

On the Future Efficacy of Experimental Philosophy

The practices of Standard Analytic Epistemology (SAE) have been, for some time now, under attack by exponents of the relatively new branch of philosophy, experimental philosophy. These practices – proposing thought-experiments in order to generate intuitions, which in turn are used as evidence to either support or refute some philosophical claim – I will argue, have largely been undermined by the psychological research being conducted, mostly in the form of surveys, by this experimental-philosophical research project. I take the concerns of experimental philosophy to be well founded in light of the unacceptable reasons SAE has given in support of its philosophical practices. The problem is straightforward: what makes the intuitions employed by SAE so high in evidentiary value? What follows from this simple question is a host of unsatisfactory answers that attempt to justify (although not always explicitly) a type of intuition elitism, which claims that the intuitions of philosophers are privileged over those of non-philosophers. The work by experimental philosophers, who engage in psychological research, reveals that intuitions are non-universal and highly variable, varying by socio-economic status, culture, geographic location, education, and so on. This is taken as evidence that the intuitions of philosophers have no special status; that their intuitions are subject to the same variability and non-universality as the intuitions of non-philosophers. This evidence is particularly compelling in light of the fact that the general aim of philosophy is to understand concepts as they are *ordinarily* understood, and not in some technical or elevated sense.

This paper argues along two lines: 1) that the initial goal of experimental philosophy – to critique and destabilize the philosophical practices of SAE – has largely been met, and 2) that the time has come for experimental philosophy to begin considering an expansion of its research project to more in-depth, psychological concerns. Following a general outline of the concept of intuition as understood in the experimental philosophy literature, I argue that intuitions are more variable than current interpretations of the data allow for: the underlying structures by which intuitions are generated may be equally, if not more variable due to contextual, priming, social as well as affective effects. If we look closer at the underlying structures (social, psychological, etc.) that produce intuitions, we see that there are many places where these contextual effects take hold. Consequently, I put forth a tentative typology of these underlying structures in order to show that intuitions are less reliable than SAE and some proponents of experimental philosophy acknowledge. In the subsequent sections of this paper, I argue that experimental philosophy ought to dedicate its resources toward the development of a more robust typology of intuition formation. Although it is not part of the experimental philosopher's project to take up the task of providing explicit recommendations to proponents of SAE, experimental philosophy can, and should, adopt a methodological framework that can achieve similar results, yet carry with it a superior level of normative force. I conclude that by expanding the scope of its psychological research, experimental philosophy can progress beyond mere criticism and provide practical correctives to the methodological flaws not only of SAE, but of any discipline engaged in practices of conceptual analysis.