ON THE EXPERTISE DEFENSE OF ARMCHAIR PHILOSOPHY

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I. Introduction

There has been a recent effort to defend traditional armchair methods of philosophy using what has been called an "expertise defense."[1] According to the expertise defense, the specialized training philosophers receive gives them special insight into relevant philosophical intuitions. Any method that derives philosophically relevant intuitions from persons who are not trained experts is mistaken. So, because experimental philosophy does exactly that, it takes intuitions of non-philosophers too seriously, we must forswear experimental philosophy.

I believe that the expertise defense fails, and the aim of this paper is to show that this is so. Section 2 summarizes how philosophers appeal to intuitions. Section 3 reviews two versions of the expertise defense, as presented by Gary Gutting and Timothy Williamson. Section 4 argues that the expertise defense not only succumbs to the usual problems leveled against it but the expertise defense leads to a dilemma. Finally, in Section 5, I conclude that the expertise defense fails.

II. Appeals to "Intuition"

Philosophers frequently call on intuitions in response to thought experiments to partially support their argument.[2] These intuitions are evidence for the particular view the philosopher seeks to endorse. When the aim is a folk theory, the intuitions proposed by the philosopher in response to a case should be consistent with reactions the folk have to the thought experiment. Call this the "counterexample method."[3]

Perhaps the most famous case of the counterexample method is Edmund Gettier's challenge of the traditional justified true belief account of knowledge. Suppose that Corky and Sophia enter a surfing contest.[4] Corky has a justified belief that "Sophia will win the contest." He also has a justified belief that "Sophia will find the doggy

door under the pressure of a fat closeout," so he concludes that "the person who wins will find the doggy door under the pressure of a fat closeout." But, in fact, Sophia does not win the contest; Corky does. He wins it by finding the doggy door under the pressure of a fat closeout. So, Corky's belief "the person who wins will find the doggy door when under the pressure of a fat closeout" was justified and true. According to Gettier, Corky's belief, though justified and true, does not appear to be an instance of knowledge. Given the evidential value of the counterexample, Gettier has argued that we can have justified true beliefs without also having knowledge.[5]

The counterexample method attempts to capture ordinary pretheoretic intuitions. Do philosophers wish to give an analysis of the ordinary pretheoritic folk concept? In contemporary analytic philosophy, it is quite explicit that the goal is to give an analysis of folk concepts.[6] For example, Jackson writes:

> Although metaphysics is about what the world is like, the questions we ask when we do metaphysics are framed in a language, and thus we need to attend to what the users of the language mean by the words they employ to ask their questions. When bounty hunters go searching, they are searching for a person and not a handbill. But they will not get very far if they fail to attend to the representational properties of the handbill on the wanted person. These properties give them their target, or, if you like, define the subject of their search.[7]

Likewise, we can extend the example to philosophy. When, for instance, we ask whether freedom is compatible with determinism: "What we are seeking to address is whether free action according to our ordinary conception, or something suitably close to our ordinary conception, exists and is compatible with determinism."[8] By folk theory, Jackson seems to mean a set or collection of generally accepted platitudes. Accordingly, the agreement of the philosopher's intuitions with ordinary intuitions leads to a folk theory. To the extent that philosopher's intuitions and ordinary intuitions disagree, we may say that the analysis given is not a folk theory.

If the goal is to analyze folk concepts, one might expect philosophers to ask folk for their opinions. But Jackson writes:

> I am sometimes asked... why, if conceptual analysis is concerned to elucidate what governs our classificatory practice, don't I advocate doing serious opinion polls on people's responses to various cases? My answer is that I do—when it is necessary.[9]

Jackson claims that such "polls" are appropriate. But, on his view, such polls are unnecessary because "often we know that our own case is typical and so can generalize from it to others."[10] We can generalize because people's intuitions and our own intuitions coincide. Because we are experts on our own intuitions, we are experts on people's intuitions too.

III. The Expertise Defense

In "An Experimental Philosophy Manifesto," Joshua Knobe and Shaun Nichols identify and summarize two dominant strategies employed by proponents of an expertise defense of traditional armchair philosophy. Advocates of the first strategy have argued that because other academic disciplines, such as physics and biology, do not consider the views of the folk we philosophers ought to ignore them too. Those who endorse the second strategy argue that a philosopher has a more focused ability than the folk do to arrive at ordinary intuitions about cases because a philosopher has "special training" to draw fine distinctions and to think carefully. Timothy Williamson and Gary Gutting have offered their own versions of the expertise defense. In this section, I will review each of these arguments. Then, in the next section, I will offer some criticisms of both.

Williamson has argued that the specialized training philosophers receive make them more capable of distinguishing relevant philosophical intuitions from irrelevant ones. He writes:

> We should not regard philosophical training as an illegitimate contamination of the data, any more than training natural scientists how to perform experiments properly is a contamination of their data. Although the philosophically innocent may be free of various forms of theoretical bias, just as the scientifically innocent are, that is not enough to confer special authority on innocent judgment, given its characteristic sloppiness. Training in any intellectual discipline whatsoever has some tendency to instill unquestioning conformity to current basic assumptions in that discipline, and a consequent slowness to recognize errors in those assumptions. That is inevitable, for no progress is made when everything is put simultaneously into question. Fully trained practitioners can still obtain experimental results that undermine currently accepted theories. That can happen with philosophical thought experiments too, as the example of Gettier shows.[11]

Specialized training does not contaminate data; expertise enhances it and makes the intuitions more philosophically relevant. The philosopher who receives specialized training does not commit the same mistakes novices do.[12] Although "unquestioning conformity" to a discipline's basic assumptions is inevitable, according to Williamson, one should see this as a virtue.

Gutting has argued that people must meet a criteria of adequate judgment for their intuitions to be philosophically relevant. The criteria of adequate judgment include three elements: (i) that people really understand what is being asked of them, (ii) that people take the question seriously, and (iii) that people had enough time to reflect on the matter. According to Gutting, a good sign that a survey meets these criteria is that the responses converge on a specific response. He has presented an example supporting his view:

> If ... when students were given only 30 seconds to answer the survey question,

> they were split 50-50 on the answer; and, when we subsequently gave them 2 minutes to answer, the split went to 90-10, this would suggest that we were approaching conditions for adequate judgment."[13]

Studies have shown that philosophy majors tend to support the generally accepted standard intuitions, which means that their views are converging on the standard answers.[14] So, it is these folks, those who have a formal philosophy education, that have met the criteria of adequate judgment. Gutting then asks us to infer:

> unless there are good reasons to think that the relevant experiences of philosophy students (thinking more about these sorts of questions, being trained to reflect more carefully and critically, engaging in the back-and-forth of argument, etc.) are likely to distort their judgment, it is reasonable to conclude that the conditions under which people study philosophy are much closer to adequate conditions than are the conditions under which the surveys [of ordinary persons] were given.[15]

Thus, we have more reason to reject what experimental philosophers have found of ordinary intuitions than of what philosophers have said of ordinary intuitions.

IV. Some Worries about So-called 'Experts' and a Modified Euthyphro Dilemma

The primary aim of some philosophical theorizing is to uncover the folk concept. The previous section has reviewed two arguments supporting the expertise defense of traditional armchair philosophy. Because specialized training helps philosophers converge on the standard generally accepted intuition, we can accept that it is the ordinary folk intuition. In this section, I want to offer some criticisms of the expertise defense.

Philosophy's primary aim is not to give us what experts believe our views on some concept ought to be but to tell us what an appropriate understanding of a philosophical concept is." I am thinking here of what C.I. Lewis has claimed:

> It is—I take it—a distinguishing characteristic of philosophy that it is everybody's business. The man who is his own lawyer or physician, will be poorly served; but everyone both can and must be his own philosopher. He must be, because philosophy deals with ends, not means. It includes the questions, What is good? What is right? What is valid? Since finally the responsibility for his own life must rest squarely upon the shoulders of each, no one can delegate the business of answering such questions to another. Concerning the means whereby the valid ends of life may be attained, we seek expert advice. The natural sciences and the techniques to which they give rise, though they may serve some other interests also, are primarily directed to the discovery of such means. But the question of the ultimately valuable ends which shall be served, remains at once the most personal, and the most general of all questions.[16]

The belief that we may generalize from our own intuitions to those of the folk fails to see philosophy as "everybody's business." It seems that philosophers have believed that we can move from our own intuitions to folk intuitions without asking ourselves whether the proposed responses coincide with the ordinary person's intuitions. Philosophers, so to speak, have developed a special competence in accessing folk intuitions. And yet, experimental studies seem to undermine this special ability. The empirical data have shown that (on multiple occasions) the philosopher's own intuitions do not track ordinary intuitions.[17] If a philosopher's own intuitions do not track ordinary intuitions very well, then the philosopher's own intuitions fail to support a folk theory adequately.

There is an independent reason to worry that the intuitions of philosophers and the folk do not agree. Philosophers' intuitions do not always agree. Epistemology of the 1970s and 1980s bore witness to a cottage industry of counterexample after counterexample undermining the latest theory. If philosophers' intuitions disagree, then we should expect that the intuitions of philosophers and folk disagree too.

Williamson sets this worry aside. He has argued that the problem does not "warrant wholesale skepticism about the method of thought experiments."[18] Williamson has said that we should expect disagreement among philosophers since the foundation of philosophical debates is disagreement. So, according to Williamson, we should embrace our differences rather than see them as a problem. Williamson's assessment seems to be incorrect. Philosophers disagree, and the disagreements philosophers have are a source of encouragement and motivation promoting the development of further work. The situation is different when it comes to the employment of ordinary intuitions. The counterexample method depends on getting ordinary intuitions right. Knowing that there is disagreement between philosophers' intuitions should cause the philosopher to reconsider whether the proposed "ordinary" intuition is one actually shared by the folk."

The expertise defense depends on philosophers being experts—that is, specially trained people who have vast knowledge of their field. I have challenged the expertise defense by suggesting (a) that folk intuitions and philosopher's intuitions fail to coincide and (b) that philosopher's intuitions are not the aim of philosophical inquiry. In this section, I want to consider another reason why a philosopher's intuitions may turn out to be irrelevant.

Call the position that philosophers are experts and know what intuitions are philosophically relevant intuitions: "PCT." It may be defined:

> PCT_{def} - X is a philosophically relevant intuition if and only if a philosopher approves it and X is a philosophically irrelevant intuition if and only if a philosopher forbids it.

PCT seems consistent with what both Williamson and Gutting have argued. Only those people who are competent judges of intuition are equipped to tell us what intuitions are philosophically relevant. This formulation of the expertise defense leads to a dilemma: is X a philosophically relevant intuition because a philosopher says it is, or does a philosopher say X is a philosophically relevant intuition because it is? So, either an

intuition is philosophically relevant because a philosopher says it is, or a philosopher says an intuition is philosophically relevant because it is.

If X is a philosophically relevant intuition because a philosopher says it is, then the philosopher could have chosen any intuition and deemed it philosophically relevant. The philosopher could have said anything, e.g., "the moon is made of green cheese," and, according to PCT, we would have had to say that that is a philosophically relevant intuition. So, philosophers deeming some intuition philosophically relevant seems arbitrary.

If a philosopher says that an intuition is philosophically relevant because it is, then the intuition's philosophical relevance is not based on the philosopher's telling us so. We would not need philosopher's expertise to identify philosophically relevant intuitions. There would be independent means of verifying that an intuition is philosophically relevant. And, I gather that these means would be available to those who have not been specially trained. Thus, the philosopher's expertise is unimportant.

V. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that the strategies commonly employed by proponents of the expertise defense may be mistaken. Both Williamson and Gutting have suggested that specialized training helps philosophers converge on a standard and widely accepted philosophical intuition. But, if the counterexample method is correct and if philosophers want to offer a folk theory, then we must take seriously (i) the aim of the philosophical enterprise, (ii) the disagreement had between philosophers and the folk, and (iii) the ready availability of intuitions, independent of the specialized training academic philosophers receive.

Notes

1. Cf., Gutting; Williamson.
2. In this paper, I will use the term "intuition" to mean: "a strong, immediate reaction that is, though not always, a belief." Others have defined intuitions as "intellectual seemings" (Bealer) or "inclinations to believe" (Sosa). I realize there is a debate over what intuitions are, but I would prefer to leave that debate aside for this paper.
3. I follow Bishop in using this term.
4. The example uses surfing terminology, including "doggy door" and "fat closeout." While one might be unfamiliar with the terminology, one is likely familiar with the scene. When a surfer is inside the barrel of a wave and the wave is about to break, sometimes the surfer "finds the doggy door" by exiting the wave just as the barrel closes in on the surfer, i.e., the "fat closeout."
5. Appealing to intuitions is not limited to epistemology. There are plenty of examples from ethics (e.g., trolley problems, doctrine of doing and allowing, doctrine of double effect, euthanasia, etc.) and metaphysics (e.g., twin earth) that exemplify our appeal to intuitions. Although I could easily call on these examples here, I have chosen to stick with Gettier counterexamples.
6. Besides Jackson, see Gibbard and Lewis.
7. Jackson 30.
8. Jackson 31.

9. Jackson 36f.
10. Jackson 37.
11. Williamson 191.
12. Novices often think of (what trained philosophers believe are) irrelevant factors. What introductory ethics instructor has not heard the following from a student after having heard the trolley problem for the first time: "trolleys are loud. Why don't the five people get out of the way?" Or, "I don't go near trolley tracks." Or, "What time of day is it? If it's nighttime, they won't see me throw the switch. So, I throw it and they won't know I contributed to their death."
13. Gutting 97.
14. See, e.g., Machery et al. A variety of empirical studies have included in the demographic section of the survey a "philosophical sophistication" metric where respondents may admit to being a philosophy major or completing one or two courses in philosophy, etc. Although researchers do not have to employ this data in their analyses, the results very often find that respondents with one or two philosophy courses usually give responses compatible with the standard philosophical intuitions.
15. Gutting 97.
16. Lewis 2.
17. See, e.g., Knobe; Machery et al.; Weinberg et al.
18. Williamson 191.

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