

**Review of *Experimental Philosophy* (2008, OUP),
Joshua Knobe and Shaun Nichols (eds.)**

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Experimental Philosophy

JOSHUA KNOBE, SHAUN NICHOLS (EDS.)

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Experimental philosophy is a new and somewhat controversial method of philosophical inquiry in which philosophers conduct experiments in order to shed light on issues of philosophical interest. This typically involves surveying ordinary people to find out their “intuitions” (roughly, pre-theoretical judgments) about hypothetical cases important to philosophical theorizing. The controversy surrounding this methodology arises largely because it departs from more traditional ways of doing philosophy. Moreover, some of its practitioners have used it to argue that the more traditional methods are flawed. In *Experimental Philosophy*, Joshua Knobe and Shaun Nichols are set with the task of introducing readers to this burgeoning field by putting together a collection of some of its most important articles. Given how controversial it has become, this is a heavy burden. I’m happy to say that they have put together a valuable collection that serves as a diplomatic introduction to this exciting new style of research.

The collection of papers is judicious. Many of them are influential articles already published elsewhere, and they cover a fairly broad range of topics. There is a significant amount of new material first published here as well. Some of the previously published essays have minor updates. For example, Knobe (ch. 7) adds an honorable footnote citing subsequent studies which have “conclusively demonstrated” (p. 146) that one of his main hypotheses is false. There are also a number of papers first published in the volume, including chapters 9–11 and the editors’ opening chapter.

The collection is broken up into four parts by topic. Part one contains two already quite famous papers presenting cross-cultural differences in intuitions. Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich (ch. 2) investigate intuitions about various influential cases in epistemology, including Gettier cases and Fred Dretske’s zebra case. Machery, Mallon, Nichols, and Stich (ch. 3), on the other hand, focus on the semantics of proper names exploring in particular people’s intuitions about Saul Kripke’s famous Gödel and Jonah cases.

The book’s second part concerns moral responsibility and determinism. Here readers find experiments on, among other things, whether ordinary folk tend to be compatibilists or incompatibilists about moral responsibility—i.e., whether people think one can be morally responsible in a universe in which all actions are determined by the past and the laws of nature. The recent results reported by Nichols and Knobe (ch. 6) are particularly interesting. While Nahmias et al. (ch. 5)—and to some extent Woolfolk et al. (ch. 4)—purport to show that people make judgments that reflect compatibilist views, Nichols and Knobe contend that this is only the case when people are presented with emotionally charged scenarios. In one of their experiments, they described a deterministic universe and an indeterministic universe to subjects and then randomly placed them in two different conditions. In the *concrete* condition, subjects read a scenario in which a man kills his wife and children to be with his secretary; participants were then asked

whether the agent is “fully morally responsible” for the murder in the deterministic universe. 72% of participants said “yes.” In the *abstract* condition, subjects were asked: In the deterministic universe, “is it possible for a person to be fully morally responsible?” (p. 111). Only 14% answered “yes.” Nichols and Knobe conclude that affect is playing a large role in determining people’s intuitions about moral responsibility. While they admit that more studies should be done to determine whether emotional reactions are causing performance errors here, they review several potential models and tentatively conclude that it is; thus, we should interpret the incompatibilist judgments of the folk, which are uninfluenced by affect, as reflecting their true intuitions about the matter.

Part three focuses on intentional action, beginning with Knobe’s famous work involving the CEO help and harm cases. Knobe (ch. 7) shows that people will judge a side-effect of an agent’s action as intentional under certain circumstances but not others. While much of the subsequent literature has focused on what exactly these circumstances are and whether Knobe is right that they have primarily to do with blameworthiness, Thomas Nadelhoffer (ch. 8) focuses on the more normative question of whether this effect is an error. Appealing to a certain model of blame attribution, he concludes that it is.

Part four focuses on broader issues concerning the future of experimental philosophy. Reporting some new experiments of their own, Fiery Cushman and Al Mele (ch. 9) provide an interesting new perspective on how to approach experimental work on intentional action which involves posting multiple folk concepts of intentional action. Jesse Prinz (ch. 10) lays out the differences between experimental philosophers and the more familiar “empirical philosophers” which make use of empirical results in their philosophical theorizing but don’t generate the results themselves. Ernest Sosa (ch. 12) critiques at least some projects within experimental philosophy by appealing to the difference between substantive disagreements versus merely verbal ones.

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong’s contribution to the volume, “Abstract + Concrete = Paradox” (ch. 11), surveys a great deal of experimental research on people’s intuitions about paradoxical issues and argues that there may be a unified explanation of the pull we have toward both positions on such debates. Consider, for example, the data gathered by Nichols and Knobe (ch. 7). Sinnott-Armstrong argues that they have not ruled out the explanation that concreteness significantly affects these intuitions instead of, or in addition to, emotions. Nichols and Knobe do conduct an experiment to pry apart concreteness from affect. To this end, they ran a *high affect condition* (involving rape) similar to their previous concrete condition and a *low affect condition* (involving tax evasion) with equal concreteness but less likely to evoke emotional responses (see p.116). While subjects in the high affect condition were, as predicted, significantly more likely to provide compatibilist intuitions, Sinnott-Armstrong suggests that the data can be explained in terms of degrees of abstractness, claiming that rape “conjures up more concrete images” than tax evasion (p. 215). Likewise, in other perennial debates where we find conflicting intuitions in ourselves, Sinnott-Armstrong suggests the cause may be a conflict between abstract and concrete thought.

One of the most important pieces of new material for those unfamiliar with experimental philosophy is the editors’ opening chapter, “An Experimental Philosophy Manifesto.” Knobe and Nichols (“K&N” for short) lay out what they take to be the nature and scope of experimental philosophy and defend it against some common objections. As they put it, they are, among other things, attempting to “justify the initiation of the enterprise of experimental philosophy” (p. 14). On the whole, the authors do an admirable job of showing that the methodology employed by experimental philosophers shouldn’t be as controversial as it is often thought to be. One of their main claims is that

experimental philosophy is simply harking back to the old days when philosophers often studied the human mind in order to better understand the world outside of it. The idea is that by studying how ordinary people think about things of philosophical interest, like knowledge, we can learn more about the phenomena themselves. But, as they make clear, just like the old days, there is no need to make this the only philosophical method: “What we are proposing is just to add another tool to the philosopher’s toolbox” (p. 10). Furthermore, they stress that experimental philosophy is far from simply surveying people to solve philosophical problems. Considering a hypothetical philosopher who has reflected on moral responsibility but discovered that an experimental result shows that her view is not widely shared among “the folk,” K&N ask: “Is she supposed to change her mind just because she finds herself in the minority? Of course she isn’t” (p. 6).

With this fairly minimal characterization of experimental philosophy, K&N go on to defend it against various objections. Without going into the details, it should be fairly clear that this will be difficult to criticize. How can one deny that investigating how ordinary people think about philosophically important issues could shed at least *some* light on such issues? The dialectic here, however, is often obfuscated. Some who label themselves “critics of experimental philosophy” say they’re objecting to experimental philosophy when they’re really criticizing a certain revisionary project that some experimental philosophers pursue. Sosa’s paper (ch. 12) is an example. He obscures the dialectic by calling his target “experimental philosophy.” While he mentions that some experimental philosophers aren’t a target of his (because they don’t make the more controversial claims he’s attacking), he relegates this to a footnote (n. 5, p. 239) and thanks Knobe for discussion—presumably for pressing him on it.

While K&N appropriately characterize experimental philosophy in a broad way, leaving it open for having “diverse ambitions” (p. 3), they often don’t make these stronger versus weaker projects clear. Perhaps it would have been helpful to introduce a distinction between experimentalists that are quite revisionary and those who aren’t (or much less so). Let us say that *revisionary experimentalists* think experimental philosophy largely *undermines* the more standard methods of doing philosophy while *moderate experimentalists* think it doesn’t—it largely *supplements* them. K&N do seem to have this sort of distinction in mind. However, they write that “it is not possible to point to a single basic viewpoint and say: ‘This viewpoint lies at the heart of all contemporary work in experimental philosophy’” (p. 6). I’m not so sure. Each experimental philosopher seeks to conduct experiments to shed light on philosophical issues. This is arguably the heart of experimental philosophy, and it only commits one to the moderate view on what we might call a “metaphilosophical debate” about methodology.

K&N do, however, largely characterize experimental philosophy in a fairly moderate way. But then this raises another issue: relying on a primarily moderate characterization might seem problematic when they proceed to rebut objections. After all, most professional critics of “experimental philosophy” don’t level such objections against the *moderate* view; they (e.g., Sosa, ch. 12) target the more revisionary views. So why would K&N characterize experimental philosophy in a fairly moderate way but then attempt to respond to criticisms that are typically only meant to be directed toward the more revisionary view? Are they being unfair here? (I’m grateful to Jonathan Ichikawa for raising this issue on the Arché Methodology Project Weblog.)

Perhaps K&N were simply trying to make explicit that none of the objections they discuss work against the moderate view. After all, this is largely a piece written to “justify the initiation” of experimental philosophy to the broader philosophical community. And, from what I’ve gathered, many philosophers who don’t follow experimental philosophy much think it’s a “movement” that consists primarily of

revisionary experimentalists who are simply trying to undermine traditional philosophical methods and replace them with “opinion polls.” This is far from an accurate picture of their goals and methods. So, in a book that is largely supposed to introduce such people to experimental philosophy, I think it wise to make clear that it’s primarily a moderate enterprise and that the common objections—i.e., the ones experimental philosophers so often hear in conversation, not necessarily in print—don’t work at all against it.

I have only touched on some of the items in this excellent volume. Yet the mix of new essays with some of the most important papers in experimental philosophy to date makes the collection considerably useful as an introduction to the field as well as a handbook for veterans. But I suspect most will be having one of their first encounters with experimental philosophy by reading from this book. Thankfully, Knobe and Nichols’s collection displays the broad scope of the field, including the much less controversial, revisionary projects. The editors should be commended for doing so well in such a hotly debated and developing enterprise. Given the great impact experimental philosophy has had on the discipline as a whole and the broad range of topics covered by the papers collected, I highly recommend the book to all.

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