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# In memoriam: the x-phi debate

TAMLER SOMMERS PAYS HIS RESPECTS

**A**bout a year ago I was asked to write an accessible magazine article about experimental philosophy. The piece, as I conceived it, would begin along these (somewhat histrionic) lines:

The controversial new movement called experimental philosophy – “x-phi” as it has come to be known – has generated both excitement and hostility in the philosophical community. Questions abound: Is experimental philosophy the wave of the future or just a passing fad? Can probing for the intuitions of the “folk” tell us anything about philosophical truth? Are philosophers qualified to conduct empirical studies, or should this be left to the psychologists?

And so forth. But I couldn't do it. I could not get myself to write an essay about the general debate over experimental philosophy. At the time, I had no idea why it was so difficult, but I think I do now. Debates are interesting when there is more than one reasonable position to hold. A debate about whether a particular instance of hate speech should be protected by federal law might be interesting. A debate about the value of freedom of expression laws in general is not. On the question of the general value or viability of experimental philosophy, there is only one reasonable position. This

**Tamler Sommers** is assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Houston



makes it an exceptionally boring debate, and who wants to write about that?

That said, many smart people perceive the disagreement on this issue to be legitimate. Experimental philosophy has received a great deal of attention in scholarly journals and the popular media. Often the topic of these articles is precisely what I claim is a non-issue – the value of experimental philosophy as a movement. And here I am writing about this same topic yet again. But I am not going to provide another argument for an obvious position. Instead, I'm writing this as an obituary – an obituary for the so-called controversy about experimental philosophy, and an attempt to diagnose how it lived as long as it did.

Actually, I might be a little late to the game. The recent instalment on experimental philosophy in the *New York Times* blog forum “Room for Debate” (August 19, 2010) was if not an obituary then a strong signal that the issue was on life support. The blog featured perspectives from six philosophers, both “for” and “against” the new movement. The only problem was that they all seemed to agree about the subject under discussion. The unanimous verdict was that experimental philosophy, as a matter of principle, could offer important insight on deep philosophical problems. Room for debate? There didn't seem to be any. To the extent that there was disagreement, it concerned the quality of the existing literature. But since no one could discuss specific studies or articles – this was a debate about x-phi in general, remember – no one could provide a shred of support for their views on that matter. What I learned from the exchange was this: for debates about experimental philosophy to be

fruitful and interesting, to be genuine debates, they must be about the details and implications of particular experiments within the literature and not about the potential or in principle importance of the movement as a whole.

For those who are unfamiliar with the only reasonable position about experimental philosophy in general, here it is. *Of course*, experimental philosophy can make important contributions to philosophical inquiry. I'll give just two reasons, but there are many more. First, a sizable percentage of philosophical arguments rely on both implicit and explicit appeals to intuitions about cases and principles. Philosophers often assume the reader will have a certain intuition, and they use this intuition as evidence for the truth of key premises in their arguments. They go on to draw substantive philosophical conclusions on the basis of these intuitions. If experimental inquiry reveals that a large portion of reflective people have different intuitions, then the philosopher must either explain away this disagreement or concede that the argument's application is restricted to the group of people who have the same intuition as the philosopher. This would be a philosophically important concession.

Now as many x-phi opponents will stress, not every philosopher develops arguments that appeal to intuitions – indeed, some are positively suspicious of this practice. It's not clear that it is even possible to develop substantive intuition-free arguments in some areas (ethics, for example). But suppose that some philosophers are successful in doing so – so what? This would only mean that experimental work on intuitions cannot have a direct impact on those arguments. The work would still have a potential effect on

the large majority of philosophical arguments that (often frankly) include such an appeal. No one believes that for a subfield of philosophy to have value, it must bear on every single area and argument in our discipline.

Second, much of the experimental literature aims to examine – the origins of our philosophical intuitions and the psychological mechanisms that underlie them. Shedding light on the psychology behind our philosophical beliefs can have important philosophical implications for how we regard these beliefs. Just what these implications are is a matter of legitimate debate (and a fascinating one). Whether there are any implications at all is not. To take just one example, imagine that Nietzsche were correct that conventional Western morality grew out of the resentment of a weak and oppressed people. This would tell us *something* philosophically interesting about our moral beliefs and attitudes, even if we need sophisticated philosophical analysis to figure out what. And the same reasoning applies to all the core areas of philosophical inquiry. As staunch x-phi “opponent” Timothy Williamson writes in the NY Times blog: “when it comes to philosophical questions about how we gain knowledge from perception, memory and reasoning, it would be crazy to suggest that

nothing relevant can be learned from experimental results.”

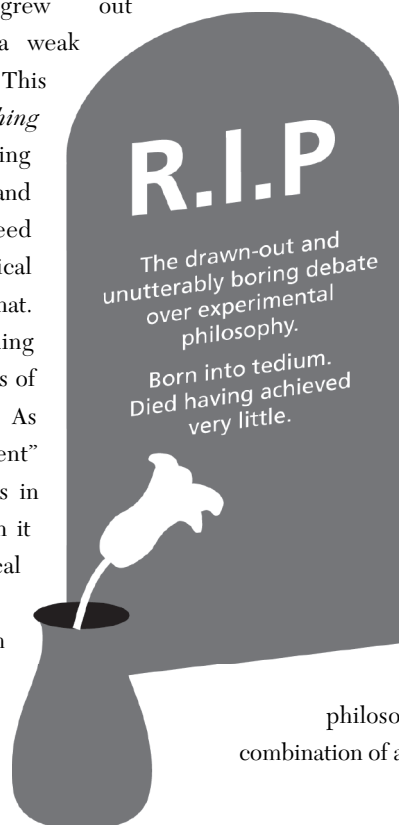
So if people still wonder whether experimental philosophy can offer insights on deep philosophical questions, you can offer something like the above replies to convince them. (If the person concedes these points but presses you as to whether experimental philosophy is *really philosophy*, I suggest backing away slowly and avoiding that person in the hallways in the future.) A question remains though: why does the controversy exist in the first place? Why so much hostility directed at experimental philosophy in journals and blogs? Why don’t we find similarly heated debates over the value of metaontology, philosophy of mathematics, and philosophy of law?

Part of the explanation, I believe, involves the mistaken impression that experimental philosophers are secret radicals who want to revolutionise the profession, replacing good old-fashioned philosophical argumentation with surveys, brain scans, and data analysis. Williamson, for example, writes the following in his blog entry:

“The real issue concerns the most effective way for each side to learn from the other. There are philosophy-hating philosophers who would like to replace the traditional methodology of

philosophy, with their stress on a combination of abstract reasoning and particular

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examples, by something more like imitation psychology.”

Now I am acquainted with dozens of experimental philosophers, including the ones to whom Williamson is likely referring, and they love philosophy as much as anyone diligently cranking out counterexamples to the view of knowledge as justified true belief. It is true, as Williams notes, that some experimental philosophers are on the attack. But their target is not philosophy in general. Rather, it is a particular methodology *within* philosophy – the use of the philosopher’s own intuitions about cases and principles as evidence for philosophical truth. The experimentalists issue this challenge not because they hate philosophy, but because they believe that the traditional methodology is grounded in empirically implausible assumptions about the universality and stability of the intuitions. It is a *philosophical* challenge at its core, even if it is motivated by empirical research into the nature of intuitions.

Of course, attacks on the “traditional methodology” existed long before anyone conceived of experimental philosophy as a movement. Nietzsche and Rorty, for example, are two of its sharpest critics. Further, the founding document of the contemporary experimental challenge – Stephen Stich’s 1996 book *Deconstructing the Mind* – is not itself a piece of experimental philosophy. Rather, the book sets up the following hypothetical: *if* there is substantial variation about intuitions concerning reference, then serious problems are raised for traditional debates in philosophy of mind (e.g. eliminativism vs. functionalism). What the experimental philosophers have attempted to show is that this variation indeed exists.

It’s also worth noting that this strand within experimental philosophy – what Jonathan Weinberg refers to as “the negative program” – is not the only focus, or even the primary focus, of the movement. Experimental philosophy is a large and diverse field. Many experimentalists accept the dominant methodology for the most part and design their studies to work within that tradition. Most experimental work on free will and moral responsibility, for example, seeks to supplement rather than subvert “armchair” approaches to the topic. And the so-called armchair philosophers in the field tend to embrace their experimentally oriented colleagues. But no one, whatever the focus of their work, seeks to replace philosophy with psychology, imitation or real. As x-phi pioneer and prodigy Joshua Knobe likes to stress, experimental philosophy is not a revolutionary movement; it is a return to tradition, to the naturalistic approach of Aristotle and Hume.

I return to the question then: why has this non-issue generated heated debate and antagonism? Again, I turn to Williamson’s entry at the NY Times blog for clues:

“[E]xperimentalists draw lessons for morality from the results of brain scans in comically naive ways, without realizing how many philosophical assumptions they are uncritically relying on in their inferences – precisely because they neglect traditional philosophical skills in making distinctions and assessing arguments. The danger is that *the publicity such crude work attracts* will give a bad name to constructive developments in which experimental results really do cast light on philosophical questions. (my italics)”

These remarks, in my view, get to the heart of the problem that x-phi opponents have with

the movement. Experimental philosophy, they believe, is attracting far more attention than is warranted by the quality of its output. The issue does not *merely* concern the perceived lack of rigour in parts of the literature. Every subfield of philosophy including the core areas has examples of crude arguments and sloppy reasoning. But magazines and newspapers tend not to run features on externalist approaches to meaning or the principle of sufficient reason.

On one level, I understand this frustration. I have spent my career working on the free will/moral responsibility problem. Every week, it seems, there is a new article in a popular venue in which a neuroscientist blithely claims to have solved the free will problem in a couple of paragraphs. (Often there's a snide remark about philosophers thrown into the mix as well). It's infuriating to all of us who work seriously on the topic. It's a sad fact of life that some work is good and some work is sloppy, and that the sloppiest work often garners the most public attention. It seems to me, however, that the right way to deal with "crude work" is either to ignore it or to specifically address its flaws. It's tempting for me and my colleagues (including the experimental philosophers among us) to act dismissively towards entire disciplines because of the simplistic analyses of a few of its practitioners. But we do so at our peril – much insight can be gained from high quality interdisciplinary work on long-standing philosophical problems.

How about the experimental philosophers themselves – are they partly responsible for extending the life of this debate? Perhaps. It is only natural to court controversy when controversy attracts so much attention within and outside the philosophical community. Often,



however, experimental philosophers are simply defending their work and approach against the broad-scale attacks of their opponents. But if general sweeping criticism of the movement as a whole is unreasonable, then repeated sweeping defences are unnecessary – or at least uninteresting. The issue resembles in some ways the controversies over evolution. There are innumerable fascinating debates within evolutionary biology itself, but one quickly grows weary of the general defences of Darwinism against the attacks of creationists and intelligent design theorists. There is nothing to be gained from such defences but confirmation of what we already know. In my perfect world, experimental philosophers would restrict their discussions to specific studies and the implications they draw from them – even in venues geared towards wider audiences. And this is largely what is happening, which is why this essay is best regarded as an obituary. The debate over experimental philosophy, if it ever really existed, has reached its fitting end. It is time for philosophers everywhere to move on.

The x-phi debate is survived by articles in the *New York Times*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Prospect*, *Slate*, many scholarly journals, and countless blog posts, forums, and podcasts.