

Research Statement

My primary research questions are: how do we know our own minds, how do others know our minds, and what are these varieties of knowledge good for? My dissertation examines two peculiar epistemic phenomena in connection with these questions. The first is often called *first-person authority*. Roughly, to have first-person authority is to be owed (and to typically receive) deference from your listeners when ascribing mental states to yourself. The second phenomenon is the *privileged self-knowledge* we tend have of our own mental states. As privileged self-knowers, we tend to know our own mental states in a distinctively secure way. I offer explanations of both phenomena. I then explain how these phenomena intersect in important social contexts. Specifically, I argue that these phenomena jointly contribute to our social agency, which I define as agency that is exercised, for example, in much cooperative group action, interpersonal argumentation, and linguistic interpretation. A more detailed outline of my dissertation (1 page) is attached to the end of my CV.

I have four papers under review that expand my research in various directions. One has been revised and resubmitted, and another has just received a request for revisions. In one paper, I examine arguments for the view that inference is, necessarily, a “mental action that a person performs, in which he is either aware, or can become aware, of why he is moving from some beliefs to others” (Boghossian 2014, p. 16). If such a view is correct, then self-knowledge is required in order to exercise our basic inferential capacities. I argue, however, that this view is undermotivated. After considering six arguments for the view that inference requires self-knowledge, I conclude that they do not succeed in securing this connection. In arguing this, I motivate a conception of inference according to which agents need only contend, in the inferential process, with the *contents* of their inferential mental states and the epistemic support relations that occur between these contents (cf. Peacocke 1996).

In a second paper, I respond to recent skepticism about first-person authority (Barz 2018). The view is that there is either (1) nothing philosophically interesting about first-person authority, or (2) no such thing as first-person authority that is unique to self-ascriptions only. I reply by advancing several refined ‘Authority Theses’ against the skeptic. The result is that first-person authority is a cluster of interrelated phenomena, each applicable only to self-ascriptive speech and thought, that are puzzling in ways that warrant philosophical inquiry.

In a third paper, I argue that a certain “transparency method” of how we acquire privileged self-knowledge, proposed by Alex Byrne (2005, 2011, 2018), is incompatible with the influential view that we deploy such self-knowledge in “critical reasoning” (Burge 1996, 2013; Sorgiovanni 2018). By identifying reasons for why Byrne’s transparency method cannot enable us to critically reason, I draw out a further consequence for theorizing about the sources of our privileged self-knowledge. The consequence, I say, is that it is highly unlikely that agents *follow epistemic rules* in the course of acquiring such knowledge.

In a fourth and final paper under review, I argue that Donald Davidson’s philosophy harbors the resources for an interesting but hitherto underdeveloped transcendental account of self-knowledge. On the account, we necessarily have self-knowledge, and it is necessarily privileged, insofar as it is constitutive of our rational identities that we are capable of interpreting the speech of others in our linguistic communities. I then consider an argument, due to Rockney Jacobsen (2009), that takes Davidson (or the best version of him) to be a deflationist about self-knowledge, one who thinks that the privilege we have as self-knowers reduces to the *know how* we possess in using language to self-ascribe mental states. On this view, privileged self-

knowledge does not turn out to be propositional knowledge *that* one is in a given state of mind. I deny that Davidson held this view, and I deny that the best version of him would hold it.

I also have several projects in development that continue my interests in questions of first-person authority and privileged self-knowledge. In one paper, I defend a mereological account of the ontological relationship between the first-order propositional attitudes and second-order self-beliefs of rational agents. Thus, I argue that, in rationality-conducive cognitive conditions, having a first-order belief, desire, or intention partly constitutes having a second-order self-belief about it. I defend this “constitutivist” account of self-knowledge against a recent alternative, one that is supposed to do better at explaining the fallibility of our self-knowledge (Parrott 2017).

In a second paper in development, I evaluate different “expressivist” accounts of first-person authority. Expressivist accounts share the idea that listeners are entitled to defer to a speaker’s self-ascriptions insofar as those self-ascriptions directly express something about the speaker. But they differ in terms of what expressed feature is relevant. *Neo-expressivists* argue that the relevant expressed feature is the very mental state self-ascribed (Jacobsen 1996, 1997; Falvey 2000; Finkelstein 2003; Bar-On 2004), whereas *agency-based expressivists* argue that the relevant expressed feature is the agent’s cognitive agency with respect to the expressed attitude (Parrott 2015). I defend neo-expressivism against recent criticisms from the agency-based expressivist camp, and I also argue against agency-based expressivism directly. Along the way, I draw connections between these expressivist theories and a third ‘hybrid’ theory that I think captures the good features of agency-based expressivism without competing with neo-expressivism (McGeer 2015).

A final project based on my primary research program is a monograph titled *The Functions of Self-Knowledge*. This is the first monograph dedicated solely to the question of what functions privileged self-knowledge plays in our psychological economies. The book contains six chapters: one introducing various interrelated epistemological questions about privileged self-knowledge, one describing various skeptical accounts of privileged self-knowledge, three comprising a critical survey of extant accounts of the functional roles of privileged self-knowledge, and one offering my own account—an account that focuses on the indispensability of privileged self-knowledge for various forms of social cognition and group action, as originally argued in my dissertation. A detailed chapter outline (approximately 2200 words) is available upon request.

Going forward, I am beginning to deepen my interests in social and digital epistemology. I am currently writing a paper about the epistemic injustice one suffers when one’s sincere online comments are ignored due to the assumption that they have been posted by a bot. This is increasingly prevalent in North America and the UK in light of recent revelations about the prevalence of Russian bots on platforms like Reddit and Twitter. Of course, because such bots are real, many “accusations of bothood” are true. But some are false. The false accusations are epistemically interesting, I argue, because they generate epistemic injustices that look a lot like “testimonial injustices”, except that they are not rooted in “identity-prejudicial credibility deficits” (Fricker 2007). After all, as testimonial injustice is typically understood, the speaker’s testimony is not taken *sufficiently seriously* owing to the hearer’s prejudices against the speaker due to her sex, race, class, etc. However, when someone assumes that a post has been made by a bot, it is being assumed that *no testimony has really been issued*. I explore some consequences of this fact for discerning how to combat epistemic injustices produced by accusations of bothood.

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