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JENNIFER NADO

ADVANCES IN EXPERIMENTAL PHILOSOPHY
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Jennifer Nado

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Introduction

Jennifer Nado

Five or ten years ago, an introduction for a volume entitled “Advances in Experimental Philosophy and Philosophical Methodology” would probably have opened with something like the following:

From its inception, the most salient and controversial aspect of experimental philosophy has been its implications for traditional philosophical methodology. Experimental philosophy challenges traditional methods both through its findings, and through its very existence. The findings generated by experimental philosophers, many of which appear to suggest that intuitions are sensitive to factors such as cultural background and emotional state, challenge the legitimacy of appeal to intuition as an evidential source in philosophical theorizing. Further, however, the radical notion of philosophers using empirical methods drawn from psychology challenges the idea that philosophy is an exclusively armchair-driven discipline.

Summaries like this can be found throughout the literature—I’m quite sure my 2011 dissertation contained a roughly similar paragraph. In fact, in all honesty, the above is essentially the opening paragraph I wrote (more or less on autopilot) as I began to draft this introduction. But experimental philosophy’s implications have really never been quite so straightforward as such a paragraph suggests.

Early work in what has been called the “negative program” in experimental philosophy tended to invoke something like the following very simple argument, which we might call the “Argument from Variation”:

- 1 Experimental studies have shown that intuitions vary as a function of inappropriate factors like cultural background, emotional state, and so forth.

- 2 The above variation shows intuition to be an unreliable guide to philosophical truth.
- 3 Philosophers must abandon their reliance on intuition-based methods of theorizing.

Variations on this basic line of argument for example can be found in Alexander and Weinberg (2007), Swain et al. (2008); Joachim Horvath (2010) describes a near-identical argument as being the “master argument” of experimental philosophy.¹ As experimental philosophy has matured, however, its practitioners have been confronted with the fact that this simple argument is in fact less straightforward than it appears. In particular, critics of experimental philosophy have pointed out that it involves several unstated and potentially problematic assumptions.

First, the argument’s premises are stated simply in terms of “intuition,” suggesting that our ordinary, non-technical understanding of intuition will suffice to ground the argument. Yet it’s quite plausible that a casual understanding does not so suffice—debates over just what an intuition *is* predate experimental philosophy (see for instance the articles in DePaul and Ramsey 1998), but the variation argument gives them new urgency. As several critics have pointed out, it’s quite difficult to give a definition of intuition that comports fairly well with philosophers’ general usage of the term without causing the variation argument to become either self-undermining, or overly skeptical. As an example of the former problem, both George Bealer (1992) and Joel Pust (2001) have pointed out that arguments against the use of intuition plausibly invoke epistemological standards, concepts, and so forth, that appear to be backed up only by intuition. If we accept the conclusion of an anti-intuition argument, we will be forced to reject those standards—thereby undermining the very argument that led us to reject intuition. As an example of the latter problem, Timothy Williamson (2007) has noted that the cognitive abilities that comprise “philosophical intuition” also plausibly underlie a large proportion of everyday cognition as well. Reject intuition, and one ends up becoming a “judgment skeptic”—that is, one’s arguments against philosophical uses of intuition will generalize to a great many ordinary judgments. Indeed, a flat-out rejection of any belief justified only by intuition would plausibly require rejection of elementary logic and mathematics—and

presumably, most experimental philosophers would rather hold on to (say) *modus ponens* and addition.

A second difficulty is that the variation argument's premises simply assume that the experimental findings—which initially used undergraduate subjects almost exclusively—generalize to professional philosophers. In other words, the argument implies that, if undergraduates are shown to be sensitive to order effects, we can conclude that philosophers are highly likely to be so as well. This assumption has been the subject of what is commonly called the “expertise defense” (see for example Kauppinen 2007; Ludwig 2007; Devitt 2011; Williamson 2011). Proponents of this defense claim that, since professional philosophers plausibly have a great deal of expertise in thinking about matters philosophical, there is simply no reason to assume that they will be subject to the biases and errors that have been found in “folk” intuition. Recently, experimental philosophers have attempted to combat this objection by conducting studies using philosophers as subjects—and results so far suggest that philosophers’ intuitions may exhibit biases as well (see e.g. Schulz et al. 2011; Schwitzgebel and Cushman 2012; Tobia et al. 2013). A proponent of expertise, however, might well reply that survey contexts do not prompt philosophers to exercise the capacities which constitute their special expertise—philosophers’ expertise might manifest only through extended reflection, for instance.

Finally, the conclusion of the variation argument follows only if we assume that intuition really does play a central, evidential role in philosophical method. This is the most recent assumption to come under question, in the form of what I’ll call (following Cappelen 2012) the “Centrality” debate. “Centrality” is, in Cappelen’s words, the thesis that “Contemporary analytic philosophers rely on intuitions as evidence (or as a source of evidence) for philosophical theories” (Cappelen 2012: 3). It’s a common assumption on both sides of the intuition literature, but Cappelen and several others (Deutsch 2009, 2010; Earlenberg and Molyneux 2013; Ichikawa and Jarvis 2013; Ichikawa 2014) have recently begun to argue that it is false. They argue, for instance, that evidence in philosophy does not consist of intuitions—it consists of facts about philosophical phenomena like knowledge, causation, and so forth. And although philosophers have often characterized thought experiment judgments as mere appeals to intuition, closer examination

reveals that the relevant claims are typically backed up by argument. If this is right, then empirical studies of spontaneous, unreflective “intuitions” aren’t obviously relevant to what philosophers actually do.

The three assumptions just surveyed are not unrelated. Williamson’s response to the “judgment skeptic” involves rejecting what he calls the “psychologization” of our evidence: that is, the tendency to assume that evidence in philosophy consists of intuitions. Similarly, Cappelen’s arguments against Centrality, at points, turn on doubts about the very coherence of the concept of an intuition. Moreover, although Cappelen criticizes proponents of the expertise defense for their commitment to the Centrality assumption, a rejection of Centrality raises similar concerns about issues of philosophical expertise. As noted earlier, a common response to the expertise defense has been to run more of approximately the same sort of survey that experimental philosophers have always used—only now using professional philosophers as subjects. But, if the opponents of Centrality are right, then the real difference between naïve subjects and professionals may well be that the former, but not the latter, form their beliefs about philosophical issues primarily by consulting intuition. Perhaps philosophers are subject to just the same biases in intuition as the “folk”—that’s of little consequence if the actual practice of philosophy, outside the context of the laboratory, primarily involves argumentation rather than brute appeal to intuition. Philosophical expertise, in other words, might consist precisely in the ability to employ sophisticated argumentation and complex reasoning in support of judgments that the folk standardly make “intuitively.”

All this lends to a growing sense that experimental philosophy needs to reexamine its roots—to rearticulate just what the targets, aims, and methods of experimental philosophy really are. This volume serves as an attempt to do just that. Each of the authors in this volume offers a new perspective on the discipline of experimental philosophy, one that goes beyond the straightforward, armchair-burning pronouncements so frequently suggested by the early days of the movement. Not all are wholly optimistic—the volume contains its share of criticisms of experimental philosophy’s aims and self-image. The contributions, in fact, frequently represent quite different visions regarding the proper role of experimentation in philosophy—from Turri’s call for the normalization of experiments in epistemology, to Deutsch’s pessimism, to many positions in between.

Jonathan Weinberg's chapter sets us off by offering an alternative to the standard reliability-based critique of the epistemological worth of intuitions. Weinberg notes that even a quite reliable source of evidence (of which intuition is, in fact, likely one) can nonetheless be untrustworthy, depending upon the particular inferences one makes from the source's deliverances. Given this insight, Weinberg argues that metaphilosophers ought to be considering critiques not only of our use of intuition but of other aspects of our methodology as well. Weinberg notes, for example, that theories in philosophy tend to be "exception intolerant"—a single counterexample can often wholly overturn a theory. Even highly reliable sources of evidence may fail to be trustworthy enough for the generation of such theories. To address this problem, Weinberg suggests that philosophers might well consider adopting "exception tolerant" theories rather than searching for ways to improve the reliability of intuition. If they do so, however, they will also need to adjust the forms of inference they employ; namely, they will need to adopt modes of inference that work well on the "messy" sorts of data sets that χ -phi suggests intuition generates.

Much early negative work in experimental philosophy focused on discrediting intuition by way of demonstrations of bias or inappropriate variation. On such views, one might expect experimental philosophy to play an inherently short-lived role—once traditionalists had become convinced of their folly, appeals to intuition would be abandoned and the work of the experimental philosopher would be complete. In his chapter, however, John Turri offers a quite different criticism of traditional philosophical method. Turri notes that theories in epistemology are frequently judged by how well they comport with our commonsense views about the nature of knowledge, justification and so forth. Turri then reviews several recent studies which indicate that philosophers very frequently mischaracterize how ordinary folks think and talk about knowledge. The current philosophical practice of reliance on introspection and casual observation is, then, clearly insufficiently rigorous. Turri's conclusion is a critical one, but it is not that intuition (or appeal to commonsense epistemology) be abandoned—it is that experimentation must become part of the standard practice in epistemology.

Joshua Alexander's contribution focuses not on the traditional target of intuitions, but on thought experiments. Alexander examines two competing accounts of how thought experiments work, both from the literature in

philosophy of science—the “argument view” and the “mental model” view. Examination of these accounts demonstrates the importance of studying philosophical cognition generally—for instance, the role imagination might play in understanding a thought experiment. The shift to a general focus on philosophical cognition demonstrates an expanded role for experimental philosophy. For, Alexander notes, experimental philosophy just is the empirical study of how we think philosophically. A focus on “intuition” obscures this broader role for x-phi. Alexander ultimately suggests a “cooperative” view of the relationship between experimental philosophy and traditional uses of the method of cases.

The second half of the volume focuses broadly on the Centrality debate, leading off with a contribution by Max Deutsch. Deutsch, one of the initiators of the debate, here argues that Gettier’s 1963 article, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?,” supposedly one of the archetype examples of “intuition-based” thought experimentation, in fact does not rely on intuitions as evidence. Indeed, Gettier offers arguments for his claims, not brute appeals to intuition—the primary argument being that the agents in the counterexamples have true beliefs only due to sheer luck, and that this sort of luck is inconsistent with knowledge. One might suppose that, despite Gettier’s intentions, at the very least the post-Gettier literature has treated Gettier’s counterexamples as involving appeal to intuition. But Deutsch argues that both the “Gettierology” literature that Gettier’s paper spawned and the current textbook discussions of Gettier’s cases fail to evidence any such interpretation. Further, contrary to popular belief, responses to Gettier’s paper themselves relied on argumentation, rather than intuition, in supporting their own conclusions.

Ron Mallon’s contribution explores whether the impact of experimental philosophy would in fact be undermined by the failure of the Centrality thesis. Mallon focuses on the “argument from diversity”—that is, the argument that the observed variation in intuitive judgments across cultural, socio-economic, or other groups of persons is *prima facie* a cause for concern about current philosophical methods. Mallon contends that the effectiveness of this argument is not dependent on the classical, “Platonic armchair”-style picture of philosophical method that opponents of Centrality reject. Mallon suggests that we view the argument from diversity as akin to the problem of

disagreement among epistemic peers; the issue, then, becomes one of whether we are epistemically obligated to reduce our credence in a proposition in response to the disagreement. From this perspective, the argument remains effective against multiple construals of philosophical method, including naturalistic alternatives to the “Platonic armchair” view as well as views which reject any form of reliance on spontaneous “intuitive” judgment, no matter how characterized.

In our joint contribution, Michael Johnson and I attempt to address the Centrality question on a smaller scale by conducting a “case study” of the use of intuitions in one particular field in philosophy—theories of reference. Interestingly, experimental philosophy has prompted a quite separate debate on this topic, one which we suggest has unexplored parallels with the incipient Centrality debate. When Machery et al. (2004) published findings suggesting that persons with East Asian cultural backgrounds are less likely than Westerners to exhibit anti-descriptivist intuitions in response to two of Kripke’s well-known thought experiments, several authors objected that the intuitions Machery et al. studied were of little relevance to the success of Kripke’s arguments. We examine arguments by Michael Devitt, Genoveva Martí, and others, ultimately concluding that the central data for a theory of reference consists not of intuitions, but of applications of terms to things. In other words, the central data consists of linguistic behavior, and can thus quite naturally be studied by way of the methods of experimental philosophy. Nonetheless, since intuition can be good (although not perfect) evidence for what one would say, armchair appeal to intuition can therefore be good (though indirect and non-ideal) evidence for a theory of reference. All of this, however, applies only to the theory of reference—we argue that intuition’s evidential status is more uncertain in other fields of philosophy.

Jonathan Ichikawa, like Deutsch, rejects the traditional view that philosophers rely on intuitions as evidence. However, Ichikawa’s reasons differ from Deutsch’s (and indeed from those of other opponents of Centrality)—while Deutsch emphasizes the presence of argumentation in, e.g. Gettier’s work, Ichikawa approaches from the other direction, asking us to consider whether the absence of an occurrence of intuition really impacts an agent’s reasons to believe. Ichikawa argues that agents are often under rational pressure to accept

certain propositions even in the absence of any awareness of this pressure or inclination to accept those propositions. If this is so, then, although the occurrence of an intuition might lead to awareness of the rational pressure, it is hard to see how the occurrence of an intuition lends any justificatory weight. Though Ichikawa thus rejects the view that intuitions play an evidential role in philosophy, he—unlike most other opponents of Centrality—holds that experimental philosophy’s importance is not wholly undermined by a rejection of intuition-centered views of philosophical method. Ichikawa notes that, even if intuitions do not play an evidential role in philosophy, this does not rule out the possibility that psychological facts about intuitions may nonetheless be epistemically significant. The existence of order effects in intuition, for example, might lead us to doubt our ability to respond rationally to our reasons—without requiring the commitment that we are relying on those intuitions as evidence.

This volume joins several others in the “Advances in Experimental Philosophy” series; its focus, however, is somewhat atypical. The advances with which this volume’s authors are concerned are not, for the most part, a matter of new, exciting empirical results—this volume contains significantly less discussion of actual experimental findings than its predecessors. Instead, the advances are metaphilosophical. They consist of the development and sophistication of different perspectives on the nature and relevance of the entire project of experimental philosophy. More broadly, they consist of new insights on just what philosophy is and ought to be. It’s an exciting time to be involved in this field; one gets the sense that philosophy’s self-image will likely be quite different twenty or so years down the line. It’s my hope and belief that experimental philosophy will continue to challenge, and thereby help shape, philosophers’ views about their own discipline.

Note

- 1 Interestingly, some of the classic early experiments (such as Weinberg, Nichols and Stich 2001 and Machery et al. 2004) fail to precisely fit this argument type, since they restrict their conclusions to epistemic intuitions and semantic intuitions respectively. However, the basic approach is otherwise similar.

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