

My primary research program focuses on cases in which self-knowledge is difficult: cases in which someone has to think to know what she feels, perceives, thinks, or wants. I argue that these cases show that we sometimes learn about our conscious mental states through inferences. We draw these inferences from conscious states and from our behaviors. For example, someone might infer that she wanted something through her feeling of disappointment that it did not occur. Or she might learn that a given sentence expresses the thought she had in mind through her dispositions to respond when asked to clarify what she means. That we can learn about our occurrent states by inferring them from others suggests that there is no sharp distinction between occurrent and dispositional mental states: even conscious thoughts, perceptions, and feelings, may have dispositional elements.

My research builds on the work of recent inferential theories of self-knowledge, such as those developed by Cassam (2015) and Lawlor (2009), and is inspired by the work of Ryle (1949). I have related interests in philosophy of language—particularly in semantic deference, insofar as it allows us to have thoughts we only partially understand, and in virtue epistemology.

Knowing What You Want

Much of my work in self-knowledge has focused on knowledge of desire. In several papers both completed and in progress, I examine how we know our desires. In “Desire Transparency and the Guise of the Good,” I argue that someone cannot transparently infer that she wants something from the fact that it appears valuable to her. This conclusion has the consequence that the value appearance theory of desires is not correct: it does not follow from the fact that all desires present their objects as good that all value appearances are desires. In a paper I am drafting, I argue that constitutivism about knowledge of desire is false. This view assumes that some desires are commitments we deliberately make when we make choices. If we were able to form desires deliberately, those desires would be self-intimating: anyone who wants something as a commitment would know that she does. I argue that in cases of choice our beliefs about our desires are self-intimating, not our desires themselves.

In a related project, I pursue the relationship between desires and disappointment. The close relationship between the two motivates important doctrines in both Buddhist and Stoic philosophy, but is missing from contemporary analytic approaches to desire. It is commonplace to hold that desires are dispositions to act, I believe desires are also dispositions to feel disappointed. I argue that a desire that p is a disposition to feel disappointment if p does not occur, and if one expects that it will.

Deferential Contents

I propose a reinterpretation of extended mind thought-experiments as involving what I call ‘deferential contents.’ The form of deference I mean is the following: sometimes we say things like, “I want whatever you want,” or “I believe whatever you

say.” Here, the subject has an attitude that identifies its object only as the object identified in some other source. I argue that we can explain extended mind thought-experiments as involving deferential contents: Otto believes that whatever is in the notebook is the way to get to the MoMA, and I believe that whatever the waiter will say when I ask him is the name of my favorite dish. I distinguish this from the recent know-how interpretation of extended mind cases.

Knowing What You’re Thinking

Descartes, arguably, held that we could be certain about the contents of our own thoughts. Externalism about mental content poses one challenge to this view: if what I refer to with ‘water’ is determined by what constitutes water where I am, I might not know the contents of my thoughts. I raise a different worry about knowledge of our thoughts: it seems as though we can clarify what we meant on a given occasion. I might think, “I’d better meet with the Provost,” but in fact mean “I’d better meet with the Dean.” This might happen either because I do not know the difference between a dean and a provost, or simply through a ‘slip of the mind.’ In either case, it seems right to say that I did not mean, “I’d better meet with the Provost,” at the earlier time. What determines what I did mean are my dispositions to clarify what I meant to myself, and the inferential connections between my use of “Provost” in my thoughts and the other concepts I possess. The upshot of these cases is that it’s possible to be wrong at a given time about the contents of one’s thought through an incorrect articulation of that thought.

Virtue Epistemology: Trust, Gaslighting, and Understanding

In gaslighting, a perpetrator systematically refuses to take their victim seriously as an epistemic agent. Is gaslighting a kind of epistemic injustice, and if so, what kind? In a paper in preparation, I plan to argue that the epistemic injustice of gaslighting is distinct from that of testimonial injustice (not trusting a speaker’s claims because she belongs to a minority group). Gaslighting is a violation of the trust we have in others to correct us sincerely when we are wrong. This trust is central to our development of self-trust and amounts to a denial that the victim has a right to an epistemic perspective.

I am also interested in understanding as our goal in trying to know our own minds. The literature on understanding construes understanding as a cognitive state in which one grasps relationships between aspects of something, while knowledge is a relationship to a true proposition. If we accept that many mental states are dispositions, deciding whether one is, say, in love or afraid of being alone might be a matter of the interpretation that makes the most sense of various other facts about oneself. Perhaps the best we can hope for with respect to knowledge of some our mental states is the interpretation that helps a person understand herself better than the alternatives.