

A Possible Future For Philosophy

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You'll get no predictions from us about the future of philosophy. Predicting the trajectory of any discipline is all but impossible at the best of times. And as a glance at the newspaper makes abundantly clear, these are not the best of times. But we will offer some suggestions about an exciting *possible* future in which philosophers do much better than they have been doing for the last few thousand years.

Concepts are the building blocks for thought, and from Socrates onward one of the goals of philosophers in the Western tradition has been to analyse important philosophical concepts like *knowledge*, *justice*, *beauty* and *freedom*. For some, the motive was just to get clearer about these fundamental units of thought. For others, the goal was more ambitious. Not content to analyse our concepts, these philosophers hoped to improve them – an old project that has recently acquired a new name: “conceptual engineering”.

Though their motives for analysing concepts varied, most philosophers relied heavily on a single method: the method of cases. To use the method, a philosopher describes a case – real or imagined – and asks whether some philosophically important concept applies to the people or objects or events described: Does the person in the story

know what he claims to know? Is the action described *morally permissible*? Does the protagonist have *free will*? To answer the question, the philosopher relies on his own spontaneous judgement – the sort of judgement that, in recent years, has been called an “intuition”. The goal is to construct a definition of the philosophical concept that captures philosopher's intuitions about cases – a definition of *knowledge*, for example, that entails that a person has knowledge when (and only when) the philosopher's intuition indicates that he does.

In recent years, this method has come in for a fair amount of criticism. One problem is that philosophers typically rely on their own intuitions, and those of their professional colleagues. But might it not be the case that philosophers' intuitions are influenced by their own philosophical theories, or that philosophers as a group tend to have idiosyncratic intuitions because of professional acculturation and the effects of selection, as senior philosophers decide who will get an advanced degree and who will get an academic job? Wouldn't it be better to solicit the intuitions of a much less homogeneous group – people in other disciplines, people from a variety of religious, ethnic and political groups, people with widely varying levels of education? This is

the thought that has motivated much recent work in “experimental philosophy” – the new philosophical movement that is committed to studying philosophical intuitions objectively, using the techniques of contemporary social science. The findings have often been very uncomfortable for traditional philosophers. We'll mention two examples.

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Over the last few decades, epistemologists have devoted an enormous amount of attention to the role of “stakes” in epistemic judgement. According to many epistemologists, our intuitions about whether a person has knowledge depend not only on the quality of her evidence and the truth of her belief, but also on what is at stake. If the belief in question will lead to action with important consequences there is a lot at stake, and (many epistemologists maintain) it is less likely that we will intuit that she has knowledge. Philosophers have written hundreds of articles debating alternative explanations for this phenomenon. But when experimental philosophers began collecting the intuitions of non-philosophers they found that stakes typically had no effect at all on knowledge judgements. The “stakes effect” is a myth engendered by the fact that professional epistemologists have idiosyncratic

epistemological intuitions. Our research group has recently confirmed this in a study that collected data from over 4,500 people in 16 countries. Stakes, it seems, don't matter *anywhere*!

Our second example is drawn from the philosophical literature on aesthetics. Philosophers interested in the nature of aesthetic judgement have long insisted that we do not treat aesthetic judgements in the same way we treat expressions of subjective preference. Rather, we intuitively judge that aesthetic judgements are “intersubjectively valid” – we take them to be correct or incorrect despite disagreement. If two people disagree about, say, the beauty of a painting, then intuition tells us that one of them must be mistaken. Moreover, most aestheticians take this to be a central fact to be explained by philosophical accounts of aesthetic judgement. However, we also take aesthetic judgements to be the product of subjective personal experience. Reconciling these two facts is one of the central problems confronting philosophical aesthetics. But is it really the case that most people have the intuition that aesthetic judgements are intersubjectively valid? Or is this intuition shared primarily by professional philosophers trained in aesthetics? To address this question, our research team sought the judgements of over 2000 people in 19 countries. We found that the vast majority of people do not consider their own aesthetic judgements to be intersubjectively valid. Here again, philosophers have expended enormous energy and ingenuity in an attempt to explain an intuition that very few people share.

We promised a few suggestions on how philosophy in the future might do a lot bet-

ter. One of those suggestions should now be obvious. Rather than relying on their own intuitions, which may be biased or idiosyncratic, philosophers who use the method of cases should follow the lead of experimental philosophers and do some empirical work to find out what people's intuitions really are.

Our second suggestion is implicit in what we've said about our own work on stakes and on aesthetic judgements. This work not only collected intuitions from a lot of people, it collected intuitions from a lot of *cultures*. In the two studies we've mentioned, there was surprisingly little difference between cultures. But in other cross-cultural studies we've found substantial differences in intuition in different cultures. It may be that different cultures invoke interestingly different concepts, even when they use the same word (or standard translations) to label these concepts.

Why is this important? Well, good conceptual engineers, like good engineers in other domains, should start with as much information as possible about which options have already been tried and how well they have worked. If we are going to build a better concept of knowledge, or justice, or moral permissibility, or freedom, we would do well to begin by seeing how these concepts (or their closest analogs) are constructed in cultures around the world, and how well existing varieties work. We would also do well not to restrict ourselves to the millennia old method of cases in studying concepts. Over the last century, linguists, anthropologists, psychologists and neuroscientists have developed many new methods and technologies for studying concepts. Philosophers who are serious about conceptual engineering should embrace many of

these methods.

But hey, is this really possible? Yes, we think it is. And so does the John Templeton Foundation that has recently awarded us a \$2.6 million grant titled: "The Geography of Philosophy: An Interdisciplinary, Cross-Cultural Exploration of Universality and Diversity in Fundamental Philosophical Concepts." We'll be working in collaboration with 110 research partners on five continents – philosophers, anthropologists, psychologists, linguists, neuroscientists and even an economist or two. We won't predict that this is what philosophy will look like in the future. But we firmly believe that it *should*.

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