Research Statement – Julia Netter

I am a political philosopher interested in real-world challenges facing modern liberal societies. Specifically, I work on autonomous agency in the context of moral pluralism and digital technology. My D.Phil. research considered the limits of respect for individuals' moral autonomy within the theory of political liberalism when citizens face each other in deep moral disagreement. My postdoctoral research proposes a new concept for liberal theory—the digital body—which provides guidance on how to preserve individuals' capacity to reflect on and make truly autonomous decisions about the use of their data online. Going forward, I intend to explore how liberal norms of individual speech and debate need to be reshaped in light of the simultaneous technologically-induced expansion and fracturing of the public sphere.

Overall, my research centers on the impact of fundamental challenges faced by real-world societies that pertain to *individual autonomous agency*, i.e., a person's capacity to reflect on and determine their actions according to their own judgments. Protecting this capacity is at the heart of modern liberal societies.

In my **dissertation**, I explored how Rawlsian political liberalism—and, specifically, its idea of public reason—can respond to conflicts rooted in fundamental moral disagreement while respecting individuals' status as morally autonomous agents. Pluralism of moral convictions and consequently deep disagreements are a fact of modern liberal societies, and Rawlsian political liberalism develops normative political principles for these diverse societies. Political liberalism demands that coercive measures are justified to all citizens, who all share reasons offered in justification. In my dissertation, I identify a tension between this requirement and the fact that common interpretations of political liberalism address justifications only to citizens whose convictions live up to a specific standard of reasonableness. My work contributes two approaches that resolve this tension by showing that even unreasonable citizens have reasons to recognize this core liberal standard of reasonableness as valid. These approaches identify reasons that are implicit in individuals' attitude and conduct towards their fellow citizens, and in the character of their foundational moral beliefs. Consequently, I showed that public reason liberalism has a broader constituency than is widely assumed: it needs not artificially restrict itself to addressing only an idealized version of perfectly reasonable citizens.

This work shows that the right conception of the person is essential for liberalism to be genuinely respectful of individuals as morally autonomous agents. In particular, I demonstrated that political liberalism must rely on a conception of the person which is attuned to the actual complexity and significance of individuals' diverse moral convictions and motivations. The main contribution of my work consists in determining and clarifying the status of liberal principles in relation to those individual moral foundations.

I have further developed my dissertation work into two articles. A first article, "Political liberalism, deep moral disagreement, and higher-order commitments to cooperation", is currently under review. It counters a justification commonly invoked by political liberals to exclude private moral beliefs (i.e., beliefs not universally shared) from public reason: the assumption of a higher-order commitment to cooperation. In doing so, the article shows that political liberalism is less free-standing and more substantively tied to individuals' systems of private moral beliefs than typically acknowledged. In a second paper, "Nonpublic reasons and the private lives of foundational beliefs", I challenge another key assumption of political liberalism—namely that invoking private moral beliefs as justifications in public reason indicates an attitude of disrespect for others. Examining the foundational beliefs underlying citizens' private moral conceptions, I argue that justificatory restraint is nevertheless warranted because the nature of these beliefs makes it impossible for citizens to render them accessible to others within public reason.

In my **postdoctoral work** at Brown's Political Theory Project, I focus on another fundamental challenge for real world societies that threatens individuals' status as autonomous agents: the ubiquitous collection and processing of digital data. My latest project investigates the impact of digital technology on individual autonomous agency, and how liberal theory can take it into account. The shift of an increasing amount of

everyday activities to online platforms and services, and the plethora of digital data that a modern person generates—both implicitly or explicitly—as they go about their life poses new challenges to individuals' capacity to reflect on, and make meaningful decisions with regard to, the information they provide about themselves. I claim that for liberal theory to determine what it means for a person to be autonomous in the data-saturated world online, we must first expand our conceptual devices, and, in particular, develop a more nuanced view on what constitutes the individual person in the digital sphere.

To approach this task, I examine our interactions online through the prism of a new concept. I observe that the shift of many of our daily activities into the digital realm creates new *digital bodies*: the manifestation of ourselves as individuals in the digital sphere, made up of the interconnected clusters of personal data which we both explicitly provide and implicitly generate through our actions. Conceiving of these trails of data as an analogue to the physical body is apt because, just like our physical bodies, they provide the observer with information about our personal characteristics, habits and preferences, and provide a medium for affecting us as a person. For example, just as the threat or use of physical force uses the pain our physical bodies can feel to direct our actions, political campaigns can access our decision making via our digital bodies in the form of fine-grained personal profiles which similarly allow them manipulate our opinions and reactions. I argue that our digital bodies interact with our digital environment in invisible and intangible ways. This makes it hard to grasp the full scope and potential implications of our actions online. These difficulties to even perceive our digital bodies affects our capacity to effectively reflect on and control them, threatening our capacity, as autonomous agents, to shape our online actions according to our convictions about how we want our lives to go.

The overarching goal of this research project is to incorporate a deeper understanding of our digital bodies into liberal theory. To this end, I am currently working on an article—"Liberal theory and the digital body: rethinking autonomous agency in data protection"—which examines why classic liberal paradigms like consent and targeted regulation in their current form fail as devices for preserving individuals' status as autonomous agents in the digital sphere. I argue that considering these failures through the prism of the digital body helps to highlight the reasons why data protection falls through the cracks of our standard liberal responses: individuals lack the sensory capacities for even determining which instances of collection and use of their data are innocuous and which might be harmful to them. I propose that regulation must, in the first instance, focus on rendering our digital bodies visible and tangible to us, which requires imposing limits on the amount, complexity, and longevity of the data collected about us.

Building on the concept of the digital body, in my future work, I look to investigate the concrete manifestations of autonomous agency online in more depth. To this end, I look to answer the following questions: which aspects of our digital bodies we can and should expect to be able to control? How does the concept of harm apply in this context—can we be harmed by uses of our data irrespective of whether that threat tangibly extends to our physical selves? Answers to these questions are crucial to informing public debate on political regulation of the data economy as well as ethical standards for engineers and corporate conduct.

My research seeks to provide normative guidance that is interesting and useful to both philosophers and technologists. It is useful to philosophers by highlighting how specific characteristics of our technological environment affect the character of the moral landscape and shape the specific ethical conundrums we must respond to; and to technologists by offering normative proposals that are attuned to technical constraints and business models, and which do not rely impossible concepts or implausible technology.

In pursuing this work, I build on my background in liberal theory and on frequent interaction with scholars and practitioners in Computer Science and Economics. My postdoc at the Political Theory Project encouraged me to think across disciplinary boundaries, and to connect my own background in Political Science and Political Philosophy with ideas, methods, and insights from Economics, History, and Computer Science. In particular, I have worked with faculty and students at Brown's CS department, giving guest

lectures and discussing pedagogy for teaching writing skills and normative thinking to CS students. Brown undergraduates often take courses across the humanities–STEM divide, and I have found that teaching and interacting with these students provides valuable input to my research.

Longer term, I intend to reach back to my experience working on moral pluralism and deep disagreement in liberal societies and develop a research program that examines socio-cultural challenges to pluralistic public debate brought about by technological change. Given that algorithmic models, and artificial intelligence increasingly shape the flow of information in the public sphere—from personalized news feeds to fact-checking and the removal of inappropriate content—political philosophers must pay attention to the moral and political judgments implicit in their choices, and how these judgments are generated. How can we cope with imperfect AIs that may not promote goals that liberals envision for public discourse—such as open-mindedness, fairness, or overcoming biases—if all (including the engineers who design them) have an incomplete understanding of how the AIs come to their decisions?

I firmly believe that individuals' capacity to function as autonomous agents, both when it comes to exercising control over their personal data and as participants in public discourse, is fundamentally affected by the transformations brought about by digital technology. Hence, these matters should be in the purview of political philosophy.