

## Research Statement

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My research concerns questions in philosophy of mind and epistemology that relate to our most basic ways of understanding our place in the world as conscious subjects. My work addresses limitations on objective modes of inquiry directed at ourselves *qua* subjects of experience. I have developed a new way of understanding these limitations by outlining a distinctive gap between the subject's first-person perspective and objective accounts of the subject, and I am currently working to show how this gap has significant implications for our understanding of the relation between subject and world.

### Current Research: Objectivity and the First-Person Perspective

We often think of ourselves both as conscious *subjects* who have unique first-person perspectives on the world, and as *objects*, or particular human beings who inhabit the world. Typically, we have no difficulty reconciling these two ways of thinking about ourselves. It seems obvious that the subject of one's first-person perspective just is the unique human being one refers to with "I" in everyday interactions with others. However, this familiar view can be questioned, with disorienting effect. For example, a screening of *The Matrix* (1999) can leave one wondering "Am I a brain-in-a-vat being made to think that I am embodied, rather than *this* human being?" Similarly, a medical procedure might prompt one to consider one's relation to one's brain. The prospect of a corpus callosotomy (the severing of the two hemispheres of the brain) might cause one to wonder how a brain, a complex mass of neurons, could possibly be the subject of one's perspective, when it seems like a unified consciousness requires a unified, indivisible subject. Or, in those moments when one is keenly aware of one's status as a subject, taking in and experiencing the world, one might wonder how any kind of object could be open to the world in this way. How could a series of physical interactions give rise to conscious experiences?

In each of these cases, one thinks of oneself primarily as a subject, and the identity of this subject with any given object then comes to seem arbitrary, contingent, and mysterious. It becomes difficult to see how an object with a certain set of properties, situated in a certain way, could have *this* very perspective (i.e., the perspective one takes to be one's own). The following questions arise: *Which* thing am I? What *kind* of thing am I? Do I exist as an object in the world *at all*? My research concerns the source and significance of these questions. My doctoral research resulted in a new framework for understanding the source of these questions. This framework was published in my paper "The Subject-as-Object Problem" (*Inquiry*, 2022), where I argued that there is always room for doubt about one's identity as a particular object due to a gap between one's first-person perspective and any objective account of oneself. My current research is focused on the significance of this gap for understanding a wide range of problems in philosophy of mind and epistemology.

The gap opened by the subject-as-object problem affects our ability to adopt an objective standpoint on ourselves and our circumstances; it places limitations on inquiry that cannot be overcome. I believe a clear account of these limitations is important for understanding the difficulties around attempts to give a scientific account of consciousness, the special status of

first-person identity claims, the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity, the origins of external world scepticism, and the radical possibility of doubting one's own existence. I am currently working on papers corresponding to each of these topics.

### **Future Research in Philosophy of Mind**

I intend to extend my current research to include further work on consciousness and the “what it’s like” of experience. I am particularly interested in questions about the possibility of an objective standpoint on experience, and limitations on our ability to know whether we have succeeded in adopting such a standpoint. My strategy involves situating these questions in relation to the framework I have developed for articulating the subject-as-object problem. For instance, I believe we can explain the seeming contingency of psychophysical identities by tracing it back to subject-as-object problem, and thereby meet Kripke’s famous challenge to the identity theorist. Very roughly, the idea is this: because it is always possible to call into question one’s own identity with a particular object (or as a certain kind of object), it is also possible to question accounts of phenomena that rely on assumptions about oneself. It might be difficult to see how *this* pain, for example, could be the stimulation of C-fibres, but then it is also difficult to see how *I* could be this complex organism who has C-fibres. The seeming contingency of first-person identity statements is inherited by psychophysical identities.

This strategy has a significant advantage: it substantiates the intuition that attempts to provide objective accounts of first-person phenomena face a deep challenge, and it does so without threatening our best scientific theories. On one hand, the subject-as-object problem opens a gap that leaves room for doubt about any objective account we might give of the subject, their experiences, and their relations to the world. At the same time, this gap necessarily makes space for, and prevents the elimination of, objective accounts that are in line with our best scientific theories.

### **Future Research in Early Modern Philosophy**

My work is heavily influenced by early modern philosophy. I initially formulated the subject-as-object problem in response to Kant’s Paralogisms, and my applications of this problem often target Cartesian ideas about the subject’s relation to the world. I intend to spend more time on the Paralogisms, with a special focus on Kant’s response to the “Achilles argument” in the Second Paralogism, and his response to Descartes in the Fourth Paralogism (or “The Refutation of Idealism” in the B edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*). These two projects correspond to my work on (1) limitations on the kinds of inferences we can draw about the subject of experience, and (2) different ways of understanding notions of externality and objectivity. The first project will build on my research (undertaken as Marleen Rozemond’s research assistant) into the Achilles argument as it appears in the Clarke-Collins correspondence, and my research on the history of the argument as it shows up in German rationalism (under the supervision of Corey Dyck). The second project has the potential to develop into a broader investigation into early modern conceptions of the appearance-reality distinction. I am particularly interested in Berkeleyan idealism and Hume’s attempt to understand our commitment to a world of independently existing objects in the *Treatise*.