

PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

Journal of the APPA

Volume 5 Number 1 March 2010

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Book Review

David Berman, *A Manual of Experimental Philosophy*, Jeremy Pepyat Books, Dublin, 2009. Printed by the Dublin University Press Limited, 118 pages.

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A Manual of Experimental Philosophy documents a project—The Experimental Network in Psychological Philosophy (ENIPP)—carried out by David Berman in 2008-2009. The guiding principle of Berman’s work is that “arm-chair psychology is hands on philosophy, and that at least some philosophical questions can be usefully examined by means of well-focused psychological experiments and observations” (5). The book describes the project findings, but its primary goal is to clarify the method and vindicate its use.

By “arm-chair psychology,” Berman has in mind the sort of activity engaged in by modern philosophers (e.g., Descartes and Berkeley) who used their inner, subjective experience as the starting point for reflection about the nature of both self and world. As Berman recounts its history, this method of “serious” or “disciplined introspection” was taken up by early psychologists in the late 19th century, but was largely abandoned by both academic disciplines when psychologists pursued behaviorism and philosophy took its analytic turn. And while psychoanalysis and cognitive-neuro psychology remain “interested in consciousness and the evidence from introspection, they do not place much confidence in it” as a way of understanding mind or metaphysical reality (13).

Berman is careful to point out that his method (which he labels Exp Phi) should not be confused with another contemporary approach (labeled by its proponents as X-Phi) that also goes by the name of experimental philosophy. Both “underline the need for philosophers to do the simple experiments whose result they think is so obvious that it is not worth doing” (49). But beyond this they have little in common. X-Phi asks its participants to report their reactions to a thought experiment, and those reports are then used by the X-Philosophers as raw data about the nature of human concepts (for some examples, see Knobe & Nichols (2008)). This is useful, since it often turns out that the ways philosophers conceptualize issues are different from the ways of ordinary folk. But X-Phi does not challenge the commitment to conceptual analysis that has come to dominate academic philosophy. By contrast, Berman’s Exp Phi requires participants to carry out a variety of mental experiments themselves, and he explicitly requests that they “try not to think in language” but simply observe their inner experience (8). So Exp Phi “questions whether philosophy is ultimately about clarifying the meaning of concepts” and “suggests that unmediated, non-linguistic observation of reality is the best way to attain philosophical truth” (90).

Two explicit aims of Berman’s project are to “teach a disciplined form of introspection” and “advance the self knowledge of the project participants” (5), and in addition to performing the experiments himself, he engages his participants in extended conversation (via email and through seminars and interviews) designed to ensure that both he, and they, adequately characterize the “data” they produce. Hence, one way to read this book is as a series of case studies in philosophical client counseling. It differs from other modalities of philosophical practice in two main ways. First, where the aims of philosophical counselor are typically practical—alleviating a client’s dis-ease,

Berman's aims are more narrowly philosophical—understanding the nature of “mental objects or mental actions or both” (ENIPP website). And second, Berman's clients are almost all “philosophy graduates, teachers or graduate students,” who are themselves interested in theoretical questions about the nature of mind (1). For anyone who shares this interest, Berman's detailed presentation of both the participants' initial reports and his follow-up conversations provides a fascinating read, though as a method of client counseling it may have limited usefulness. In another work, Berman himself has aptly described it as “philosophical counseling for *philosophers*” (2008, emphasis added).

The bulk of the book describes the four experiments. In the Dark Space experiment (Ch. 2), participants are asked to sit in a completely darkened room for several minutes and then, “looking closely, observe what [they] see” (15). The participant reports are quite various, so one might conclude that the experiment fails to show anything useful at all. But Berman treats it as proto-evidence that there are a variety of “mental types.” This hypothesis is somewhat confirmed by the General Images experiment (Ch. 5), in which participants are prompted to think about an object (a dog or a chair) and asked to “introspect on what [they] have in mind apart from the words ‘dog’ and ‘chair’” (51). Berman contends that his participants fall along a spectrum from non-imagers to strong imagers, and it is in this chapter that he makes the strongest claims for the significance of his method. He takes it to show that while “images are the clearest conscious objects” some people simply don't have them (68), and hence that “image-people don't realize how mystical it sounds” to talk about mental images, or even concepts, as objects of conscious experience (69). Rather than treat non-imagers as somehow impaired or confused, Berman contends that such people experience a different psychological reality, and one that contemporary philosophy and psychology tend to ignore or discount.

The suggestion that both disciplines have wrongly ignored fundamental facts about mental reality is further developed in Berman's discussion of the other two experiments. The Three Containers experiment (Ch. 4) asks participants to reproduce the experiment that led Berkeley to conclude that hot and cold are subjective phenomena. Berman does not doubt such properties are primarily mental, but he does find that what many people actually experience is different than what Berkeley (and others) assume, and hence that there is much more diversity among the mental objects that a fully adequate philosophy needs to explain. In a similar vein, the Interrupting Desire experiment (Ch. 3) is portrayed as both supporting the broadly psychoanalytic view that the self is often governed by unconscious desires, and as demonstrating that these desires “can be consciously and deliberately induced” by the self (36). In Berman's view, such desires are more accurately described as *suppressed* than as *repressed*. And if he is right about this, then philosophical counselors may well be able to do more for their clients than therapists who take a more psychoanalytic approach.

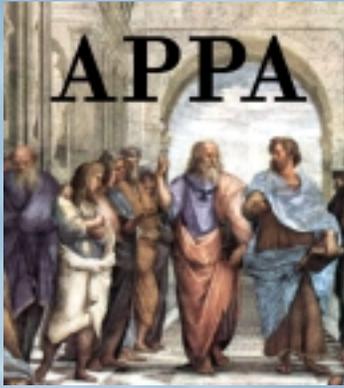
Is Berman right? He freely acknowledges that his experiments “do fall below the standard of experiments in the natural sciences” insofar as the same experiments produce a diversity of conflicting results (93). But his final chapter offers a series of carefully nuanced arguments designed to show that while diversity can arise from poor observation, badly set up experiments, or “minds that are not able to describe their experience adequately” (99), it could also arise from the fact that reality contains a wide variety of mental objects, only some of which are available to any given “type” of human mind. Careful readers will benefit from reflecting on this latter possibility, regardless of whether they ultimately endorse Berman's view.

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Aims and Scope

Philosophical Practice is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

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APPA Mission

The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a non-profit educational corporation that encourages philosophical awareness and advocates leading the examined life. Philosophy can be practiced through client counseling, group facilitation, organizational consulting or educational programs. APPA members apply philosophical systems, insights and methods to the management of human problems and the amelioration of human estates. The APPA is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization.

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