often literally abuse: so, for example, many kinds of institutional racism and sexism, such as institutional racism and sexism in medicine, will count as abuse rather than merely maltreatment. And the separation of families at the US/Mexico border is also literally abuse, independent of whether any individual is an abuser in those cases. My account contrasts with common approaches to abuse, and is a jumping off point for significant interdisciplinary work and conversation. My hope is that and in using philosophical argument to develop and support it, my approach will provide a kind of safety net for abuse victims (theory as therapy) as they work to understand and recover from their own experiences.

In my book I'm tackling several topics, such as: how we might analyze abusive action without entailing anything about an abuser; how we might widen common descriptions of particular kinds of abuse, such as physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect, to capture additional cases of abuse; and how to apply tools from the Metaphysics of Causation to argue that in many cases, victims of abuse aren't causes of their abuse, even if features of them are among the background conditions that brought about instances of abuse. I'm also working on a paper, "Resisting Rip-Current Resources", discussing maltreatment in academia, how it is in many ways structurally similar to abuse, and how those subjected to it (as well as their allies) can identify good resources for responding to it, while avoiding resources that harm more than they help.

In all of my work here, my aim is to use philosophical tools to produce arguments that are helpful to the general public. I love doing my sort of abstract, in-the-clouds analytic metaphysics, but I am also grateful to have exciting projects that connect philosophy with real lives in meaningful ways.

More information on my research is available here: [www.parthood.com/applications](http://www.parthood.com/applications)  
Included there is a "Current Book Projects" document that summarizes how I see my manuscripts on *Parts Across Space and Time*, *Decompositional Plenitude*, *Atheistic Prayer*, and *Abuse: A Philosophical Perspective* developing. And links to all of my papers can be found on my research page here: [www.parthood.com/research](http://www.parthood.com/research)