Dear Prospective Student,

Causation is, as a philosopher once said, the cement of the universe. Everywhere we look things interact causally: bodies attract, elevated levels of CO$_2$ in the atmosphere contribute to rising sea levels, smoking causes cancer. We too are caught up in causal processes, and not just with regard to our health, but also with regard to our character as rational beings: as knowers and agents. We have beliefs about the world, running the spectrum from simple everyday beliefs (e.g. the belief that the streets are wet) to the most complex scientific theories. And we act in the world: we tie our shoes, we file our taxes, we elect a new prime minister. All of these states and activities involve causation: My belief that the streets are wet is often based on seeing that the streets are wet. And seeing is at least in part a matter of the object seen acting causally on my senses. Likewise, filing my taxes involves my intentionally hitting certain keys on a keyboard, so as to cause a computer to carry out certain processes. And the hitting of keys itself is, arguably, a process in which my intention to enter certain characters into a document is causally responsible for the pressing of keys. Belief and intentional action, then, are causal affairs.

At the same time, belief and intentional action are paradigmatic manifestations of our rationality and for this reason have a normative dimension. It is essential to such states and processes that they are assessable as correct or incorrect in various ways: a belief may be incorrect in the sense that it is irrational to hold it; an action may be incorrect in the sense that it undermines the agent’s avowed intention to achieve a particular goal. What is more, the normative dimension is one that we understand and that typically enters into the very processes by which we come to be in the state or carry out the activity: I come to believe that the streets are wet because this is what I take to be the correct way of interpreting what I see. I form the intention to fill in the tax form because I regard that as the correct way to discharge a duty I take myself to have. Belief and intentional action, then, are normative affairs.

But how can a state or process be both causal and normative? Causal laws describe what happens. There seems to be nothing normative about this. By contrast, norms say what should happen – whether or not it does happen. How can considerations pertaining to what should happen be relevant to making something happen? How can the thought that I should file my taxes bring it about that I do? How can the idea that it is appropriate to believe that the streets are wet, given what I see, bring it about that this is what I believe? This is one way to frame the traditional problem of the relation between reason and nature – the problem of explaining how it is that, insofar as we possess rational capacities, we are subject to natural causal processes and yet, at the same time, capable of guiding our behavior by normative considerations. This problem – sometimes framed as the problem of how the “space of reasons” relates to the “space of causes” – animates many of my interests in philosophy. In my current research I pursue these interests primarily through the historical lens of the work of Immanuel Kant. Kant held a particular view of what explains why we are subject to normative requirements and what is involved in this – a view he summed up by saying that our minds are characterized by spontaneity and one that I find deeply attractive. Developing and defending this view is central to my work in philosophy. While my published work does this in the context of debates about how to read Kant, I am interested in the many issues involved in it also from a more contemporary perspective. This covers topics in philosophy of mind, epistemology, philosophy
of action, and a tiny bit of metaphysics. I am interested in, and would be happy to advise student projects on, questions such as the following: What is it to believe something? What is it to believe one thing on the basis of another? What is the relation between belief and self-knowledge? Is there a sense in which believing something involves a particular sort of agency (“epistemic” or “doxastic” agency)? What is it to act intentionally? What is practical reason and how does it relate to theoretical reason? What is an intention, and what is the relation between intention and action? In what sense, if any, does perceptual experience provide reasons for belief? How must the content of perceptual experience be characterized? Does perceptual experience even have content? What is the relation between the capacity for conceptual thought and the capacity for perceptual experience?

In addition, I would be more than happy to work with students interested in almost anything relating to Kant and the surrounding history of philosophy: in particular, Hume and Leibniz in one direction, Fichte and Hegel in the other.

To get a sense of my work, check out some of my papers on philpapers or academia.edu. Most of these address problems in Kant interpretation. But three papers that touch on contemporary issues are “Kantian Conceptualism,” “Spontaneity, sensation, and the myth of the given,” and “Epistemic Agency and the Self-Knowledge of Reason.”

Best wishes,
Thomas Land