**What is X-Phi Good For?**

**David Papineau**

There is no doubt that much fascinating empirical material has been produced by the experimental philosophy movement. Who would have thought that ordinary people’s ideas about knowledge or consciousness would vary with gender and cultural background, or that their moral judgements would be so sensitive to apparently irrelevant influences? Still, even if experimental philosophy is interesting, this doesn’t necessarily mean that it is important. Those who insist that it marks a revolution in philosophy owe us some explanation of its significance.

After all, philosophy isn’t survey research. When philosophers study knowledge, consciousness, free will, moral value, and so on, their first concern is with these things themselves, rather than with what people think about them. So why exactly is it so important to philosophy to discover experimentally that people differ in their views on these matters? We wouldn’t expect physicists to throw up their hands in excitement just because somebody shows that different cultures have different views about the origin of the universe.

Experimental philosophers are surprisingly vague on this issue. If pressed, they tend to mutter something about discrediting the role played by ‘intuitions’ in traditional philosophy, before rushing off to design their next questionnaire. But this is far too quick. Exactly what role intuitions play in philosophy is a matter of debate, and the details of this debate matter to the significance of experimental philosophy.

Experimental philosophy does itself a disservice by not stopping to explain what it is good for. My own view is that it has an important if limited contribution to make to orthodox philosophical debates, in ways I’ll explain later. But its advocates often claim much more, suggesting that their new method somehow discredits all traditional philosophy. Out with the old, in with the new! In the absence of any reasoned support for this radical manifesto, it is all too easy for critics to dismiss the movement as a fad without foundations.

Isn’t it enough that experimental philosophy is interesting in its own right? Aren’t we all fascinated by the quirks in human thinking that it uncovers? Maybe so, but this doesn’t explain why these findings matter to philosophy. The human mind is very quirky in its attitudes to snakes, spiders, and sex, in ways which are well worth studying, but nobody thinks that these quirks are the province of experimental philosophy.

The ‘official X-phi’ website proclaims that ‘experimental philosophy involves the collection of empirical data to shed light on philosophical issues’. But how, to repeat the question I started with, do empirical data about everyday thinking help us with real philosophical issues? The comparison with physics is telling once more. Psychologists have done much to investigate everyday thinking about physical topics—‘folk physics’ as it is sometimes called—and their findings are certainly interesting. Who would have thought that everyday thought is so committed to outmoded Aristotelian laws of motion? But knowing about folk physics doesn’t help with real physics. So why should knowing about folk philosophy help with real philosophy?

Perhaps the relevant point is that philosophy, unlike physics, is concerned with the analysis of concepts. Traditional philosophers sit in their armchairs and ask themselves what they would say if someone’s justified belief were true purely by luck, or if someone other than me satisfied all the descriptions associated with the name ‘David Papineau’, or if someone’s memories were transferred to another body, . . . and so on for a familiar range of recherché scenarios. If the point of this exercise were to analyse our concepts of knowledge, proper names, personhood, and so on, then there would be an obvious rationale for experimental philosophy. Instead of a haphazard appeal to a few armchair reactions, it could proceed on a sound scientific basis, with proper questionnaires and systematic surveys of the reactions of ordinary people.

Some writers in the experimental philosophy tradition do seem to think of their project in this way. They say that they are in the business of analysing concepts, just like traditional philosophy, only doing it better. However, this is not a good defence of experimental philosophy. It is a bad idea to think of philosophy as analysing concepts. I don’t mean that philosophy that analyses concepts is bad philosophy. I mean that it is a bad idea to think that any serious philosophy analyses concepts in the first place.

I know that there are plenty of serious philosophers who say that they are analysing concepts. But their claims about their own practice do not stand up to examination. When we look closely at what they actually do (or indeed look closely at what they actually say they do) it turns out, unsurprisingly, that they are really interested in theories about the nature of reality, and not in the concepts used to frame those theories. The point is that concepts per se make no assertions. The concept red doesn’t itself say anything, and nor by the same coin do the concepts knowledge, or proper name, or person. We only have substantial theses worth evaluating when concepts like these are used to make synthetic claims about what exists. In line with this, when philosophers say that they are ‘analysing concepts’, in truth they turn out to be evaluating substantial claims, such as that real people like you and me are constituted by their bodies, or that real names like ‘David Papineau’ refer to whoever satisfies the descriptions associated with the names, or that familiar cases of real knowledge require nothing more than true justified belief.

In line with this, it is a mistake to think of the armchair reflections of philosophers as designed to explore the structure of concepts. Philosophers aren’t exploring the concept of knowledge, say, when they argue that that knowledge can’t be true justified belief because some cases of true justified belief intuitively don’t constitute knowledge. Rather they are countering a substantial theory about the nature of knowledge with a synthetic intuition about a possible case.

In this respect, they are no different from empirical scientists who construct thought-experiments in order to discredit some established theory. Consider how Galileo argued against the Aristotelian theory that heavier bodies fall faster. He observed that Aristotle’s theory had the obviously counterintuitive consequence that two bodies tied together with a piece of string would fall faster than either alone (since they would then form a compound body heavier than both). The Aristotelian theory of free fall was no conceptual claim, yet Galileo didn’t have to leave his armchair to demolish it. He simply pointed out that it has a consequence we intuitively know to be wrong.

Of course, if philosophical thought-experiments have the same structure as scientific ones, then philosophers owe us some account of the authority of their intuitions. By and large, philosophers tend to trust their intuitions. They assume that they are right if it strikes them that a luckily true justified belief isn’t knowledge, or that a prince would be transported into a cobbler’s body if his memories were transferred there, or . . . and so on for many familiar appeals to philosophical intuition. However, if these intuitions are substantial claims about reality, rather than mere matters of conceptual definition, then their authority cannot be taken for granted. In the scientific case, intuitions about observable results can always be checked by performing real experiments. But there seems no obvious way of similarly confirming philosophical intuitions empirically.

Some philosophers appeal to the wisdom of history to justify armchair intuitions. According to J.L. Austin, our intuitions embody “all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connections they have found worth marking, in the lifetime of many generations . . .”. However, at this point the findings of experimental philosophy certainly have something to say. If people of different cultures and genders have divergent intuitions about basic philosophical questions, then this undermines Austin’s optimism. History can’t guarantee that our intuitions are all true, if they collectively contradict themselves.

Maybe the reactions of trained philosophers are better than those of ordinary people. Timothy Williamson has defended armchair methods against the experimental findings by arguing that a proper philosophical training winnows out mistaken reactions to test cases. However, this ‘expertise defence’ of intuitions only raises further questions. How exactly has their training succeeded in putting the philosophical experts in touch with the truth? And in any case, there is some recent evidence that even the philosophical experts disagree among themselves, and display something like the same range of contradictory reactions as non-philosophers.

So there is no doubt that experimental philosophy has a kind of negative significance for philosophical practice. It can show us that philosophical intuitions are untrustworthy, even when tutored by an expert education, and so shouldn’t always have the last say in philosophical arguments.

However, if this negative message is all that experimental philosophy has to tell us, it scarcely justifies its revolutionary billing. For one thing, the flurry of experimental studies starts to look like using a big hammer to crack a small nut. Did we really need all those questionnaires to show us that philosophical intuitions can go astray? I would have thought that the same moral could be drawn much more quickly from a minimal acquaintance with the history of thought. The past is full of examples of respectable thinkers staking their intellectual shirts on intuitions that we now know to be quite misguided.

What is more, the negative message seems in danger of putting experimental philosophers out of a job. What is the point of continuing to explore the structure of everyday intuitions, once it has been established that they are so untrustworthy? Experimental philosophers maintain that their findings will ‘shed light on philosophical issues’. But once everyday intuitions have been discredited, it is hard to see what further illumination can come from continuing to study them. What are we supposed to learn from the misguided assumptions of everyday thought?

Still, perhaps the negative message is not the only way in which experimental philosophy can contribute. To see how it may also have a positive side, it will be helpful to think about the nature of philosophical problems. Philosophy is defined by a certain kind of intellectual predicament. We face a philosophical problem when we find our thinking pulled in contradictory directions. One line of thought tells us that free will exists, another that free will is impossible . . . and then we don’t know what to think. This kind of problem can arise in any intellectual area, which is why philosophy is not restricted in its subject matter. Biology, politics and literature can throw up philosophical puzzles that are just as perplexing as any in metaphysics or epistemology. Philosophy is needed whenever we find an intellectual tangle that needs unravelling.

The eventual aim of philosophy is no different from science. Both are in the business of finding consistent and coherent theories to explain the world around us. But the two disciplines play different roles. Science seeks out empirical data in order to eliminate those theories that don’t fit the observed facts. In philosophy, by contrast, we often have all the empirical data we could want, but still don’t know what to think, because our overall theories are producing paradoxical conclusions, and so must contain an error somewhere.

In such cases, it can be very difficult to know where the fault lies. We typically start with some nice neat assumption, about knowledge, or names, or persons, or whatever . . . and then find that that this assumption runs counter to our intuitions about particular scenarios. Well, intuitions aren’t always gospel, as we have seen. But our neat initial assumptions aren’t guaranteed to be true either. So the philosopher’s task is to adjudicate between the conflicting ideas and come up with a coherent overall theory.

The difficulty of this task is often compounded by unclarity about the source of our intuitions. We may know what we think about particular cases, but what general principles lie behind these judgements? What exactly makes us think that some luckily true justified belief isn’t knowledge, or that the prince has moved to the cobbler’s body, or . . . ? If we were clear about the principles behind our intuitions, we could assess them properly and decide whether they were worth keeping. But until then we won’t really know where our intuitions are coming from.

Well, we could always stay in our armchairs, and try to identify the assumptions that are driving our thinking the old way, by gauging our own reactions to various imaginary scenarios. But here experimental philosophy offers an obvious alternative. If we really want to understand the cognitive structures behind everyday philosophical intuitions, why not study the matter scientifically? Why not test a wide range of subjects systematically, rather than engaging in amateur introspection? The results already produced by experimental philosophers show how much can be done. By probing carefully, they can get behind our superficial reactions and identify the deep structures of our intuitive thought.

Note how experimental philosophy is here an aid to traditional philosophical argument, not a replacement. Once we have sorted out the principles behind our intuitions, we still need to assess their worth. And at this point there is no alternative to the old ways, to using reasoned argument to figure out which overall theory is superior. In some cases we will end up rejecting our intuitions, in others not. (For what it is worth, I’d say that our intuitions about knowledge and names stand up to examination, but that our intuitions about persons and consciousness turn out to be flawed.)

Still, if we want to subject our intuitive assumptions to serious assessment, we first need to find out what they are. And experimental philosophy promises to carry out this preliminary task far better than the old armchair methods.