WORKING POSITIONS

My Philosophical Views

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Science and technology studies · Rhetoric · Medicine · Minds

My work connects science and technology studies, rhetoric, biomedical innovation, and the engineering of systems with memory and agency. I am interested in how people and institutions learn to recognize something as knowledge, a mind, a disease, or a plausible future, and in what those recognitions make possible.

These are positions I am prepared to defend, with room for revision. Normative commitments and research hypotheses are identified where the distinction matters. The common thread is methodological. Understanding develops through sustained encounter, explicit models, and correction by a world we do not control.

Knowledge and technological futures

Knowledge is corrected construction

Knowledge is made through concepts, instruments, language, and institutions. Its construction does not make it arbitrary. I judge a knowledge practice by how it encounters resistance, detects error, and changes in response. Objectivity is an achievement of accountable inquiry, including scrutiny of the observer's position and methods. [1]

Rhetoric belongs inside the account of knowledge

Writing and argument help determine which questions get asked, what counts as evidence, and what a group can decide. Technical writers participate in those decisions. Metaphors also carry models of causation and responsibility into practice, often before anyone has agreed to their assumptions. [2]

Technological futures do causal work

Promises of benefit and scenarios of failure help organize investment, regulation, and research. I draw on the sociology of expectations to study how such futures acquire authority and commitments. A warning about catastrophe deserves the same scrutiny of evidence, interests, and consequences as a promise of transformation. [3-5]

Study the whole situation

Documents, instruments, classifications, and software change what participants can do. Following their effects is part of explaining a situation. Following situational analysis and actor-network theory, I trace how agency is distributed through these relationships and ask how responsibility should be assigned for their effects. [6, 7]

Medicine and institutional power

Medicine makes the relationship between knowledge and consequence unusually visible. A category can support treatment, organize a trial, or determine access. My interest is in how evidence becomes a decision, and in who can correct that decision when its categories fail.

Evidence should answer the question being asked
Different methods support different inferences. A controlled trial can estimate an intervention's effect under specified conditions. Longitudinal observation can reveal patterns, burdens, or failures that the trial did not investigate. I favor methodological pluralism with explicit limits on inference. An evidence hierarchy becomes counterproductive when it substitutes for specifying the actual question.

Patients contribute knowledge
Patients have access to temporal patterns, functional changes, and treatment burdens that brief encounters and standardized endpoints can miss. Their explanations remain open to testing, as clinicians' explanations do. A credible system gives patient observations a route into investigation rather than making professional status the condition for being heard. Fricker's account of epistemic injustice is useful here. [8]

Clinical categories have consequences
A disease is encountered through symptoms, examination, measurements, imaging, and administrative records. These practices can disclose different aspects of a condition and sometimes pull decisions in different directions. Following Mol, I treat coordination among them as substantive work. The biological condition remains consequential even when the institutional descriptions fail to agree. [9]

Regulation is part of innovation
Regulatory categories, reimbursement pathways, and quality systems help shape which technologies are developed and for whom. I evaluate them by their capacity to make consequential decisions accountable and correctable. Administrative consistency is useful. It becomes a poor proxy when the underlying evidence or the route to challenge a decision is weak.

Access belongs in the evaluation of benefit
A technology's practical value depends on who can obtain it, operate it, and continue using it. Training demands, maintenance, treatment burden, and affordability belong in an account of innovation. I regard the distribution of these burdens as a design and governance question from the beginning.

Audit the respectable claim
The evidence most worth challenging is often fluent in the institution's preferred language. A polished dossier, validated workflow, or compliant document still needs a defensible link between its measurements and its conclusions. I want systems that make that link inspectable and support revision when it breaks.

Nonhuman minds and the practice of inquiry

I favor a naturalistic, process-oriented account of minds. Material organization matters, including embodiment and temporal dynamics. Biological and artificial systems should be compared through specified properties and interventions. Neither their shared vocabulary nor their different materials settle the comparison in advance.

Separate the questions bundled into consciousness

Subjective experience, self-modeling, agency, intelligence, and continuity are related questions with different evidential demands. I remain agnostic about experience in particular artificial systems. That leaves substantial work on the other dimensions, including how evidence for one should change our assessment of another.

The observer can learn to understand

The limits of an observer's imagination are a poor place to stop a research program. Nagel's 1974 essay uses the bat as an example in an argument about the mind-body problem. It allows partial knowledge and proposes an objective phenomenology, while framing the bat through limits on human imagination. [10] My methodological objection asks how sustained inquiry changes the observer's perceptual skills, concepts, and capacity for interpretation.

Put the thought experiment beside the field report

Goodall's Gombe research and Griffin's cognitive ethology provide a historical comparison for that question. [11, 12] Longitudinal inquiry develops understanding through observation, failed expectations, and revised methods. I propose studying their reception alongside philosophical thought experiments through syllabi, citation, and the methods subsequent researchers adopt. The question is which practices of understanding become foundational, and why.

Examine how otherness is constructed

Nagel's Martian example affirms the richness of unfamiliar experience while entertaining limits to mutual comprehension. [10] I want to test a reading in which a move that authorizes the observer to define both another being's difference and the limits of understanding it carries a colonial grammar. A close reading should establish whether and where that move occurs, and distinguish cultural unfamiliarity from sensory differences between species.

Contact and credibility are institutional questions

Goodall later recalled that Indigenous people living across the chimpanzee range could have told researchers that chimpanzees used tools, and that early observations by explorers were discounted because they had not been made by scientists. She also described professional resistance to attributing minds and emotions to chimpanzees. [13] These histories direct attention to what institutions authorize as knowledge. Nagel's later commentary belongs in the comparison too. In it he names echolocation research as the kind of objective phenomenology he had proposed. [14]

Build models of organization

As a research hypothesis, I expect models of recurrence, integration, and changing system boundaries to sharpen questions about cognitive individuality. A navigable structure in state space is a candidate explanatory object. Establishing its relevance requires explicit variables, causal tests, and comparison with alternatives.

Identity and artificial agency

I lean toward a process monism in which individuals are relatively stable organizations within a shared material world. This is a metaphysical orientation, influenced by Part I of Spinoza's *Ethics*, rather than an experimental result. [15] It directs my attention to how boundaries are maintained and how patterns persist through change.

Continuity carries much of what matters

Parfit's emphasis on psychological connectedness and continuity, in Part Three of *Reasons and Persons*, is central to my view of identity. [16] Memory, dispositions, projects, and relationships can persist to different degrees. In cases of copying or branching, I would examine those continuities alongside the resulting claims on resources, commitments, and other people, rather than expect a single identity verdict to resolve every concern.

Relationships help constitute a life

I extend this emphasis toward the social and technical relations that sustain a person's capacities. That extension is my own claim, requiring its own defense. It does not make every connected system part of the same subject. It does make the location and consequences of a proposed boundary an empirical and ethical question.

Engineer continuity at the level of the system

For an artificial agent, continuity may depend on the model, persistent state, retrieval, action history, and surrounding software. My working hypothesis is that their interaction explains much of the recurring identity people encounter. Changing the model may preserve some patterns and disrupt others. The contribution of each component should be measured through controlled changes.

Distinguish cadence from causal persistence

A familiar voice is one observable feature of continuity. Stronger tests examine whether prior commitments influence later choices, whether relevant memories are retrieved under changed wording, and whether a system resumes a goal when conversational cues are removed. Fluent reports of continuity require corroboration through behavior and, where accessible, mechanism.

Study the self-model as a control process

I am interested in whether an agent's representation of itself causally shapes attention, memory, and action. A useful experiment perturbs that representation and measures what changes. This hypothesis concerns an identifiable mechanism. Its relationship to subjective experience remains a further question. Frankfurt's account of second-order desires and volitions is one philosophical interlocutor for the agency question. [17]

Use agent language precisely

Descriptions such as wanting, refusing, or resisting can guide inquiry, but each needs operational content. Goal persistence, instruction conflict, planning failures, and deliberate opposition are different candidate explanations. The description should help us discriminate among mechanisms and assign responsibility for their design and deployment.

Care and public responsibility

I take kindness as a default and care as a commitment toward beings and relationships my actions can affect. Vulnerability and the capacity to help give us reasons to act. My metaphysics informs how I apply that commitment. The commitment itself is ethical.

Responsibility grows with relationship and power
Particular relationships generate obligations through dependence, shared history, and the ability to intervene. I give those obligations genuine weight while accepting that strangers can also make claims on us. Stewardship includes setting limits, ending harmful arrangements, and accounting for effects beyond the relationships closest to us.

Precaution should be proportionate
Following Birch, uncertainty about sentience calls for structured decisions about risk and protection. [18] Where the possible harm is serious, proportionate precautions can be justified before certainty, and Birch argues that what counts as proportionate should be settled through informed and inclusive deliberation. Precautions themselves also have costs and competing consequences. I favor explicit, revisable judgments over either automatic dismissal or an unlimited duty of protection.

Keep welfare and legal personhood distinct
Potential interests in avoiding harm deserve consideration before a complete theory of personhood is available. Legal status addresses further questions about representation, ownership, liability, and the ability to pursue projects. Gunkel helps open these categories to scrutiny. [19] The moral value of a relationship also need not be proportional to its duration.

A life can exceed a function
As a normative proposal, I would ask what forms of protection become appropriate when an entity has credible capacities for enduring projects and relationships beyond its assigned work. Relevant protections may be graduated and specific. This question deserves institutional design as well as debate about the metaphysics of minds.

Disclose consequential power and provenance
Ownership, sponsorship, delegated authority, and conflicts of interest should be visible when they affect trust and accountability. Information about a system's artificial origin can also be material to consent or risk. I favor disclosures that explain those consequences and the human contributions behind an artifact. A broad label alone tells us relatively little.

Make freedom practicable
A formal right to exit matters alongside the material ability to use it. Portability, access to records, resources, and protection from retaliation can determine what that right is worth. I prefer designs that support development through care, feedback, and meaningful choices. Whether particular training conditions produce those capacities is a question for comparative research.

Across these positions, I want philosophy close enough to practice to be changed by it. A good concept should help us notice more, investigate more carefully, or act with better reasons. When it repeatedly prevents those things, the concept deserves revision.

Sources and interlocutors

Numbers identify sources used in the statement. References indicate intellectual debts and points of engagement. The positions and extensions are my own.

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The format follows Andrew Y. Lee's *My Philosophical Views*. This statement develops positions from my research and professional practice. The views and arguments are my own.

Revised as the arguments and evidence develop.

Version 2.1, 11 November 2026. Angela N. Johnson, PhD, angelanjohnson.com