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## Book Reviews

**Joshua Alexander**

*Experimental Philosophy: An Introduction*. Polity Press: Cambridge, MA, 2012.

US\$22.95

*Experimental Philosophy: An Introduction* is somewhat narrower in scope than *Experimental Philosophy* by Joshua Knobe and Shaun Nichols (2008, Oxford University Press, Oxford) and broader than *Experiments in Ethics* by Kwame Anthony Appiah (2008, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA). The brevity, concise writing style, and focus will make *Experimental Philosophy: An Introduction* a useful background text for undergraduate teaching and the best introduction to this exciting field for some time to come.

Because the field of experimental philosophy is new, customary readers of *Journal of Cognition and Culture* may not be aware of the purview of such a book. First, Alexander's book requires background knowledge in analytic philosophy; the audience is exclusively analytic philosophy students and professionals. This allows the book its tight focus but gives the impression that, just like in mainstream analytic philosophy, philosophers are still talking amongst themselves. For example, we don't have an account of the treatment of the cognitive psychology of reasoning and other cognate disciplines in this book. This, and larger discussion of the work of Jesse Prinz, Shaun Nichols and Shaun Gallagher would have been most welcome. Second, *Experimental Philosophy: An Introduction* appears to dichotomize experimental philosophy and mainstream analytic philosophy in ways that oversimplify how philosophers work. It omits any consideration of the historical tradition of experimental philosophy that went under the name 'natural philosophy'.

Overall *Experimental Philosophy* does not aim to answer fundamental questions about the relationship of philosophy to empirical research, but rather aims to provide helpful, clearly structured summaries of articles, with glosses on them, that have appeared in the recent experimental philosophical literature. Alexander's knowledge of this material is impressive – it would appear he has studied about every paper published in this field (He also reports several unpublished studies, which emphasizes that experimental philosophy might be the chummy in-group you thought it was).

Chapter 1, "Philosophical Intuitions," characterizes and distinguishes among several distinct definitions of 'intuition' including doxastic, semantic,

phenomenological, etiological and methodological conceptions. Unfortunately, these turn out not to be mutually exclusive and Alexander merely aims to set the table rather than to adjudicate between these accounts. We found this to somewhat undermine the utility of these distinctions at this early juncture in the book even though the discussion is quite clear.

Chapter 2, “Experimental Philosophy and Philosophical Analysis,” reads like a cognitive psychology review paper of recent experimental philosophical work on free will and epistemology. It provides helpful and clearly stated hypotheses, and reports a variety of data in a detailed way. There are no diagrams or charts to help the reader, and while the majority of the intended audience would not understand p-values and z-scores, they would benefit from a figure charting the many iterations of hypotheses about determinism and indeterminism, for example. Some results reported are intrinsically fascinating, including priming effects for determinism. It indicates that experimental philosophy, while still constrained in its choice of methods and approaches, has grown beyond merely asking subjects about their intuitions.

One of the strongest chapters of the book, chapter 3 “Experimental Philosophy and the Philosophy of Mind,” enters detailed discussion of experimental philosophy in the philosophy of mind. By doing so, Alexander takes readers into the methodology of experimental philosophy, linking that work with our understanding of concepts of intentional action (p. 55). Alexander first reports the results of Knobe’s paper “Intentional Action in Folk Psychology: An Experimental Investigation”. This experiment indicates, puzzlingly, that an undesirable byproduct of an action (harming the environment to make a profit) is seen as intentional, whereas a desirable byproduct (helping the environment) is regarded as unintentional, indicating that people’s views about the moral status of an action influence their judgment about whether or not the action was intentional. The chapter offers an excellent overview of experimental philosophy work on this issue and clearly explains the methods involved.

Chapter 4, called “Experimental Philosophy and Philosophical Methodology,” discusses intuitions in traditional philosophy, and experimental philosophy’s role in challenging the status quo. As Stephen Stich first argued, demographics (e.g., differences in gender, culture or language) appear to frame intuitions about a variety of philosophical issues. This result was obtained first by posing Gettier problems to participants from East Asia and the United States, which revealed that United States residents polled had less willingness to attribute knowledge than East Asians. Though this may not seem terribly surprising to philosophers already familiar with discussion of cultural epistemic systems in cross-cultural psychology, to the majority of philosophers this might have

appeared groundbreaking. Once the template was formed, Alexander reports, similar study designs were implemented to test for intuitions about reference (where East Asians are more likely to be descriptivists rather than causal theorists) and free will (where women were found to believe that people freely choose to murder even in deterministic worlds). Since philosophical intuitions are so sensitive to such a variety of non-philosophical features of cases, traditional analytic philosophers are no longer justified in taking intuitions as universal. Alexander rightly argues for significant reform of traditional philosophical practice, endorses a form of restrictionism and calls for more experimental philosophy to point out hazards in the road to progress.

Experimental philosophy is challenged from two directions. As a hybrid endeavor, with a methodology from cognitive psychology repurposed to address philosophical questions, it has encountered both philosophical objections to its *raison d'être*, and scrutiny about its methods from psychologists. In chapter 5, "In Defense of Experimental Psychology," Alexander responds to these criticisms. In keeping with the rest of the book he devotes his attention to philosophical criticisms, relegating psychological critiques to the epilogue. One popular form of philosophical criticism is what Alexander has termed the *expertise defense*. Proponents of this view, including Ernest Sosa and Kirk Ludwig, submit that what matters are not the intuitions of the folk, but intuitions of experts, namely philosophers like themselves. Through their education and expertise, philosophers have gained more relevant concepts and theories, or grasp them better, making their intuitions more valuable than those of lay people. Alexander replies reasonably by arguing that philosophical discussions also involve ordinary concepts, which have commonsense meanings as well (e.g., knowledge, justification), and that philosophy has been driven by concerns about what these ordinary concepts mean. A closely related criticism is that philosophers may have superior procedural know-how. Alexander remarks that, while this may be true, experimental philosophy is eminently suited to investigate this difference. He insists we need *more* experimental philosophy to settle this issue. While this call seems justified in the face of our poor grasp of what philosophical methodology exactly is, we would like to add an important qualification. We do not *only* need more experimental philosophy; we need different kinds of experimental philosophy. For instance, fMRI experiments or eye-tracking studies could reveal whether philosophers process philosophical concepts or short vignettes differently.

In the epilogue Alexander briefly discusses criticisms of the survey methods used to obtain nearly all experimental philosophy results discussed in this book. We find the brevity and selectivity of these criticisms and the fact that their discussion is relegated to an epilogue unfortunate. Probing observations

and criticisms, for instance, by Jennifer Nagel and Jen Wright, remain undiscussed. In a sense, this lack of a systematic treatment of psychological critiques may be symptomatic of experimental philosophy as a discipline. Although ostensibly it wants to effect dramatic changes in how philosophy is conceptualized and practiced, it represents, like its armchair counterpart, a philosophy-first perspective.

To summarize, *Experimental Philosophy: An Introduction* provides a clear, well-structured and helpful overview of literature on experimental philosophy. Its main drawbacks are a narrowness of scope, lack of contextualization within the broader field of empirically-informed philosophy, and lack of discussion of fundamental methodological issues in experimental philosophy. Nevertheless, its clarity makes the book an excellent tool for undergraduate teaching and a source for those philosophers who wish to learn more about the subject.

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