

## **Experimental Philosophy**

As with most topics in philosophy, there is no consensus about what experimental philosophy is. Most broadly, experimental philosophy involves using scientific methods to collect empirical data for the purpose of casting light on philosophical issues. Such a definition threatens to be too broad, however: Taking the nature of matter to be a philosophical issue, research at the Large Hadron Collider would count as experimental philosophy.

Others have suggested more narrow definitions, characterizing experimental philosophy in terms of the use of scientific methods to investigate intuitions. This threatens to be too narrow, however, excluding such work as Eric Schwitzgebel's comparison of the rates of theft of ethics books to similar volumes from other areas of philosophy for the purpose of finding out whether philosophical training in ethics promotes moral behavior.

While restricting experimental philosophy to the study of intuitions is too narrow, this nonetheless covers most of the research in this area. Focusing on this research, we begin by discussing some of the methods that have been used by experimental philosophers. We then distinguish between three types of goals that have guided experimental philosophers, illustrating these goals with some examples.

### **Methods**

In a typical study in experimental philosophy, the researcher uses the methods of experimental psychology to study the intuitions of some group of people—most often the intuitions of people without training in philosophy (often called “the folk”). This is usually done by constructing one

or more vignettes, or hypothetical stories, that are of philosophical interest. The vignette(s) are then presented to participants who are asked to answer one or more questions related to the vignette, often on a five- or seven-point scale. The researcher then analyzes the results, considering what the participants' responses reveal about the intuitions at issue.

While this describes the majority of the studies conducted so far, other approaches have also been employed. For example, Adam Arico, Brian Fiala, Robert Goldberg, and Shaun Nichols have measured reaction times to investigate the low-level cues involved in mental state attribution. Adam Feltz and Edward Cokely have used a personality inventory to investigate the influence of individual personality differences on intuitions. And, Jonathan Livengood, Justin Sytsma, Adam Feltz, Richard Scheines, and Edouard Machery relied on a social-psychological questionnaire—Shane Frederick's Cognitive Reflection Test—to highlight an aspect of the philosophical temperament: Philosophers tend to be more critical of their spontaneous, "gut" intuitions than non-philosophers (even when one controls for the level of education).

Further, there are a number of psychologists conducting research that can be readily classified as work in experimental philosophy. These researchers often employ methods that go beyond the use of vignettes to solicit intuitions. For example, Joshua Greene and colleagues have used brain imagery in investigating the processes generating moral judgments.

## **Goals**

It is common for philosophers to turn their analytic gaze on their own discipline, and experimental philosophers are no exception: There has been a good deal of debate concerning how best to classify various projects in experimental philosophy. The most prominent

distinction is based on experimental philosophers' attitudes toward the use of intuitions as evidence in philosophy. Advocates of the *positive program* support this use of intuitions, but hold that empirical investigation is often needed to arrive at an adequate understanding of what those intuitions are. In contrast, advocates of the *negative program* are skeptical of the use of intuitions as evidence (even when supplemented by empirical investigations), and their empirical work is intended to substantiate their doubts toward this practice. Further, some work in experimental philosophy is not motivated by the question of whether intuitions can serve as evidence, but rather by an interest in people's intuitions themselves and in what they reveal about how people think about topics such as free will, the mind, or consciousness. We will say that such work belongs to the *neutral program*.

While it is often relatively easy to identify the goals of experimental philosophers, it is sometimes difficult to classify their work as belonging to one program or another. To illustrate, consider Sytsma and Machery's work investigating how people classify different types of mental states. This research considered the philosophical claim that phenomenal consciousness is an obvious aspect of our mental lives. If this claim is correct, then non-philosophers should tend to classify mental states in the same way that philosophers do. Their experimental work suggested that this is not the case, however: Unlike philosophers, non-philosophers treated two prototypical examples of phenomenally conscious mental states (seeing red and feeling pain) differently, suggesting that they did not view them as being phenomenal. Rather, non-philosophers seem to categorize mental states into different groups depending on the extent to which they have an associated hedonic value.

How should this work be classified? It might be thought to be an example of the positive program insofar as it investigates people's intuitions and calls on those results to make a

philosophical argument. Alternatively, it might be construed as an example of the negative program: Taking the philosophers' claim to rest on their intuitions about different mental states, this work challenges the reliability of that supposed evidence. Finally, having found evidence that non-philosophers do not classify mental states in the same way that philosophers do, Sytsma and Machery went on to explore how non-philosophers classify mental states, taking this to be an interesting question in its own right.

Despite this shortcoming, the distinction between the positive, negative, and neutral programs does a good job of capturing some of the most prominent projects in the literature. This is perhaps most clear with regard to the negative program. For example, Edouard Machery, Ron Mallon, Shaun Nichols, and Stephen Stich presented evidence that intuitions about the reference of proper names vary across cultures. They then argued that, lacking a principled reason to favor the intuitions of one group over another, the evidential value of such intuitions is called into question. Similarly, Stacey Swain, Joshua Alexander, and Jonathan Weinberg have provided evidence that people's disposition to ascribe knowledge sometimes varies depending on a seemingly irrelevant factor—whether or not the situation is contrasted with a clear case of knowledge. They then argued that this raises doubts about the evidential value of intuitions about knowledge.

Other prominent work in experimental philosophy is well classified in terms of the positive program. Consider the work of Eddy Nahmias, Steve Morris, Thomas Nadelhoffer, and Jason Turner on incompatibilism—the claim that free will and determinism are incompatible. Incompatibilist philosophers often assert that it is counter-intuitive to hold that free will and determinism are compatible, concluding from this that absent a decisive argument to the contrary,

incompatibilism should be seen as the default position. Nahmias et al. undermined this argument by providing evidence that ordinary people take free will to be compatible with determinism.

Turning finally to the neutral program, Joshua Knobe found that, when judging whether someone intentionally brought about a foreseen side effect, people are more likely to judge that a harmful side effect was brought about intentionally than a helpful side effect. On the basis of these and similar findings, he concluded that moral considerations play a significant role in folk psychology.

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See also Consciousness; Folk Psychology; Free Will, Philosophical Conceptions of.

#### **FURTHER READINGS**

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