

Regina A. Rini (2012). "Review of J. Alexander: *Experimental Philosophy: An Introduction*". *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 26(4): 457-460.

www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02698595.2012.748500

Experimental Philosophy: An Introduction reviewed by Regina A. Rini

JOSHUA ALEXANDER

Cambridge, Polity Press, 2012

154 pp., ISBN 978-0-7456-4917-7, £50, \$64.95 (hardback); ISBN 978-0-7456-9818-4, £15.99, \$22.95 (paperback)

Joshua Alexander's *Experimental Philosophy: An Introduction* is a highly readable overview of one of contemporary philosophy's most vibrant areas. The book's successes are qualified, but for the right reader, with the right aims in mind, it would be a very helpful volume. It is a very short book, consisting of only five chapters: an opening discussion of the nature of intuition and philosophical method; three middle chapters, each introducing a distinctive conception of how experimental investigation might contribute to (or radically alter) the practice of philosophy; and a final chapter rebutting a grab bag of challenges opponents have lodged against the experimental philosophy movement.

The book appears to have two objectives, and in the first it is highly successful. Alexander provides a breezy, engaging and often incisive catalogue of important experimental findings. Though the scope is not comprehensive – as Alexander acknowledges in the introduction, he mostly ignores ethics, among other areas – he does offer lucid summaries of the most important findings of the past decade, including work on free will, intentional action, knowledge ascription, and the theory of reference. Alexander handles what could have been an unwieldy jumble of data with considerable finesse; the main text is a swiftly readable journey through key findings, with footnotes carrying enough methodological and statistical detail to satisfy the curious. This light touch and gift for clear explanation is especially prominent in the first chapter, concerning the nature of philosophical method and the idea of intuition, so much so that I would recommend it as a reading in introductory philosophy courses.

Unfortunately, the book's second and more important aim is less evenly accomplished. Alexander wants not only to summarize key experimental findings, but to show how these bear on philosophical practice. On this topic Alexander wears two hats: that of the patient educator, disinterestedly introducing and weighing competing viewpoints for the benefit of the uninformed reader, and that of the committed methodologist, an active participant in these same debates. Though he is sometimes careful to mark when he is moving from arbiter to a more partisan role, these transitions are not always made explicit. This omission may be a disservice for the novice reader, to whom such remarks are likely to come across as the field's consensus.

More importantly, Alexander's dual concerns, to both introduce and participate in disputes about the status of experimental philosophy, pull the book in competing directions. As a result it is not always clear who might be the intended audience. It is a very short book, barely over one hundred pages of main text, and for large sections written in a way that a motivated undergraduate might easily follow. Yet at other times Alexander wishes to engage with quite high level metaphilosophical debate and it is hard to see such a reader getting much from these passages. The discussion of skepticism on pages 84-86, for instance, is likely to be unintelligible to anyone without significant background in epistemology. This is an unfortunately recurring pattern in the book: certain passages are too dense to be helpful to unfamiliar readers, and too rushed to provide compelling argument to specialists. In this, as in most of the more substantive criticisms I am about to raise, it is very plausible to think that Alexander would have done a much better job with more space. The book is simply too brief, too compressed, to adequately address these deep and rich issues.

Keeping in mind the limitations imposed by length, I'll turn now to evaluation of some of Alexander's substantive claims. First, there is some trouble in how Alexander characterizes the practice of traditional armchair philosophy, the sort done without the benefit of experiments. Here, Alexander claims, 'Philosophical intuitions provide data to be explained by our philosophical theories, evidence that may be adduced in arguments for their truth, and reasons that may be appealed to for believing them to be true' (11). All this seems fair enough, but Alexander usually writes as if armchair philosophy takes the evidential role of intuitions to be *unidirectional*. That is, intuitions constrain theories, but theories do not constrain intuitions.

Yet as John Rawls famously wrote, in intuition-driven practice we 'work from both ends' (Rawls 1971, 20): adjusting theories to accommodate strongly held intuitions, but also jettisoning particular intuitions when they fail to cohere with well-established philosophical theories. Further, as Rawls points out, the traditional method does not simply take all intuitions at face value; he himself imposes various practical limitations on when and how intuitions are to be solicited (e.g. when one is not distracted and has time to reach 'considered judgments'). Alexander curiously neglects to discuss Rawls' remarks on philosophical method, which makes for an unfortunate omission. At the least, noting how traditional philosophical practice has always exercised care around intuitions might have dampened some of the revolutionary import of experimental philosophy. Worse, leaving out such qualifications runs a risk of the burning armchair containing only a straw man.

A nuanced treatment of the role of intuition in armchair philosophy might also have encouraged more careful discussion of the power of experimental findings. In several places, Alexander seems to suggest that resolution of a deep dialectical stalemate awaits the development of better experiments. Yet it often seems that experimental inquiry merely recreates these same stalemates, with each side producing data to support its own claims. This occurs, for instance, in Alexander's own discussion of experimental epistemology (36-48), which he concludes by suggesting that further experiments will decide the matter. But when contextualists and invariantists criticize one another's experiments, they do so not on statistical or procedural grounds (the sort of thing likely to be corrected by more experiments), but because they believe that the key concepts (e.g. 'salience', 'stakes') have been

inaccurately represented in stimuli. Determining how to fairly capture these concepts in an experimentally-testable form requires some prior agreement on their nature. And this, of course, is precisely what traditional armchair philosophy aimed to achieve. Rather than pre-empting armchair inquiry, experimental philosophy may therefore have to await its completion.

A second major problem concerns how Alexander deals with the range of distinct views encompassed within the experimental philosophy movement. He gives prominence to three, each featured in its own chapter (chapters 2-4). First, there is the relatively conservative view that philosophy can indeed explore important phenomena, like justice or knowledge, but that it should do so through 'methods that are better suited to the careful study of philosophical intuitions, namely, the methods of the social and cognitive sciences' (28). On this reading, experimental philosophy is an extension of the traditional project, equipped with better intuition-gathering techniques. A second proposal, more radical, holds that philosophy does not analyze these phenomena themselves, but only our concepts of them. On this self-psychologizing view, experimental research is crucial to expose 'the factors that influence our application of these concepts' (51), which are not always introspectively apparent. Finally, the most radical approach (often called 'restrictionism'), claims that experimental findings can disqualify certain intuitions from theoretical consideration, by showing that they are driven by factors irrelevant to philosophical truth (i.e. the gender of the intuiter, or the order in which cases have been presented).

Alexander is an extremely capable expositor of these views, taken individually. And it is a genuine contribution to the field to have at hand such a clean taxonomy of the motives for experimental philosophy. But there is very little in the book on relationships *between* the views. Are they mutually compatible? Probably not entirely, as (for instance) on the question whether philosophy properly aspires to explore actual phenomena or only our concepts. Strangely, in the final chapter, aimed at deflecting various challenges, Alexander does not distinguish between the three approaches. His rebuttals are offered on behalf of 'experimental philosophy' *in toto*. Yet it seems clear that the objections discussed might have different consequences for each of the approaches. It is surprising and unfortunate that, with his gift for explanation and the helpful analytic framework offered by the middle three chapters, Alexander did not spend more time sorting out these important differences.

Finally, it is worth remarking on Alexander's slim treatment of experimental philosophy's own methodology. Experimental philosophy is often presented as a corrective to methodological lapses in traditional philosophic practice. It therefore might be thought to have a particular burden of caution regarding its own methods. But there is very little on that topic in this book. Alexander does mention one recent objection: that survey responses are subject to various effects of conversational context and uncontrolled presupposition, which may make their interpretation problematic (see Sosa 2010, Cullen 2010). But he spends only three pages (110-112) discussing this critique, and his replies are accordingly quite thin. In a flagship work of the experimental philosophy movement, as this book can rightly claim to be, a more extensive analysis of the movement's own tools would have been appropriate.

In this review I have emphasized this book's problems. Let me now re-emphasize that I attribute nearly all of these to a single source: the book is too short. I have no doubt that with more space Alexander would have pre-empted many of my concerns. What does appear in the book is clear and

careful; what is missing is regrettable. To the reader only minimally acquainted with experimental philosophy, this book should indeed be a welcome introduction. But most readers will finish the book wishing that more had been said. For an embryonic movement like experimental philosophy, perhaps that is a good thing.

References

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