Research Statement

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An overarching concern in my work is: *What are the limits of philosophical inquiry?* Much of the literature suggests that philosophy is problematic because of its apriori method, or because the debates lapse into verbal disputes. Yet while those worries may be legitimate, my research reveals further serious concerns for philosophical inquiry.

One such issue is explored in my monograph, *Self-Reflection for the Opaque Mind* (2017, Routledge). Consider that according to contemporary psychology, we are bad not just detecting “ego threatening” thoughts à la Freud. We are also ignorant of rather ordinary thoughts—e.g., our reasons for moral judgments of others (Haidt 2001), and even mundane reasons for buying one pair of stockings over another (Nisbett & Wilson 1977)! However, reflection on one’s own thoughts requires knowing what those thoughts are in the first place. So if ignorance is the norm, why attempt self-reflection? The practice would just display naivety about psychology. Yet while respecting all the scientific data, I argue that, remarkably, we are sometimes infallible in our self-discriminating judgments. Even so, infallibility does not imply indubitability, and there is no Cartesian ambition to provide a “foundation” for empirical knowledge. The point is rather to explain how reflection as a rational activity is possible.

Other work uncovers limitations on metaphysics, specifically. Consider for instance inquiries into what sorts of objects exist. Universals and bare particulars? Composites? Berkeleyan ideas? Often, answers to these questions are based in a semantic account of our terms. But I argue that, for ontological purposes, an interpretation cannot answer what a term of English denotes, if the interpretations are themselves in English. That’s because the ontology of such interpretations would be in question as much as the terms they interpret. So in order to settle the question of ontology, the interpretations themselves would need to be interpreted, and thus a regress. (This is seen as a new, metaontological application of Wittgenstein’s rule-following argument.) Even so, I defend the Quinean idea that such questions can be answered relative to a “background language,” a language used to answer questions which itself is used unquestioningly. I concede, however, that this means that more fundamental ontological questions will go unanswered. My principle work on this, “Rule Following and Metaontology,” now appears in the *Journal of Philosophy*.

In the near future, I hope to use this paper as the basis of a second book, tentatively titled *A Critique of Metaphysical Thinking*. As this title suggests, the book presents Kantian framework, although it is an “update” of the framework for contemporary metaphysics. Such Kantianism finds natural expression in answering questions merely relative to a “background language.” For it implies that we do not represent objects “in themselves” but always via some system of representations. There is no escaping “the circle of language.”