

Recently Published Book Spotlight: The Theory and Practice of Experimental Philosophy

BIO: I'm an Associate Professor in the Philosophy Programme at Victoria University of Wellington in beautiful Wellington, New Zealand. I'm interested in a wide range of topics in philosophy, principally in philosophy of science, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of psychology. And I'm an experimental philosopher.



1. What is your work about?

Simply put, the volume is about experimental philosophy—what it is and how to do it.

The goal of Part I of *The Theory and Practice of Experimental Philosophy*

[\[https://broadviewpress.com/product/the-theory-and-practice-of-experimental-philosophy/\]](https://broadviewpress.com/product/the-theory-and-practice-of-experimental-philosophy/) is to detail the theory behind “x-phi.” It is the first volume to articulate and defend a broad conception of experimental philosophy. Both proponents and critics of x-phi have often described it narrowly as the empirical study of philosophical intuitions. Jonathan Livengood [\[http://www.philosophy.illinois.edu/people/jlive\]](http://www.philosophy.illinois.edu/people/jlive) and I discuss

different conceptions of intuitions in philosophy and argue that x-phi has no special, intrinsic connection to the study of intuitions however understood. Rather, we hold that experimental philosophy simply involves systematically collecting and analyzing empirical data in attempting to cast light on philosophical issues. We present a number of reasons to adopt a broad conception, including doing some “experimental philosophy of experimental philosophy.” We show that while self-identified experimental philosophers are split, they tend to deny that the sub-discipline is restricted to the study of intuitions. Having embraced a broad conception of experimental philosophy, we discuss how empirical work in philosophy can be motivated under a wide range of views about the nature of philosophy. We then offer a rough-and-ready categorization of different projects within experimental philosophy and survey examples of each project. Finally, we discuss and respond to four prominent objections that have been raised against experimental philosophy. We argue that despite what is often asserted, there are no one-size-fits-all objections to the practice. That is, we contend that *none* of the criticisms should be seen as bearing on x-phi as a whole; rather, each criticism targets just some of the projects within experimental philosophy—typically work concerning the evidential value of intuitions whether pro or con (or, even more narrowly, just work in the “negative program,” which challenges the evidential value of intuitions). Beyond casting doubt on the breadth of these criticisms, we offer detailed responses, arguing that none of the objections pose a serious challenge to even a restricted set of programs within experimental philosophy.

The goal of Part II of *The Theory and Practice of Experimental Philosophy* is to offer a practical how-to guide for doing experimental philosophy. We aim to provide an accessible entry point for those who haven’t carried out empirical work before. This includes detailing how to design, implement, and analyze empirical studies, focusing on the tools that have been most dominant in x-phi research to date. What sets this section of the book apart from other introductions to scientific research is that we come at it from the perspective of philosophers seeking to contribute to the philosophical literature. We argue that work in experimental philosophy should begin with good philosophy: Specifically, it should begin with a philosophical argument with an empirical premise that stands in need of testing. We then walk readers through the basic process of turning that empirical premise into a testable hypothesis, constructing an instrument to test it, pilot testing the materials, getting ethics approval, collecting data, and analyzing the results.

Thus, the volume aims not simply to introduce and justify the practice of experimental philosophy, but to give readers the tools they need to go out and do some experimental philosophy themselves.

2. What effect do you hope your work will have?

We had several goals. For one, we hoped to shift discussions of x-phi away from a focus on intuitions. We found that both experimental philosophers and critics would often describe experimental philosophy as if it were simply the empirical study of philosophical intuitions. But we had never conceived of x-phi in this way and found that many prominent research projects that are generally treated as part of the corpus have nothing to do with studying intuitions (see Chapter 3 for a number of examples). And I think there is a deeper reason for adopting a broad conception of experimental philosophy, which I articulate in greater detail in Sytsma (2017) [Preprint: <http://philsci-archive.pitt.edu/12743/>]. I find that the focus on intuitions can lead us to lose sight of a shared underlying motivation for doing experimental philosophy: the basic reason for doing empirical work in philosophy, whether directed toward intuitions or not, is simply that empirical claims require empirical support. And the broad conception lines up more squarely with this guiding, methodological naturalist belief. While philosophers are often guilty of making empirical claims

about the distribution of philosophical intuitions, these are far from the only empirical claims that one finds asserted in philosophy without adequate support. One major goal of x-phi, as I see it, is to call-out such assertions and put them to the test. And I think that a growing number of philosophers view experimental philosophy in the same light. Of course, Jonathan and I can't take credit for this trend, although we do hope we have played some role in its furtherance.

A related goal was to situate experimental philosophy—what we term the *new* experimental philosophy—within the long tradition of empirical work in philosophy. While it is common today to hear “traditional philosophy” used in a way that makes it synonymous with armchair methods, that is not how we see the Western philosophical tradition. We argue that throughout the tradition, going back to the beginnings in Ancient Greece, you can find philosophers doing empirical work of one sort or another. This carries through to the first group of philosophers to take up the label of “experimental philosophy”—figures like Bacon, Boyle, Hooke, and Newton—and on to those who reclaimed the label in the 21st Century. And while there are notable differences between the old and the new experimental philosophy, we argue that understood broadly, the new experimental philosophy is continuous with the old. In other words, we contend that x-phi should not be seen as seeking to overthrow traditional philosophy, but as embracing one prominent strand in the philosophical tradition!

A third goal was to help bring more philosophers into the fold. While there are plentiful resources available on every aspect of scientific research, we aren't aware of any other work that is specifically directed toward the concerns of philosophers. And we expected that philosophers generally want something a bit different when it comes to a guide: we want to understand *why* we should do something in one way or another, not simply to be told *how* to do something. We believe this is particularly important with regard to statistical analysis, where introductory materials often focus on offering “cookie cutter” examples rather than explaining the underlying reasons for performing a statistical test. We hope to have filled this gap, providing an introduction to statistical analysis that emphasizes the basic concepts while also giving practical instruction.

3. Who has influenced this work the most?

One thing I love about experimental philosophy is that the community is great: it is helpful, constructive, and collaborative. And this starts with a host of senior figures in the field. Without them, x-phi wouldn't exist. And without x-phi, we wouldn't have written a book about it. Folks like Stephen Stich [<http://www.rci.rutgers.edu/~stich/>], Shaun Nichols [<https://sbn.faculty.arizona.edu/>], and Joshua Knobe [<http://campuspress.yale.edu/joshuaknobe/>] (to give just a few examples) have served as examples, provided advice, and given encouragement. We owe a great debt to each of them. Most importantly, *The Theory and Practice of Experimental Philosophy* reflects the influence of Edouard Machery [<https://www.edouardmachery.com/>] and we owe him the greatest debt of all. As we say in the acknowledgments: “Without Edouard, this volume would not have been written.”

4. Is there anything you didn't include that you wanted to? Why did you leave it out?

As it stands the volume notably exceeded the length we were targeting. And it wasn't nearly enough. I would have loved to include discussions of how to conduct studies using a wider range of empirical methods. Largely out of consideration for length we focused just on questionnaire methods. And even

there we could only hope to provide an initial introduction. Space and time permitting, we would have expanded this material. And, space and time permitting, we would have included chapters on other methods.

Perhaps most notably, I would have included a chapter on the methods of corpus analysis. Corpus analysis is such an obvious tool for philosophers to employ when they're considering questions about word use/meaning and investigating ordinary concepts, it is a shame that it hasn't been employed more often in philosophy (although there are a few notable exceptions, such as Reuter 2011, Bluhm 2012, Hahn et al. 2017, Fischer and Engelhardt 2017, Sytsma and Reuter 2017, Meija-Ramos et al. forthcoming, Sytsma et al. forthcoming). I've recently finished a chapter on "Causal Attributions and Corpus Analysis" [Preprint: <http://philsci-archive.pitt.edu/14848/>] with Roland Bluhm [<https://philpeople.org/profiles/roland-bluhm>], Pascale Willemsen [<https://www.pascalewillemsen.com/>], and Kevin Reuter [<http://www.kevinreuter.com/>] for an amazing volume edited by Eugen Fischer [<http://eastanglia.academia.edu/EugenFischer>] and Mark Curtis on *Methodological Advances in Experimental Philosophy* [<https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/methodological-advances-in-experimental-philosophy-9781350068995/>] That chapter does much of what I would have hoped to do in our volume: It introduces a range of methods from corpus linguistics, including both the use of relatively qualitative search tools and the more mathematical tools of distributional semantic models, provides pointers for how philosophers can put those tools to work in their own projects, and illustrates their value by addressing four questions that arise in recent work on ordinary causal attributions (e.g., Hitchcock and Knobe 2009, Sytsma et al. 2012, Samland and Waldmann 2016).

As we note in that chapter, there are a wide array of corpora available that give extensive, balanced examples of "real" language that can be searched in a variety of ways and used for mathematical models aimed at uncovering the underlying meaning of terms (as expressed by the contexts in which they are used). And this focus on actual language coincides nicely with the general precepts of x-phi: corpus linguistics emphasizes reliance on actual language over examples produced by linguists, just as experimental philosophy emphasizes systematic empirical observation over relying on the judgments of philosophers about empirical questions. Further, corpus methods can fruitfully supplement the questionnaire methods most often employed by experimental philosophers. Investigating a corpus can help generate and motivate hypotheses for testing and can provide an alternative source of evidence for hypotheses. In addition, corpus analysis has the benefit that unlike the responses collected in a questionnaire study, the data are uncued—they aren't generated in response to a prompt given by the researcher—providing a check against various confounds that can impact questionnaire methods.

5. How does it fit in with your larger research project?

The Theory and Practice of Experimental Philosophy nicely captures both the way I think about philosophy and the way I practice it. In metaphilosophy I'm concerned with methodological questions about how best to make progress in philosophy (surprise: I think the use of empirical and formal methods is crucial), and the first-order questions I find most important and interesting have clear empirical components. I find philosophy to be most enjoyable, and most fruitful, when I'm collaborating with others, working in a team to develop an account and to figure out how best to test if it holds up.

The volume fits together most directly with *A Companion to Experimental Philosophy* [<https://www.wiley.com/en-us/A+Companion+to+Experimental+Philosophy-p-9781118661703>], which I

edited with Wesley Buckwalter [<http://wesleybuckwalter.org/>]. I think it is a perfect complement to *The Theory and Practice of Experimental Philosophy*, providing a detailed survey of the current state of the field that is unprecedented in its breadth of coverage. The 42 essays in the volume bring together both prominent experimental philosophers and critics to situate the discipline within contemporary philosophy and provide expert overviews of the empirical work that has been done on a wide range of philosophical topics, including work in philosophy of action, moral and political philosophy, philosophy of mind, epistemology, philosophy of language, metaphysics, philosophy of science, and logic.

I'm involved in a large number of different projects, but they can generally be grouped together as investigating assumptions that philosophers have made about what ordinary concepts look like or about how non-philosophers use terms of philosophical interest. My research centres on utilizing empirical methods both to test these assumptions and to come to empirically informed accounts of what these concepts really look like—what you might call empirical conceptual analysis.

One current topic of interest is the ordinary understanding of pain. The standard view among philosophers is that pains are mental states, and this is thought to follow the ordinary or commonsense conception. This view has several corollaries—that pains are located in the mind/brain, that there can be no unfeelt pains, and that there can be no pain hallucinations. In a series of papers—most in collaboration with Kevin Reuter [<http://www.kevinreuter.com/>]
—we've tested whether these assumptions actually correspond with the lay understanding of pain (see Sytsma and Reuter 2017 [Preprint: <http://philsci-archive.pitt.edu/14089/>] for a recent summary). Across more than 50 empirical studies, including cross-cultural studies, questionnaire studies, and corpus studies, we've found that lay people tend to locate pains in the body rather than the mind/brain, and that they happily accept both that there can be pains that aren't felt and pain hallucinations.

My work on pain grows out of concerns with whether lay people tend to have something like the philosophical concept of phenomenal consciousness. While many philosophers working in the area have assumed that phenomenal consciousness is a part of the “folk theory of consciousness,” some because they take the occurrence of phenomenal consciousness to be manifest in ordinary experience, I've presented evidence that lay Americans, at least, do not classify mental states in the way philosophers do—they do not treat prototypical examples of (supposed) phenomenal mental states similarly (see Sytsma 2016 for a summary [Preprint: <http://philsci-archive.pitt.edu/11467/>] for an overview). And I've argued that this evidence casts doubt on the claim that phenomenal consciousness is simply manifest, and with it on a common justification given for believing in the supposed phenomenon in the first place. I'm currently engaged in an extensive series of cross-cultural studies with Eyuphan Özdemir extending this work. We're investigating what David Chalmers [<http://consc.net/>] (2018) has called the “meta-problem of consciousness”—that is the problem of explaining why people have intuitions that there is a hard problem of consciousness. In line with the previous results, we're finding that lay people by-and-large simply don't have such “problem intuitions.”

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