

Joshua Alexander: *Experimental Philosophy: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity 2012. ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-4918-4; 154 pages.

In the last decade the number of papers on experimental philosophy increased exponentially. Eventually, some of those papers were collected in books such as *Experimental Philosophy*, a compilation edited in 2008 by J. Knobe and S. Nichols, and *Experimental Philosophy And Its Critics*, an anthology published four years later by T. Grundmann and J. Horvath. But being a relatively recent research program, experimental philosophy needed a comprehensive monographic study. Alexander's book is an attempt to fill that gap. Alexander's *Experimental Philosophy* is not precisely an introduction, as the subtitle reads. It is instead a clearly written overview of the main topics concerning experimental philosophy. As such, it can be a useful guide for all those who are already acquainted with some issues of the new movement and want to gain a better picture of the whole field. In order to be an introduction, the book would need (among other things) an extensive chapter discussing the place of the movement within the sphere of contemporary analytic philosophy. Should we understand experimental philosophy as a new way of philosophizing, now that the old research program that started more than a century ago with the "linguistic turn" has lost its centrality? Which are exactly the differences between the new movement and the "ordinary language philosophy" (or "Oxford linguistic philosophy") as a specific development inside the linguistic turn? If we basically construe experimental philosophy as a reaction against the linguistic turn in general – and against the ordinary language philosophy in particular – which continuities among these approaches should nevertheless be emphasized (for it is clear that experimental philosophy does not herald a turning back to 19th century positivism)? Critics and exponents of experimental philosophy like Kauppinen (2007) and Sandis (2010) have succinctly sought to make sense of the new movement by placing it in relation to the framework established by postwar analytic philosophy. But more work should be done around this topic and Alexander limits himself to just some loose remarks, as I will show below.

Of an introduction in experimental philosophy I would also expect a clear definition of *intuitions*, the very subject of the movement. The first chapter, whose heading is "Philosophical Intuitions," ends without providing the reader with a satisfying treatment of the topic. For those readers unfamiliar with the new movement, the phrase "philosophical intuition" can evoke different associations, such as "the intuitions that philosophers have" – and that is certainly not what Alexander means by it. It would be also advisable to offer at least a short account of the history of "intuition" as a philosophical concept; for it is not difficult to see the different connotations that the notion evokes between, for instance, an empiricist and a Platonist. The reader finishes the book conjecturing that intuitions are something like the spontaneous cognitive answers that people have when faced with some real or imagined scenarios. If this guess is right, then some questions need be dealt with: which are the differences between intuitions and emotional responses? Is it possible to distinguish intuitions from emotions? And what distinguishes an intuition from a judgment? Is an intuition something prior to a judgment? (In any event, the phrase "intuitions that concern philosophically relevant matters" is preferable to the sometimes misleading expression "philosophical intuitions." If I asked my neighbor what she thinks of the origin of the universe, I would not call her answers "astronomical intuitions.")

After liberating themselves from the European colonial powers and declaring the independence, the new nations of North and South America faced an enormous challenge: to forge an identity. Contrary to the old European countries, many young American nations did not have a "glorious past" to exhibit. Accordingly, the strategy was to create a contrast: If Europe is the land of the past, then we are the land of the future; our wealth is a promising tomorrow. Experimental philosophy as a young movement finds itself in a similar situation. Since it does not have a huge portfolio of discoveries and theories to show, the tactic is to promise a better future under its guidance. It is true that experimental philosophers can exhibit some interesting findings (like the "side-effect effect"), but they lack conclusive theories to explicate them. Alexander repeats throughout his book that not possessing a definitive interpretation of (almost none of) experimental philosophy's findings is not necessarily a weakness. On the contrary, it is an opportunity for growth; as he insists, "more research should be done." An in-depth "study of people's philosophical

intuitions” will ultimately give us a better understanding of *what* people think about philosophical issues and *why* they think so. But at this point the reader wonders: what for? Alexander assumes that if we had a better picture both of the different kinds of intuitions that people have when confronted with philosophically relevant, hypothetical cases and of the pattern that structure those intuitions, then we would be in the position to develop more robust philosophical theories. For him, people’s intuitions are like “data” that support philosophical theories about such different topics as free will, intentionality, justice, and so on.

This is at least what the so-called “positive program” aims at. But not all experimental philosophers are so ambitious. In fact, other authors embrace the “negative program,” which is far more modest and runs in the opposite direction. Its purpose is to gather ordinary intuitions and to show that – and to what extent – they do vary among people belonging to different cultures, social classes, genders, etc., to conclude that intuitions are unreliable to support any philosophical theory. In 2010, Alexander defended this latter position in a paper co-authored with J. Weinberg, a well-known exponent of the negative program (see Alexander, Mallon, and Weinberg 2010); but in *Experimental Philosophy* – which appeared two years later – he seems to have moved to the positive program:

We advance philosophical theories on the basis of their ability to explain our philosophical intuitions, defend their truth on the basis of their overall agreement with our philosophical intuitions, and justify our philosophical beliefs on the basis of their accordance with our philosophical intuitions.” (1)

Clearly, the positive program assumes a coherentist conception of truth. What experimental philosophers like Alexander look for is to reach a “reflective equilibrium” (Lycan 2011, 818ff.) between intuitions on the one side and philosophical theories on the other. But in so doing, they face two challenges: firstly, to defend coherentism from the heavy objections advanced against it by both foundationalism and skepticism; secondly, to convince the reader that the philosophical job consists of eliciting and collecting people’s intuitions and to conceive of theories that explicate them. I really doubt if this is the way that philosophers actually work – or should work. Triggering intuitions may be a suitable way to start a philosophical research, but nothing more. A robust philosophical theory is mainly the outcome of argumentation and reflection. When thinking, philosophers will occasionally gather some “ordinary intuitions” to see how far away their new theories have gone from common-sense assumptions. But a philosopher intending to base a new philosophical theory on ordinary intuitions would act as frivolously as a manager adopting a new policy after having collected just some ideas in a brainstorming session. (In this regard, experimental philosophy’s “negative program” seems more plausible. But do we actually need a new movement to reach the conclusion that ordinary intuitions are unreliable for our philosophical purpose – something that was already clear to the Presocratics?)

Alexander writes that

[...] experimental philosophers typically share with more traditional analytic philosophers the idea that philosophical intuitions provide us with important philosophical insight, but believe that we should employ methods better suited to the careful study of philosophical intuitions, namely, the methods of the social and cognitive sciences. (2-3)

The mention of “the *methods* of the social and cognitive sciences” is, however, somewhat pretentious, for the only method used by experimental philosophers to collect data are surveys. Normally, the interviewed are presented with two or three vignettes describing a philosophically relevant case. The vignettes vary in one particular aspect. That single but significant variation should help the philosopher discover the patterns organizing people’s intuitions:

Many experimental philosophers are less interested in identifying the precise meaning of philosophical concepts than they are in identifying the factors that influence our [i.e. people’s] application of these concepts. (51)

As already mentioned, Alexander does not offer a clear definition of “intuition”. At the end of the first chapter, he does examine different conceptions of intuition (the doxastic, the phenomenological, the semantic, the etiological, and the methodological conceptions), but just to point out that none of them provides a convincing theory. Apparently, he is more interested in insisting that “there is a widespread agreement about the role that they [the intuitions] play in contemporary philosophical practice” (26). In so doing, he turns back to a point he had already made at the beginning of the chapter: “the role and corresponding epistemic status of intuitional evidence in philosophy is similar to the role and corresponding epistemic status of perceptual evidence in science” (11). This is not, however, a right comparison. The methods applied in science are different from the methods used by philosophers; likewise, the epistemic status of a scientific theory is not comparable to the epistemic status of a philosophic theory. In the sciences, data are carefully obtained through experimentation. Only that kind of data becomes then the elements to construct, strengthen and, eventually, falsify a scientific theory; the “building blocks” of a philosophical theory are instead concepts and ideas that have been carefully examined and analyzed through reflection.

More illuminating than these methodological and epistemological remarks are the hypothetical cases that Alexander presents as a way to debunk some broadly held beliefs. For instance, the so-called Gettier cases *intuitively* make it clear that knowledge is not “simply justified true belief”. The “Truetemp” scenario (a case devised by Keith Lehrer) affords the *intuitional evidence* showing that “something more is needed in order to justify our beliefs than the mere fact that they are caused by a reliable cognitive process” (14). And Kripke’s story about Gödel and his bright friend Schmidt who dies prematurely leaving a draft with a revolutionary theory is a good case against descriptivism in philosophy of language: we *intuit* that names do not refer to those objects that uniquely or best satisfy the descriptions associated with them. Alexander discusses many other examples. It is important to bear in mind, though, that his point is not to show that hypothetical cases are a good way to elicit intuitions among philosophers so as to abandon false beliefs or to construct new and better theories. Experimental philosophers’ main interest is to trigger those intuitions among ordinary people; the assumption is, as Lycan (2011, 821) says, that “philosophy is a communal discipline, and it matters whether one’s intuitions are widely shared”.

Nevertheless, problems soon arise for the experimental philosopher, as Alexander fairly admits, since people’s answers are not the same. In fact, the answers collected differ according to factors such as culture, gender, etc. For example, in Western countries people generally do not identify knowledge with justified true belief, but that is not the case in India. Indians are attached to a belief that philosophers now regard as false – particularly after the work of E. Gettier in 1963. For authors like Weinberg, this clearly shows that intuitions are unreliable and we cannot consider them as the raw material for our philosophical theories. For Alexander instead, it is rather a warning: we have to do more research to discover what psychological mechanisms are involved in the Indians’ way of thinking. This knowledge will ultimately allow us to correctly elicit the intuitions we need for philosophy.

The second chapter, “Experimental Philosophy and Philosophical Analysis,” focuses mainly on two cases. The first one is the “supercomputer” case. The starting point is a common tendency among philosophers: we tend to attribute certain philosophic beliefs to people – beliefs that they actually do not share. For instance, philosophers think that people are generally incompatibilists in regard to the free-will debate: either people see the world closely determined without room for freedom and responsibility, or they think of themselves as free and responsible creatures at the cost of rejecting the supremacy of the natural laws. Surprisingly, many people give a compatibilist answer when presented with a scenario in which a supercomputer can predict the future. Nevertheless, experimental philosophers have also found that people’s answers depend on what is at stake. If the predicted action is morally irrelevant (like eating French fries), then the answer is of an incompatibilist kind; but if the future action is for example a murder, people become suddenly compatibilist: no matter how determined the universe may be, the actor is responsible for his crime. Alexander concludes that

we have come to have several competing pictures: maybe people are natural compatibilists, believing that free will and moral responsibility are compatible with causal determinism; maybe people are natural incompatibilists who are drawn to some unnatural form of compatibilism by their emotional responses to affectively charged content; maybe there is no single set of intuitions about the compatibility of free will, moral responsibility, and causal determinism. (36)

The second case starts by claiming that, if not all, at least some philosophers assume that “knowledge attributions are sensitive to conversational context” (36). Alexander presents the results of numerous surveys in which people have to answer if the protagonist of a story *knows* that the bank is open on Saturday. The interviewer hands over different vignettes. One element differs from one story to the other. The purpose is to see whether people’s tendency to knowledge attribution varies according to the salience and/or the relevance of some aspects which are added in each new story (like the costs involved if the protagonist happens to be mistaken). But at the end of the discussion we do not have a single picture:

People seem to be just as willing to say that someone knows something when the possibility of being wrong has been made salient as they are when that possibility has gone unmentioned, and people seem just as willing to say that someone knows something when the personal costs associated with being wrong are high as they are when those costs are low. On the other hand, we have empirical evidence that *something* matters – but we aren’t able to determine right now whether it’s stakes or salience that matter. (47-48)

Alexander concludes that “future research is needed” (48): again, the aim is to find out which cognitive factors play a role when the various groups of people answer differently.

At this point of the book, however, the reader is tempted to ask once more what exactly experimental philosophy’s purpose is. Being people’s intuitive answers so different, they cannot be the raw material for the construction of philosophical theories. It seems that experimental philosophy is therefore concerned with understanding the cognitive mechanisms that generate ordinary intuitions. To know what the different groups of people think of philosophically relevant issues and to discover the underlying psychological mechanisms and structures that generate and organize those answers, all this seems an exciting enterprise. But it is doubtful whether it is a *philosophical* concern; it appears to be rather a psychological and a socio-psychological question. So perhaps more than a new way of philosophizing, experimental philosophy is a new interdisciplinary field of research where philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists meet to discuss borderline questions.

The third chapter, “Experimental Philosophy and the Philosophy of Mind”, deals extensively with the so-called “side-effect effect” and the questions it raises. Knobe found out that people’s concept of intentionality varies significantly if the side-effect of an action is negative – for example, when the side-effect of a policy is harmful to the environment. As Alexander puts it, “people’s beliefs about the moral status of an action (or the outcome of that action) influence their intuitions about whether or not the action was performed intentionally” (53). Knobe’s finding is surprising because philosophers have generally assumed that concepts such as intentionality are free from normative biases. Knobe concludes that people are not “little scientists” – we all are basically “moralists” instead (Knobe et al. 2012). Nevertheless, many critics have objected that the “side-effect effect” is due to pragmatic considerations, that is, considerations that are extrinsic to our concept of intentionality; as Alexander sums these criticisms up:

this tendency to say that the chairman harmed the environment intentionally doesn’t reflect the nature of people’s folk concept of *intentional action*, it merely reflects their desire to blame their chairman for harming the environment. (55)

Alexander himself takes no stand on the debate: “it remains to be seen whether it [the side-effect effect] is telling us something about our conceptual competence or our conceptual performance” (67). He insists

once more that the only way to solve the questions raised by experimental philosophers is doing more experimental research

more (and different) work will be needed before we can determine whether normative considerations are part of our conceptual competence or simply figure into our conceptual performance.” (51)

In the fourth chapter, “Experimental Philosophy and Philosophical Methodology,” Alexander extensively discusses the problem of intuition’s sensitivity to different factors like culture. Philosophically irrelevant elements have an effect on the kind of answers that the different groups of people give when interviewed: “the real problem is that these patterns of intuitional diversity suggest that our philosophical intuitions might be sensitive to things that we neither expected nor perhaps wanted them to be” (71). The best known class of “intuitional sensitivity” concerns cultural diversity, but experimental philosophers soon realized that “interpersonal intuitional diversity exists not only *between* cultures but also *within* cultures” (76). Also the gender and the socioeconomic class of respondents condition their intuitions.

To make things even more complicated, it has become clear that people’s intuitions also depend on the way that the survey has been designed. For example, some intuitions “are being influenced by the context in which the hypothetical case is being considered.” If people are presented with three vignettes, the order in which the cases appear will influence their responses. And finally “some *moral* intuitions also show sensitivity to affectively charged content” (78), so for instance people are less willing to endorse a universal moral principle if its application will negatively affect a close relative or a friend.

The variability of our intuitions and their sensitivity to sometimes rather trivial factors may turn out to be discouraging, but Alexander remains optimistic. He insists that more research in experimental philosophy should be done to determine under which conditions and by which psychological mechanisms our intuitions are influenced. The assumption is that knowing what affects our intuitions is a way to immunize them against those factors. In other words, the point is that being aware of the unnoticed factors that condition our awareness will be the key to access to reliable intuitions – the raw material for the construction of philosophical theories.

The fifth and last chapter, “In Defense of Experimental Philosophy”, deals with three objections that cast doubt not only on the relevance of experimental philosophy, but also on the plausibility of the endeavor.

(a) The first group of critics agrees that intuitions are the building blocks of philosophical theories, but points out that only the intuitions of professional philosophers matter. Authors like K. Ludwig claim that most philosophical discussions involve technical concepts – not ordinary ones. Consequently, only individuals that have studied philosophy, i.e., that have been trained in the particular kind of philosophical reasoning and in the use of the specific philosophical terminology, are able to form the intuitions and concepts needed for philosophy. Alexander rejects this objection claiming that

there are certainly some philosophical discussions that do [require technical concepts]. But many philosophical discussions involve rather ordinary concepts [...]. Concerns about these ordinary concepts are precisely what gave rise to these philosophical discussions in the first place. If these discussions were then couched in purely technical terms, they would lose traction with the ordinary concerns that gave rise to them. (92-93)

In this reply, however, Alexander seems to mix up two different things: the “ordinary concerns that gave rise” to philosophical problems and the need for “technical concepts” to satisfactorily tackle those problems. Also “ordinary concerns” gave rise to astronomy or medicine, but these disciplines involve the use of specific concepts – and, one may argue, the same applies to philosophy.

(b) The second group of critics agrees with experimental philosophers on two aspects: firstly, that we need intuitions to construct philosophical theories; secondly, that these intuitions do not necessarily have to be the intuitions of professional philosophers. Nevertheless, the disagreement lies in the kind of intuitions required. In fact, authors like A. Kauppinen maintain that philosophy involves the use of “robust

intuitions” – not ordinary intuitions or, as he calls them, “surface intuitions”. It is not important if those intuitions come from normal people or from professional thinkers. The point is that robust intuitions necessitate “sufficiently ideal conditions” to be formed. Only philosophical reflection can guarantee that our intuitions are free from competence failures, performance failures, and the potential influence of pragmatic factors (Kauppinen 2007). Alexander replies that “there are times when reflection helps improve our judgments. [...] But, reflection can just as easily serve as an echo chamber, simply ratifying whatever initial judgments we might have made” (96). I wonder if Alexander’s answer is not overlooking an important point. It is true that reflection may sometimes be just an “echo chamber”; perhaps it is also true that we are often plagued by an “illusion”, the “wag-the-dog illusion”, as Haidt (2001) – a declared intuitionist – claims: most of the time we do not realize that reasoning is the tail shaken by our intuitions (the dog). Nevertheless, it is also the case that even Alexander recognizes the need to sort out intuitions and distinguish the reliable from the unreliable ones. In the fourth chapter, for instance, he himself points out that if our intuitions are biased, then we need to understand what factors are involved there in order to neutralize them.

(c) The last group of critics is more radical and maintains that intuitions are completely irrelevant for philosophical theorizing. Authors like Williamson insist that intuitions do not matter for philosophy, not even Kauppinen’s “robust intuitions”. As Williamson insists, “good philosophy is evidence-based” – not intuition-based (Williamson 2011, 79). Consequently, these critics downplay the significance of hypothetical cases, imaginary counterexamples, and thought experiments for philosophy’s task (Norton 1996, 354ff.). Alexander counters that

we actually can’t do the kind of philosophical work that we want to do without, in some cases, appealing to our philosophical intuitions as evidence that certain philosophical claims are true and as reasons for believing as much. (107)

Alexander’s point seems to be this: philosophers reach a solid conclusion from a set of premises, and at least some of those premises are treated as “evidence” because they are based on intuitions that we all share (Alexander 2010). In my opinion, however, the problem is that Alexander fallaciously passes from “some” to “all”. (In the quotation he says “in some cases” but means “always.”) Perhaps even “traditional” philosophers such as Williamson could agree that we ground our philosophical theories in *some* intuitions. But the point that Alexander wants to make is that our theories rest mainly – if not exclusively – on intuitions.

Experimental Philosophy is the first attempt to systematize in a single study the whole range of findings, questions, and theories advanced by the new philosophical movement. The book offers a clear overview on the main topics of the discussion with many examples and an extensive bibliography. It is suited both for students and scholars who want to get a larger picture of the subject. Nevertheless, the work leaves many questions open, questions that deserve a more detailed treatment. Experimental philosophy is not “just an academic fashion”, as some critics suggest, but it certainly will not constitute the next “revolution” in the history of philosophy, as proponents like Alexander declare. It will give us insights on what the different groups of people actually think on many philosophically relevant topics and why they think so: a more modest, but nonetheless valuable task.

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