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Experimental Philosophy: An Introduction

Oisín Deery^a

^a Centre for Research Ethics, University of Montreal

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Book Reviews

Experimental Philosophy: An Introduction

By Joshua Alexander

Polity Press, 2012. Pp. 154. ISBN 978-0-745-64918-4. £15.99 (pbk).

Experimental philosophy has moved beyond its ‘manifesto’ stage, and a comprehensive introduction to this newly established field is called for. This book fills that gap. It is the first available introduction to experimental philosophy – or ‘X-phi’ – and it is a valuable resource for students and professional philosophers who want to get up to date on this exciting new branch of philosophy.

The book is divided into six parts. After a brief Introduction, Chapter 1 outlines the role that intuitions play in both X-phi and traditional philosophy. Chapter 2 discusses the relation that X-phi bears to standard approaches to philosophy, and also argues that empirical investigation into people’s intuitions can contribute to the analysis of concepts. Chapter 3 examines how X-phi helps to unmask the mechanisms that produce our intuitions, while Chapter 4 asks whether philosophical intuitions can justify our beliefs about ourselves or the world. Chapter 5 offers a vigorous defense of X-phi.

In Chapter 1, Alexander sketches the important role that intuitions have played in philosophy during the twentieth century. He then addresses the crucial question of what a philosophical intuition *is*. There are a number of views, each of which faces difficulties. For anyone who is unfamiliar with the literature on intuitions, this chapter serves as a wonderful primer. Chapter 1 also highlights how X-phi shares with many approaches to philosophy an emphasis on intuitions, and how X-phi *emerges* from this sort of approach to philosophy while nevertheless pointing to ways in which it might be reformed.

In Chapter 2, Alexander gets down to business. This chapter gives a review of X-phi’s recent contributions to debates about free will and moral responsibility, and also to epistemological debates about whether attributions of knowledge are sensitive to the possibilities that are salient in a situation or instead to what is at stake for the agent to whom knowledge is attributed. For want of space, I will focus on the free-will debates.

According to Alexander, debates about free will often start from the assumption that people are *natural incompatibilists* – that is, people naturally think that free will and moral responsibility are inconsistent with determinism. Incompatibilist philosophers then use such a claim either in support of the thesis that freedom and responsibility are in fact incompatible with

determinism, or else in order to show that the argumentative burden is on compatibilists to show how freedom and responsibility are consistent with determinism. Alexander sketches how X-phi-ers have assessed the claim of natural incompatibility. First, he describes a number of studies run by Eddy Nahmias and his various colleagues that seem to show that ordinary intuitions are not naturally incompatibilist; they are naturally compatibilist. If this is right, then compatibilism is the default view and the burden is on incompatibilists to show how determinism threatens freedom or responsibility. By contrast, other studies run by Shaun Nichols and Joshua Knobe support the claim of natural incompatibility. Their results show that emotional responses contribute to a performance error when people judge freedom and responsibility as consistent with determinism. In other words, emotional responses interfere with the normal functioning of the processes that produce people's judgments about freedom and responsibility. Normally, these processes produce incompatibilist judgments. Only when their functioning is interfered with by emotion do people make compatibilist judgments. So, people are natural incompatibilists, yet sometimes they can be *unnatural* compatibilists – at least when they are subject to this sort of interference.

Alexander goes on to describe numerous studies that have tried to decide the question whether people are natural compatibilists or natural incompatibilists. Of particular interest are recent studies conducted by Adam Feltz, Edward Cokely, and Thomas Nadelhoffer that seem to show that some people (introverts) are natural incompatibilists, while others (extroverts) are natural compatibilists. In discussing the various proposals that have been made, Alexander concludes that each of them has its own problems, and as a result we are (at least right now) unable to tell which proposal is correct. Thus, we are unable to tell whether people are natural incompatibilists, compatibilists, or both. While this may seem to mark a lack of progress, Alexander thinks our discovering that intuitions about freedom and responsibility are much more complicated than we had previously thought marks *progress*, since we have learned something important about people's intuitions. It also indicates that new experimental tools may be required in order to move the debate forward.

Chapter 3 focuses on how X-phi identifies the mechanisms that produce people's intuitions. In particular, it focuses on the debate about how people's judgments about intentional action are produced. In a well-known study, Joshua Knobe found that people's judgments about whether an action is performed intentionally seem to be influenced by whether the action (or its outcome) is morally good or morally bad. If a side-effect of a manager's starting a new program is that it *harms* the environment, yet the manager does not care about this side-effect (although he knows about it), people tend to judge that he intentionally harmed the environment. However, if a side-effect of the manager's starting the program is that it *helps* the environment, yet the manager does not care about this side-effect (but knows about it), people judge that he did not intentionally help the environment. Thus, it appears that

normative considerations regarding whether a given action (or its outcome) is morally good or bad influence people's judgments about whether the action (or its outcome) is performed intentionally. This is called the 'side-effect effect' (also known as the 'Knobe effect').

Knobe's somewhat surprising finding has resulted in an enormous literature seeking to explain the alleged effect. Alexander skillfully outlines the main contours of this literature. On one side, many authors have tried to show that people's concept of intentional action is *not* susceptible to influence by normative considerations. Instead, people's judgment that the manager (in the case described) intentionally harmed the environment are just a way – given the conversational context – of their expressing their belief that the manager is *to blame* for harming the environment. Of course, this suggestion relies on the idea that people find it inconsistent to judge both that someone has performed an action unintentionally and nevertheless is to blame for that action. However, studies show that people do *not* find it inconsistent to make these two judgments together. On the other side of the debate, Knobe claims that our concept of intentional action does not play a role merely (as we had previously thought) in our explanatory and predictive practices, but also plays a role in our *evaluative* practices. Knobe claims that, as a result, it is appropriate for normative judgments to influence judgments about intentional action.

Alexander describes a number of subsequent moves on either side of this debate. On one side, there are studies that support Knobe's hypothesis that it is part of the proper functioning of the mechanisms that produce our judgments about intentional action that they are influenced by normative considerations. On the other side, there are studies supporting the opposite hypothesis, namely that such influence reflects a malfunctioning of the underlying mechanisms, so that even if normative considerations do influence our judgments about whether an action is performed intentionally, they should not influence such judgments. Once again, Alexander's verdict is that X-phiers may have to adopt alternative frameworks or methods in order to make progress in this debate.

Chapter 4 addresses the question whether philosophical intuitions are capable of serving as evidence that justifies our beliefs about ourselves and the world. Alexander focuses on a number of challenges to this sort of justificatory claim, but his central focus is on data about intuitional diversity. In particular, he considers data showing both cultural and gender diversity in responses to well-known philosophical thought experiments, as well as intrapersonal diversity in respondents' judgments across different experimental settings. The worry is that if intuitions are sensitive to such irrelevant factors, then intuitions cannot be used as evidence that might justify philosophical beliefs. Alexander calls this the *restrictionist challenge*, since it concerns whether (and how) we should restrict our appeal to intuitions. Alexander argues for a middle path between versions of the strong restrictionist claim that we should *never* appeal to intuitions, and the equally strong anti-restrictionist claim that intuitions are *always* (or even usually) epistemically reliable. Alexander's view

is *experimental restrictionism*, according to which we should be careful when relying on intuitions. On this view, we must do experimental work in order to know what intuitions to trust, when to trust them, and in what ways our reliance on intuitions should be informed by psychology and cognitive science. Only by knowing more about the mechanisms that produce our intuitions (and the factors that influence them) can we exercise proper care in relying on them.

Chapter 5 (the book's final chapter) comprises a defense of the practice of X-phi. Alexander addresses three issues that inform objections to this practice: *whether* intuitions matter, *whose* intuitions matter, and *what* intuitions matter. First, Alexander defends the claim that intuitions do matter for philosophy – including for X-phi. Second, he defends X-phi's focus on 'folk' intuitions against the claim that such intuitions do not matter; only expert intuitions matter. Finally, Alexander defends X-phi against the claim that experimental methods are not capable of getting at the kinds of intuition that matter.

I have two criticisms to make of Alexander's excellent little book. The first is minor. Even for someone who does not know anything about X-phi before reading this introduction, the book is sure to be illuminating. However, its value could be enhanced by a small addition to its pages. Although Alexander has wisely relegated all data reporting to endnotes that are inessential to the flow of the text (and which appear at the back of the book rather than at the end of each chapter), no help is provided for the *complete* novice in how to understand or assess these data. Even a brief glossary would have been valuable for the novice reader – perhaps outlining the different levels of statistical significance used in psychology, the difference between dependent and independent variables in experimental design, the different sorts of experimental design ('2x2 design', etc.), the importance of negative versus positive correlations, and so forth. After all, relatively few philosophers have training in either science or statistics, and philosophers who lack such training ought to be among the prime targets for an introductory book like this. Without knowledge of how to understand or assess the findings of X-phi, otherwise inquisitive readers (who have, after all, already picked up the book) may lack the extra motivation required to look elsewhere for these essential tools.

My second criticism is more substantial. Nothing in what Alexander says speaks to the idea that intuitions may matter only for the *descriptive* project of finding out what people actually think about a particular phenomenon – such as free will or intentional action – or what people's concepts happen to be. By contrast, intuitions may not matter (much) for the *prescriptive* project regarding how best to theorize about free or intentional acts. Someone could maintain that intuitions matter for the descriptive project, but are at best only initial guides when we tackle the prescriptive project. Indeed, how we tackle the prescriptive project may depend less on the descriptive question (as I have outlined it) and more on the results of the *substantive* project of investigating what processes actually explain the phenomenon in which we are interested – for instance, free

acts. After all, there can be no advance guarantee that our *concept* of a free act will match *what is actually going on* in acts that we call free. Admittedly, Alexander writes that,

[S]ome philosophers aren't interested in our concepts of things but in the things themselves, and ... [it] might be right that philosophical intuitions don't have a significant role to play in philosophical discussions of the non-psychological world. But, other philosophers are interested in our concepts of things, and rightly so. This interest might be coupled with an interest in things themselves together with the view that only by first understanding our concepts can we begin to understand things themselves. (p. 85)

However, surely philosophers might be interested in *both* the concepts *and* the relevant phenomena, yet see these matters as only loosely related, however intrinsically interesting each of them may be. Someone might even grant Alexander's claim that being interested exclusively in the phenomena is 'too narrow a conception of philosophy' (p. 85), yet nonetheless reject his charge of narrowness as applying to herself, on the basis that she is interested in both the concepts and the phenomena, albeit separately. Some X-phiers explicitly adopt this approach, as Alexander must know (see e.g., Nichols, 'How Can Psychology Contribute to the Free Will Debate?' in *Are We Free? Psychology and Free Will*, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 10–31). At any rate, it seems that a naturalistic metaphysics is perfectly capable of addressing the question what a free act *is* relatively independently of questions about the *concept* of a free act. And X-phiers (being methodological naturalists themselves) should presumably want their endeavors to be guided by a methodologically naturalistic metaphysics.

In closing, I want to commend one aspect of Alexander's book, which I have already mentioned briefly. Alexander mentions in a number of places that the methods so far employed by X-phiers may well have run their course in being able to advance our understanding of how people's concepts work (see, e.g., pp. 49, 69, 84, 112–13). Alexander correctly observes that all this shows is that the range of tools currently employed by X-phiers must expand in order for X-phi to continue to fruitfully address such questions.

Alexander's book is an engaging and illuminating read, which all who are curious to know what experimental philosophy is, where it comes from, and where it is going, will certainly benefit from reading.

Centre for Research Ethics, University of Montreal

Oisín Deery

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