Genealogy of Belief
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Week Three: Experimental Philosophy
http://users.ox.ac.uk/~corp1468/Genealogy_of_Belief.html

Many areas of philosophy, before the x-phi revolution, cared about empirical stuff…So what makes x-phi different? At least one thread of x-phi *is* different: namely the thread that attempts to offer a genealogical diagnosis for our philosophical intuitions.

1. Experimental philosophers in their own words

"[T]he aim [of x-phi] is usually to provide an account of the factors that influence applications of a concept, and in particular, the *internal psychological processes* that under like such applications. Progress here is measured not in terms of the precision with which one can characterize the actual patterns of people's intuitions but in terms of the degree to which one can achieve explanatory depth" (Knobe and Nichols 5).

> **Example**: explaining people's stronger tendencies to regard an agent as morally responsible when faced with a concretely described case in terms of 'two systems' (abstract/affective) theory

To what end?:

(1) **Replacing philosophy with psychology**: "As long as we can offer an account of the internal psychological processes that underlie our judgments, we do not also need to find necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of the concept in particular cases….[Some philosophers] think [this] amounts to trading an impossible task for one in which researchers are actually making substantial progress" (ibid 5)

- Compare: Quinean naturalised epistemology or the linguistic turn in philosophy of language

(2) **Debunking philosophical intuitions/theories**:

"Just as we might learn that a belief comes from an unreliable *external* source (e.g. an unreliable newspaper), we might learn that a belief is the result of an unreliable or distorting *internal* source (e.g., an unreliable cognitive process)…[T]hese experimental results can have a kind of indirect impact. First we use the experimental results to develop a theory about the underlying psychological processes that generate people's intuitions; that we use our theory about the psychological processes to determine whether or not those intuitions are warranted" (ibid 7-8)

"If I find out that my philosophical intuitions are a product of my cultural upbringing, then, since it's in some sense an accident that I had the cultural upbringing that I did, I am forced to wonder whether my intuitions are superior at tracking the nature of the world, the mind, and the good" (ibid 11).

- Question: is this a normative or merely psychological diagnosis?

Examples:

Weinberg et al on epistemic intuitions: intuitions about Truetemp, Gettier and cleverly-disguised mule cases purportedly vary with (a) culture, (b) socioeconomic group, (c) extent of philosophical training, (d) the order in which cases are presented…

"Our data indicate that when epistemologists advert to 'our' intuitions when attempting to characterize epistemic concepts or draw normative conclusions, they are engaged in a culturally local endeavour – what we might think of as *ethno-epistemology*…In light of this, [armchair epistemology] seems a rather bizarre way to determine the correct epistemic norms. For it is difficult to see why a process that relies heavily on epistemic intuitions that are local to one's own cultural and socioeconomic group would lead to genuinely normative conclusions. Pending a detailed response to this problem, we think that the best reaction the high-SES Western philosophy professor who tries to draw normative conclusions from the fact about 'our' intuitions is to ask: What do you mean by 'we'?" (40).

Machery et al on Kripkean vs descriptivist intuitions: East Asians more likely to have descriptivist intuitions than Westerners in response to Kripke's Jonah and Gödel cases…

"[W]e suspect that philosophers employing these thought experiments take their own intuitions regarding the referents of terms…to be universal…[This] assumption of universality is spectacularly misguided. Perhaps, however, philosophers do not assume the universality of semantic intuitions. In that case,

philosophers of language need to clarify their project. One possibility is that philosophers of language would claim to have no interest in unschooled, folk semantic intuitions, including the differing intuitions of various cultural groups. These philosophers might maintain that, since they aim to find the *correct* theory of reference for proper names, only *reflective* intuitions…are to be taken into consideration. We find it *wildly* implausible that the semantic intuitions of the narrow cross-section of humanity who are Western academic philosophers are a more reliable indicator of the correct theory of reference…than the differing semantic intuitions of other cultural or linguistic groups…In the absence of a principled arguments about why philosophers' intuitions are superior, this project smacks of narcissism in the extreme" (53-4).

2. Critical responses to X-phi

- Ernie Sosa on multiple concepts picked out by the term 'knowledge'. Doesn't seem very generalisable as a response to x-phi.

- Williamson on the conceptual turn (PoP): the subject matter of philosophy isn't our *concepts*, but rather the world itself (which we access via our concepts). This addresses the straightforward but not indirect x-phi inference.

- Williamson: the continuity between philosophical and non-ph. judgments

- Evidence and self-psychologisation; dialectical as the measure of all things

- Epistemic conservatism; starting from where one is

- Archimedeanism; the spectre of scepticism; self-defeat

   …but what's the *positive* case for thinking we're not totally off? Why think that believing in accordance with our intuitions generally leads to knowledge?

- Philosophical expertise?

- Williamson on knowledge maximisation: the nature of reference grounds a tendency for beliefs to be true, because a connection to an object is a channel for reference to it iff it is a channel for the acquisition of knowledge about the object

3. What else x-phi might do

- Rini: x-phi shows us that we're not *unified* as agents: what really causes our moral judgments aren't our reflective commitments but some subterranean (but non-Aristotelian) mechanism.

- X-phi might reveal not just the *possibility* but moreover the *viability* (non-pathology) of 'uncommonsensical' belief. Examples:

   - Marx on bourgeois morality/capitalism
   - Cian Dorr and Ted Sider on mereological nihilism
   - Crispin Wright on metaphysical necessity (the 'cautious man')

- X-phi can call on us to clarify our project: just what *is* our self-conception qua philosophers such that the genealogical contingency of our intuitions isn't, by our own lights, a problem?

4. What we're doing when we do philosophy

"Again and again, [x-phi] investigations have challenged familiar assumptions, showing that people do not actually think about these issues in anything like the way philosophers had assumed" (Knobe and Nichols 3)

Question: *do* philosophers have any such assumptions, explicit or tacit?

Perhaps philosophers explicitly adopt some sort of metaphilosophical view according to which their knowing various philosophical truths is compatible with divergent, genealogically-contingent intuitions, e.g.:

   - Hard-nosed externalism (Williamson)
   - Elucidation of parochial concepts (Sosa)
   - Agent-relative constructivism (Street on normativity)

…or perhaps some philosophers simply don't take their views to be knowledgeable or justified in the first place. After all, most philosophers already know that our intuitions diverge, and *moreover* deliberately use rhetorical tactics (including priming, framing, ordering effects) to 'persuade' others of our views (cf. Kripke)

   - Philosophical belief vs *acceptance* or *commitment* (Frede on sceptics)
   - The convergence/distribution of burden model?
   - Putting our own houses in order; pragmatism; will to power?