

Research Statement

T. Parent

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 concerns may well be legitimate, I examine how philosophical inquiry seems troubled in other ways.

One such issue is explored in my monograph, entitled *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-discerning 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 the question: What is it to exist? The answer depends on what is meant by ‘exist’, and note that “ontic terms” like ‘exist’, ‘real’ and ‘actual’ are equivocal between ontologically “loaded” and “innocent” readings. (Contrast the uncontentious vs. the Platonic reading of ‘There is an even prime’.) The question is concerned with existence in the “loaded” sense—yet I argue it is *impossible* to define an ontic term on its loaded reading. Briefly: A loaded term would have to be defined by an equivalent ontic term. But *all* ontic terms have both the loaded and innocent readings; hence, any definition will be similarly equivocal. So the question of what it means to “exist” seems unanswerable by means of a univocal definition. This material now appears in *Philosophical Studies* under the title “Ontic Terms and Metaontology, or: On What There Actually Is.”

Relatedly, consider metaphysical inquiries into what 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 the two papers mentioned as the basis of a second book, tentatively titled *On the Plurality of Metaphysica*.