

Experimental Philosophy and Philosophical Significance

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The phrase ‘experimental philosophy’ refers to a new philosophical movement that proceeds by conducting systematic experimental studies of people’s ordinary intuitions. It is now generally agreed that research in experimental philosophy has led to surprising discoveries about the patterns of people’s intuitions, but considerable controversy remains as to whether these discoveries truly have any philosophical significance.

In this thoughtful and sophisticated discussion, Kauppinen argues that recent experimental work has not in fact contributed anything to philosophy. His key claim is that experimental research on people’s intuitions cannot reveal the *semantics* of our concepts. Hence, experimental work might give us insight into the cognitive processes underlying our application of a given concept, but it cannot tell us what property in the world this concept picks out. For this reason, it is claimed, the results of recent experimental research are of interest only to psychology, not to philosophy.

Kauppinen’s argument raises many fascinating questions both in philosophy and in cognitive science, but I worry that the principal claim is simply a red herring in the present context. It doesn’t even matter whether experimental philosophy can help us to analyze the semantics of our concepts because that is not the aim that most experimental philosophers were trying to achieve in the first place. Most experimental research now being conducted is actually in the service of a very different philosophical project, and

although it may or may not turn out to be successful in attaining the goals it has set itself, we cannot even begin to evaluate its progress until we understand what those goals actually are.

For proper understanding of the aims of experimental philosophy, we need to adopt a broader historical perspective. It is true that some twentieth century philosophers believed that the main aim of philosophy was to determine the extensions of certain concepts, but this is a relatively recent development. For the vast majority of its history, the discipline of philosophy was assumed to have a far broader purview. In particular, philosophical inquiry was assumed to be concerned in a central way with questions about how the mind works – whether the mind could be divided into separate parts, how these parts might interact, whether certain kinds of knowledge were learned or innate, and so on. These questions were then assumed to have important implications for issues in moral and political philosophy. We can refer to this conception of philosophy as the *traditional conception*. It is the conception that was dominant throughout most of the history of philosophy.

As is well known, the twentieth century saw the emergence of a new type of philosophy that emphasized relatively technical discussions of questions about language and logic. Some of the more extreme practitioners of this new type of philosophy came to believe that we should actually stop engaging with the more traditional sorts of philosophical questions. They stopped asking whether people were born with an innate moral sense; they stopped asking how the various parts of the mind might conflict with each other; they stopped asking whether particular sorts of judgments were due to

reasoning or emotion. Instead, they focused on a relatively narrow range of problems involving logic, meaning and the extension of certain concepts.

In my view, this was all a catastrophic mistake. When we learned that it was possible to do important work on technical questions in language and logic, we did not thereby acquire any reason to suppose that we should stop working on the more traditional questions. The truth is that there was never really anything wrong with the traditional conception of philosophy. The traditional questions truly were profound and important, and no real arguments were ever given in favor of the view that we should stop pursuing them. As far as I can see, the idea that questions about human nature fall outside the scope of philosophy was just the expression of a bizarre sort of academic fashion. The thing to do now is just to put aside our methodological scruples and go after the traditional problems with everything we've got.

With this historical context in place, we can provide a clearer statement of the aims of experimental philosophy. The aim of most work in experimental philosophy is not to answer the new sorts of questions that rose to prominence in the twentieth century. Rather, the aim is to address the *traditional* questions of philosophy – the sorts of questions one finds in the work of Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Hume, Nietzsche, and so many others.

Here it may be helpful re-examine an example that Kauppinen discusses in detail. Recent work in experimental philosophy has shown that people's intuitions about the application of folk psychological concepts can sometimes be influenced by their *moral* judgments. (For example, people's intuitions about whether a behavior was performed intentionally can be influenced by their judgment as to whether the behavior itself was

morally good or morally bad.) This is a puzzling phenomenon, and a great deal of research has gone into trying to figure out precisely why it occurs. The rapid advances in our understanding of these issues over the past few years have been made possible by a collaborative effort involving researchers in philosophy, psychology, anthropology, law and neuroscience.

The question now is why all of these researchers attach so much significance to the issue in the first place. My bet would be that very few of them began pursuing the issue because they were curious about the extension of the English word 'intentional.' (I'm not even sure why that is supposed to be an important philosophical question.) Rather, the aim was to uncover something fundamental about how people's minds work. What the experiments seemed to be showing was that moral considerations played a role even in the most basic concepts people used to understand their world. The implication was that people's ordinary way of understanding the world might turn out to be radically different from the sort of understanding we normally seek in the sciences. Although this implication does not have anything in particular to do with questions in semantics, it is the sort of implication that would at least at one time have been regarded as paradigmatically 'philosophical.'

We can now return to the issue with which we began. Kauppinen argues that experimental philosophy cannot help us to answer questions about the semantics of our concepts and that the results obtained by experimental philosophers therefore have no philosophical significance. In response, I have suggested that we abandon the assumption that the study of people's intuitions about cases can only have philosophical significance insofar as it helps us to answer semantic questions. It is true that there was a

period in the twentieth century when many philosophers did hold such a view about the scope of philosophical inquiry, but perhaps we should regard that whole episode as just a peculiar aberration in the otherwise consistent history of our discipline. After putting it behind us, we can return in full force to what have traditionally been seen as the central questions of philosophy.