



## BOOK REVIEW

**Rethinking the scope of experimental philosophy****Eugen Fischer and John Collins (eds.): Experimental philosophy, rationalism, and naturalism: rethinking philosophical method. London: Routledge, 2015, 302pp, \$54.95 PB, \$155.00 HB**Justin Sytsma<sup>1</sup>Published online: 1 June 2016  
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Eugen Fischer and John Collins have brought together an impressive, and important, series of essays concerning the methodological debates between rationalists and naturalists, and how these debates have been impacted by work in experimental philosophy. The work at issue concerns the evidential value of intuitions, and as such is only a small part of the experimental philosophy corpus as I understand it. In fact, Fischer and Collins define experimental philosophy in this *narrow* sense in their introduction. On their view, experimental philosophy “builds on the assumption that, for better or worse, intuitions are crucially involved in philosophical work” (3). The parenthetical serves to emphasize that such work could either be pursued from a *positive* perspective aiming to vindicate the use of intuitions in philosophy or from a *negative* perspective aiming to undermine that use. Noting these two perspectives, it might then seem that experimental philosophy is neutral with regard to methodological debate: “experimental philosophy is not a party to the dispute between methodological rationalism and naturalism, but offers a new framework for settling it” (23).

As an experimental philosopher, it seems to me that something has gone badly amiss in this analysis, since I take the practice to be motivated by a methodological naturalist principle:  $x$ -phi emerges from the recognition that philosophers often rely (implicitly or explicitly) on empirical claims, coupled with the principle that empirical claims call for empirical support. In line with this view, a growing number of experimental philosophers have explicitly endorsed a *broad* conception of experimental philosophy that does not restrict it to work on intuitions (see Footnote 3 in Chapter 7 by Weinberg in the volume under review; Sytsma and Machery 2013; Rose and Danks 2013; O’Neill and Machery 2014; Schupbach 2015; Sytsma and Livengood 2016; Buckwalter and Sytsma 2016; Stich and Tobia 2016). And one

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reason they do so is that they recognize that a good deal of work that is generally considered to be part of the experimental philosophy corpus does not concern intuitions at all. Further, there is evidence that much of the work that has been done on intuitions is not primarily concerned with their evidential value (Knobe 2016).

From the perspective of the broad conception, this volume engages with only a restricted slice of experimental philosophy. And I believe that this obscures the broader naturalist commitments behind the practice. That said, while I would like to have seen discussion of the implications of the wider practice of experimental philosophy, the 12 essays in this volume offer a great deal of insight into issues concerning the evidential value of intuitions.

In Chapter 1, David Papineau casts the debate over intuitions in philosophy as being between “friends of intuition, who hold that intuitions provide a distinctive source of a prior philosophical evidence” and “enemies of intuition, who hold that intuitions are an unreliable guide to philosophical truth” (51). Experimental philosophy enters the picture with the enemies appealing to empirical studies to indicate that intuitions are unreliable, while the friends question how conclusive this evidence is. Papineau then charges that this back-and-forth misses the more basic question of how a priori philosophical knowledge could even be possible. This charge depends critically on Papineau’s framing, however. It arises because he has cast the friends of intuition as holding that philosophical intuitions are a priori. But there are a number of accounts of intuition in use and not all of them treat intuitions as being a priori. Consequently, it seems appropriate that enemies of intuition have not focused on Papineau’s question, instead turning to more general doubts about the reliability of intuitive judgments.

In Chapter 2, Tim Crane asks what relevance the history of philosophy has for the practice of philosophy today, and argues that it provides necessary context for understanding philosophical questions and how they may be answered. In Chapter 3, John Collins focuses on naturalism, arguing that methodological naturalism—understood as “a simple commendation of the aims and means of mature science” (88)—is naturalism enough. He focuses on the negative side of this claim, presenting a compelling case that metaphysical naturalism does not hold up to scrutiny. In Chapter 4, Mikkel Gerken provides a rich investigation of the extent to which a priori modal cognition plays a role in generating philosophical insights.

In Chapter 5, Daniele Sgaravatti argues that judgments about philosophical thought experiments are generated by our ordinary ability to apply concepts and that our judgments are reliable insofar as they reflect a competence in applying those concepts. He then defends this view against the objection that absent an explanation of what this competence amounts to, this is to answer a mystery with a mystery. Sgaravatti’s defense hinges on drawing a distinction between concepts and conceptions, where the latter are the psychological structures involved in the application of concepts. With this distinction in hand, his view is that “a competence in applying a concept can be constituted by a reliable conception” (144). I find that this defense now raises a serious worry, however: How are we to determine that a conception is reliable? To do so, it seems that we need to specify which concept a conception is associated with. And this raises the question of how we would know that we had specified the *correct* concept.

In Chapter 6, Hilary Kornblith considers naturalist attempts to defend armchair methods, focusing on appeals to intuition. He offers a convincing critique of this practice, concluding that “naturalism does not provide us with a new way of defending old methods,” and rather, “it provides us with reason for changing our ways” (166). Jonathan Weinberg’s contribution in Chapter 7 might be construed as offering such a defense, although he goes further in stressing the need for empirical input than the examples Kornblith considers. Weinberg starts with the idea that we ourselves are the only detectors available for many philosophically interesting properties. He allows that “we are at least *minimally adequate* detectors” (172) of these properties, and then argues that the task is to get the most out of the detectors we have, which will require significant contributions from experimental philosophers. In line with the worry raised for Sgaravatti, insofar as Weinberg is correct and we cannot even begin to imagine how to build alternative detectors for the properties at issue, it seems that this should give us pause about assuming their reality. Turning from ontological to methodological concerns, I worry that an instrument that cannot be calibrated is not much of an instrument.

In Chapter 8, Edouard Machery issues a strong challenge to the claim that philosophers are particularly skilled at applying philosophically interesting concepts, surveying a range of theoretical considerations and empirical evidence that suggest against this claimed expertise. Machery concludes with a provocative call for intellectual modesty: “Philosophers’ conviction that they are experts at applying concepts is nothing short of a form of hubris, and the growing literature coming in large measure from experimental philosophy should be viewed as a call for humility” (201). In Chapter 9, Jennifer Nado offers a convincing response to the charge that criticisms of the use of intuitions in philosophy overgeneralize, leading to skepticism about our ordinary conceptual capacities. She responds by noting that the epistemological demands involved in using intuitions as evidence in building philosophical theories are much higher than for ordinary use.

In Chapter 10, Bence Nanay does thrilling battle with a strawman. Nanay’s claim is that the naturalist rhetoric typical of experimental philosophers is false advertising. The argument for this claim rests on a contentious characterization of naturalism coupled with a mischaracterization of the bulk of what experimental philosophers do. Nanay defines naturalism in terms of integrating “the philosophical and the scientific in such a way that the philosophical does not automatically trump the scientific” (226). He then equates experimental philosophy with the study of folk intuitions, asserting that it is about the relation between “experimental findings concerning intuitions about *X*” and “philosophical accounts of *X*” (226). Taking the ultimate concern to be with *X*, while restricting experimental philosophy to the study of *intuitions about X*, allows Nanay to assert that experimental philosophy falls short of his conception of naturalism in failing to take into account scientific findings about *X* and thus, presumably, allowing the philosophical to trump the scientific. There is a great deal to be said here, but let me just restrict myself to repeating that this is an inadequate characterization of experimental philosophy, and hence, Nanay is primarily swinging at straw: x-phi is not just concerned with the study of intuitions, and the bulk of the work done on intuitions takes them to be of philosophical interest in their own right.

In Chapter 11, Amir Horowitz makes an important contribution to debates over the significance of findings of cross-cultural variation in intuitions about reference. He argues that both these findings and the practice of experimental semantics more generally are philosophically important, with the argument hinging on the claim that theoretical considerations are not able to settle the disputes. Finally, in Chapter 12, Fischer, Paul Engelhardt, and Aurelie Herbelot provide an excellent example of experimental philosophy in action. They present the results of both a linguistic corpora study and an experimental study in support of a debunking explanation of a key intuition called on in the arguments from illusion and hallucination. This is not only an impressive piece of work, but a fitting conclusion to an impressive volume.

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