

# Review of *Experimental Philosophy*

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Joshua Knobe & Shaun Nichols (eds.), *Experimental Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 2008, 244 + x pp., \$24.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-19-532326-9

To define what philosophy is has been one of the discipline's main topics since antiquity. The method of its enquiry has also been put into question, but the situation here has been much clearer. Traditional philosophy is mainly based on logical arguments, dialectics, conceptual analysis, thought experiments and intuitive solutions of problems. It does not use empirical research, statistics, controlled or natural experiments and verification through observation. We can call it "armchair" philosophy, which is a completely satisfactory name for the discipline that is usually carried out in warm, comfy workrooms. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century there was an attempt to change the philosophers' pursuit of truth and start using methods more common in natural sciences. This movement of mainly young philosophers has been named *experimental philosophy*, or simply X-phi, with a picture of an armchair on fire as its symbol. It is possible to trace the origin of the program back to the 1990s, when scholars started to deal with some classical problems of moral philosophy using the scientific apparatus of psychology and even neuroscience. Probably the first pioneers of this methodological stance were psychologists Jonathan Haidt and Joshua Greene. In 2002 the latter finished his dissertation thesis "The Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Truth about Morality and What to Do About It" at Princeton University and later published a series of papers in which he analyzed the "trolley problem". The "trolley problem" was first proposed by Philippa Foot in the 1960s and it is frequently discussed by moral philosophers who examine the limits of utilitarian ethics. The problem in its original version is very simple:

A trolley is running out of control down a track. In its path are five people who have been tied to the track by a mad philosopher. Fortunately, you could flip a switch, which will lead the trolley down a different track to safety. Unfortunately, there is a single person tied to that track. Should you flip the switch or do nothing? (Foot, "The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect", *Oxford Review*, No. 5, 1967, pp. 5–15; reprinted in *Virtues and Vices*, U of California P, 1978, pp. 19–33)

Most people choose to switch the flip and cause the death of one person, but in different versions of the example they hesitate to voluntarily kill one person in favor of five survivors. Greene used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) in order to find out how this ambivalence is possible in terms of neurology. He detected two neural areas that conduct our moral reasoning – a rational center, which uses consequentialist ethics, and an emotional centre, based on deontology. Thus, the experimental approach to philosophical problems was born.

The reviewed book is named simply *Experimental Philosophy* and its two editors could be described as superstars in the newly established field. Joshua Knobe works as an assistant professor in the Program in Cognitive Science at Yale University and Shaun Nichols is a professor of philosophy at the University of Arizona. In their book, they put together a representative anthology of papers on various forms of X-phi and also wrote the first chapter entitled "An Experimental Philosophy Manifesto", which serves as an introduction to the topic. Since the Vienna Circle manifesto "The Scientific Conception of the World", philosophy has probably not

experienced a proclamation so radical and ambitious. The authors argue in favor of more practical and empirical philosophy. They believe this claim to be in perfect accordance with older, pre-analytic philosophy which was much more interconnected with psychology, history and political science. Examples of thinkers who worked in this way include Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Hume, Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche and many others. This tradition is dramatically distinct from conventional analytic philosophy which is mainly concerned with conceptual analysis. The main task of this approach is to describe and analyze human nature, to identify “truths about how human beings really are”. Philosophers should run systematic empirical studies instead of counting upon unsubstantiated intuitions. Knobe and Nichols write:

Hence, experimental philosophers proceed by conducting experimental investigations of the psychological processes underlying people’s intuitions about central philosophical issues. Again and again, these investigations have challenged familiar assumptions, showing that people do not actually think about these issues in anything like the way philosophers had assumed. (p. 3)

Experimental philosophers usually design statistical surveys to investigate intuitions about philosophical problems among non-professionals. Results often show that such intuitions vary greatly. However, this does not mean that truths underlying these beliefs should be justified simply by voting. Armchair philosophers consider their intuitions to be universal, which might not be the case. Thought experiments, in particular, are often contaminated by this epistemological error, i. e. Putnam’s Twin-Earth experiment is based only on its author’s intuition, and the analogous intuitive assumption underlies Searle’s belief that the Chinese room is not capable of thinking. The aim of the X-phi movement is to point out that intuitions are not epistemologically sufficient for the formulation of our theories about the world and about ourselves. It is necessary to re-examine our intuitions and find more information about the fundamental facts which constitute them.

The main body of the book consists of eleven essays; seven of them are reprints of older works (2–8), the other four are previously unpublished pieces (9–12). They were written by some of the foremost practitioners of the discipline: Jonathan Weinberg, Stephen P. Stich, Edouard Machery, Eddy Nahmias, Thomas Nadelhoffer, Alfred Mele, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, and others. The themes discussed cover many philosophical areas: epistemological status of intuitions, common-sense identification of the moral responsibility of agents, or intuitive conceptions of free will and intentional action. Critical opinions are represented too, in an essay by the famous analytical epistemologist Ernest Sosa, who expresses skepticism about the relevance of X-phi to mainstream philosophy. Most of the papers are well-written and thoroughly thought-out, and together they constitute a very important work in the methodology of epistemology and philosophy. I am not sure what the future of X-phi will be like, as I have doubts about the future of the whole discipline of philosophy as such, but we may regard the first decade of this century as the time of the rise of experimental philosophy.