

# Qualitative Tools & Experimental Philosophy\*

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## Abstract

Experimental philosophy brings empirical methods to philosophy. These methods are used to probe how people think about philosophically interesting things such as knowledge, morality, freedom, etc. This paper explores the contribution that qualitative methods have to **make** in this enterprise. I argue that qualitative methods have the potential to make a much greater contribution than they have so far. Along the way, I acknowledge a few types of resistance that proponents of qualitative methods in experimental philosophy might encounter, and provide reasons to think they are ill-founded.

§1 introduces experimental philosophy and outlines experimental philosophers' current methods. §2 provides a basic introduction to qualitative methods—data gathering and analysis—and articulates how such methods might contribute to experimental philosophy. §3 articulates a major potential line of resistance to the incorporation of qualitative methods which focuses on the idea that experimental philosophers are interested in investigating particular types of mental processing—*intuitive* processing—for which a qualitative methodology would be a poor resource. §4 responds to this objection by examining the basic motivations for experimental philosophy and the various ways in which it has been claimed that empirical data can make an important philosophical contribution and finding no justification for an near exclusive focus on intuitive processing. §5 then deals with a number of other objections and clarifies my recommendations before §6 wraps up.

## 1 Experimental Philosophy

Experimental philosophy is a new sub-discipline of philosophy. Experimental philosophers aim to make a philosophical contribution by using empirical tools

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\*This is the final accepted version. Refer to the published version for citations/references etc.

to probe how people—typically ordinary folks although sometimes philosophers themselves or other populations—think about philosophically interesting phenomena.

True to their name, experimental philosophers run experiments. In these experiments, participants consider cases and their judgments about the cases are recorded. For example, a participant might consider a Gettier case and be asked to what extent they agree with the statement ‘John knows that . . .’. Experimental philosophy aims not just to find out *what* judgments people make, e.g., about Gettier cases (see, [Gettier 1963](#)), they ‘run systematic experiments aimed at understanding *how* people ordinarily think about the issues at the foundations of philosophical discussions’.<sup>1</sup> Philosophy experiments investigate the factors that influence participants’ judgments. These factors include interpersonal factors, e.g., ethnicity. However, more typically, these factors are intrapersonal. An intrapersonal factor might concern the content of the case, e.g., How much rides on John’s being right? Or it might concern the conditions in which the participant views the case, e.g., Is the participant suffering from ego depletion? Is the participant in smelly or non-smelly environs (see [Schnall et al. 2008](#))? (For more detailed introductions to the methods of experimental philosophy, see [Alexander 2012](#); [Knobe 2007](#); [Knobe et al. 2011](#). For a couple of examples of experimental studies see [Knobe 2003](#); [Weinberg et al. 2001](#); [Wright 2010](#).)

While experimental philosophy is interested in how participants think about the relevant issues, in philosophy experiments participants are almost never asked what factors they think are relevant in their decision making. They are not generally even asked, for instance:

Indicate your level of agreement with the following statement:

Considerations of luck were important when coming to my decision  
(disagree) 1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - 7 (agree).

In other words, experimental philosophers do not typically try to ascertain what is consciously going through participants’ heads when they think about philosophically interesting things.

We’ll consider why this might be in §3. First, however, we should note that there are a whole host of empirical tools designed to get at how participants are thinking in precisely that sense, the sense of what is going through their heads. The measure just suggested, measuring on a scale, would be a pretty crude way to do this. A rather better way would be to use some methods involving the gathering of some qualitative data. Let’s quickly look at what this would entail and how philosophers might make use of qualitative data.

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<sup>1</sup>Quote from the experimental philosophy [website](#), accessed 8th Jan ‘14, my emphasis.

## 2 Qualitative Methods

This section is not intended as a *how to guide* for using qualitative methods in philosophy nor a comprehensive survey of qualitative methodology. It is a brief and incomplete introduction to qualitative methods for those who are not familiar. I concentrate on qualitative methods as I envisage them being of most use to philosophers.

### 2.1 Qualitative Data Gathering

The distinctive aspect of qualitative data is that it involves open response answers.<sup>2</sup> Participants are not asked to respond ‘yes’ or ‘no’ nor asked to indicate a level of agreement with a particular statement. Rather questions are asked which give participants the opportunity to provide an open response in their own terms.

The most straightforward way of gathering qualitative data would be via surveys which incorporate open response questions. This form of qualitative data gathering can be thought of as an alternative way of delivering a structured qualitative interview. Verbal interviews are historically the meat and bread of qualitative research. Interviews can be more or less structured. And a more structured interview closely resembles a research questionnaire albeit one in which the interviewer reads the questions aloud and the interviewee responds aloud ([Brinkmann, 2014](#)). Highly structured interviews can also be administered by email. Telephone interviews can be used (experimental philosophers have made some use of telephone surveys, see [Ahlenius and Tännsjö, 2012](#), but not to gather qualitative data).

Delivering interviews face-to-face is more typical in qualitative research as it allows for more freedom in the structure of the interview. At the more unstructured end of the scale, ‘[a]fter the opening request for a narrative, the main role of the interviewer is to remain a listener... sporadically asking questions that may clarify ([Brinkmann, 2014](#)). In all cases, structured or unstructured, the conversation is recorded and (where necessary) transcribed. It is worth noting that, in addition to questions, an interviewer can make use of other prompts to elicit a response from participants such as images, thought experiments, or otherwise philosophically interesting cases.

Focus groups are another way to gather qualitative data. A focus group is an informal discussion among a small group of participants (usually between 6 and 8 and rarely over 12) ([Wilkinson, 1998](#)). This discussion is on a topic provided by the researcher. Again this might be, for example, some questions, images or a

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<sup>2</sup>This is an imperfect characterisation as many methods of qualitative research involve, e.g., **naturalistic** observation, rather than collecting responses from participants in any form. Here, I will simply restrict discussion to the methods involving open responses of some form. But this is not **because** I think naturalistic observation might have no role to play in empirically-minded philosophy.

philosophically interesting case or thought experiment. Discussion can be more or less structured. The discussion may be directed by a moderator (frequently the researcher) but the aim is to capture discussion between participants. Again, the discussion is recorded and transcribed.

The final data gathering method which I will consider is what I shall call a 'think aloud study' (see [Van Someren et al., 1994](#), for the background to such methods). In the context I have in mind, such a study might involve a participant being asked to complete a survey, e.g., a survey which has been or is planned to be used as part of a standard experimental philosophy experiment, and, while completing it, be asked to 'think aloud', to vocalize their thought processes as they are deciding how to answer the questions on the survey. Again this can be recorded and transcribed. (Such methods are sometimes called *concurrent protocol analysis* [Bal-dacchino et al. 2014](#).) A similar alternative method involves having participants fill out a survey and afterwards asking them to articulate why they answered the questions as they did.)

## 2.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

The analysis of qualitative data can take a number of forms. There are some set qualitative research paradigms which stipulate certain approaches (for example Grounded Theory see [Bryant and Charmaz, 2007](#) or Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis see [Smith et al., 2009](#)). However, I'd foresee a rather more straightforward approach being of most use to philosophers. Here, let me describe a basic approach to the analysis of qualitative data (for more on the basics, see [Saldaña 2013](#)).

Qualitative data gathering typically results in a large body of text. This text is then broken down into segments and coded. The appropriate length of segments depends on research purposes, however, a fairly typical unit might be a sentence or small group of sentences. The researcher assigns segments to a code or codes which identify particular themes in the data. Codes can represent particular ideas expressed by the text. They can also represent other features of the text, e.g., confusion, apparent contradiction, belief revision, etc. Codes can also be clustered under higher-order codes in order to better represent the themes that emerge.

The researcher develops a coding manual containing a clear and precise description of each code. This helps ensure consistency in coding. It facilitates the establishment of inter-coder reliability: where multiple coders work with the same manual, one can also check the degree to which the coders agree. A coding manual can be decided in advance (this is sometimes described as 'a priori' in the literature). More typically, however, the construction of the final coding manual in the analysis of qualitative data is an iterative process. This means that the coding is done in several stages as the coding manual develops.

A completely preset coding manual might be appropriate for some research

aims. In many philosophical applications it may be appropriate for there to be some element of setting certain codes in advance. For instance, in a ‘think aloud’ study one would typically be looking out for many types of problems that participant typically exhibit. At the other end of the scale from a completely preset coding manual, researchers might initially be completely open in a first pass coding. This means that a researcher approaches the text with no specific hypotheses in mind trying to distance their analysis from any expectations they have about important themes; in such projects, the expectation is that one codes almost everything. A completely open initial coding would likely be inappropriate for philosophical use where the research questions are likely to be more targeted. However, allowing a coding manual to develop via an iterative process of coding does not mean that the initial stages of coding must be open. The idea of such an iterative process is that as one codes data—as one’s understanding of the data develops—the codes being used develop. The descriptions of codes may become refined. One may see a need to collapse codes or create new ones. Having developed a better understanding of the themes that emerge, one will likely have to go back and recode the data using the refined coding manual. So the process is often iterative: coding and recoding until one is happy that the codes one is using capture the themes apparent in the data.

It is important to note that quantitative information can help one’s analysis of qualitative data. For instance, information about the frequencies of certain codes or words in the data, collocation data relating to words, or the overlap of particular codes can help one identify important themes in the data.

## 2.3 Philosophical Uses of Qualitative Methods

Experimental philosophers do not tend to use qualitative methods. A brief quantitative survey illustrates this fact. A list was made of articles from 2014 indexed on the experimental philosophy web page.<sup>3</sup> The complete list contained 57 articles. These were categorized as non-empirical (i.e., presents no novel data), quantitative, and qualitative. Papers were only classified as qualitative if qualitative data was collected, analyzed and featured in the presented results (as something other than a manipulation check). Of the 36 empirical articles in the sample, only 1 was classified as qualitative.<sup>4</sup> My main aim in this paper is to argue that qualitative methods have the potential to make a much greater contribution than they do at

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<sup>3</sup>Link: <http://pantheon.yale.edu/~jk762/ExperimentalPhilosophy.html#>. All articles from “X-Phi of...” categories. Papers in languages other than English were not included. Citations for edited collections were not included in this count (the volumes, not the papers therein), neither were book reviews or conference **summaries**.

<sup>4</sup>Thanks to a referee for suggesting this quick survey. Interested readers should also see [Knobe \(2015\)](#) whose more systematic survey tracks the extent to which quantitative data is used in philosophy.

present.

How might experimental philosophers use qualitative methods? I think the most important contribution they have to make is in supplementing the methods already used by experimental philosophers. Qualitative tools are typically used to supplement other types of methods. For instance, [Wilkinson \(1998\)](#) notes that focus groups are often used either (a) 'in an initial exploratory or hypothesis-generation phase, prior to developing a... questionnaire' or (b) 'in a final follow-up phase, to pursue an interesting finding from a large-scale survey, or simply to add richness and depth to a project'.

What are the advantages to employing some more qualitative tools? Qualitative methods can be used to gain insight into how participants think and talk about philosophically interesting phenomena for themselves. Of course, quantitative surveys can do this. However, qualitative methods can give you much deeper insight. The reason is that they remove certain barriers. For example, it might be otherwise very unclear how participants understand the question they are asked. Or there might be very important aspects of how the participant thinks about an issue which a fixed response format might give them no ability to express (and which will consequently remain unknown to philosophy). Another barrier which is removed is that participants are able to respond in their own words and so one can gain an insight into way in which 'philosophical' usage of a term (as might be employed in a philosopher's experimental materials) simply doesn't fit with the ways ordinary folks are using the relevant term.

One example here: [Strohminger and Nichols \(2014\)](#) in five experiments probe ordinary folks' ideas about personal identity.<sup>5</sup> The headline finding is that 'Moral traits [such as honesty and racism] are considered more important to personal identity than any other part of the mind' (168). One might wonder exactly how these results should feed into philosophical debate about personal identity. One might wonder whether participants we should be interpreted as expressing any thoughts about numerical personal identity when they select one end of the scale (Jack 'is completely different now') as opposed to the other (Jack 'is the same person as before'). These sorts of questions can be asked about many philosophical experiments. Sometimes they can be raised in a dismissive context (e.g., 'participants might simply fail to understand the relevant philosophical concepts and so we can ignore these results'). But that is not the context I raise them in here. Results such as [Strohminger and Nichols \(2014\)](#)'s are not valuable only insofar as they concern participants' thoughts about personal identity *as it is typically understood by philosophers*. If it turns out that ordinary folks have little traction on a philosophical notion of personal identity, and that the sense of 'a person being the same person as before' which matters to them is something quite different, that is

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<sup>5</sup>Let me be clear. This work is valuable and important. By using this example I don't suggest this paper has any problems or any peculiar features. It is simply useful to have an example.

a philosophically important finding. The reason that I raise these questions here is that without further data it is difficult to know *which* philosophically interesting lesson to take from such studies: the one concerning philosophers' understanding of personal identity or the other one. What further data is needed? The most effective way to work this out would be to gather some qualitative data, perhaps, for example, via an interview format which allowed the flexibility to probe how they are thinking about personal identity. For example, an interview which started by asking participants simply to explain in their own words why they give the answer which they do or what they mean when they say that 'Jack is the same person as before', and then followed up on the answer in order to gain a deeper insight.<sup>6</sup>

For other philosophical purposes, something like a focus group might be more helpful. Advantages to focus groups include the fact that they afford insight into the ways that participants speak about and use philosophical concepts in the real world. In a one-to-one interview, participants are engaged in conversation with a researcher who guides the discussion using particular language and according to their understanding of the issues. Of course, a focus group can't guarantee *complete* ecological validity, as it were, as it is still a pretty artificial setting.<sup>7</sup> However, they do represent a marked improvement on survey responses or other interview types. The direction and language of the conversations is directed primarily by participants themselves rather than a researcher. A philosophical question which I can imagine being explored in this way is the extent to which ordinary thinking about distinctions between, for instance, beliefs, thoughts, and knowledge, map onto philosophical discussions in epistemology. Why would this be a valuable project? Well, many epistemologists acknowledge that terms such as 'belief' and 'know' as used by philosophers disconnect in important ways from the ordinary use of those terms. Whether that is a problem depends on your general metaphilosophical stance. Perhaps you think that the terms as used by philosophers are simply terms of art and the resemblance to ordinary English words is to some extent a red herring—in which case it would be no surprise if you were not interested in the kind of empirical work I am suggest. Perhaps, however, you think that the importance and interest of many epistemological debates is rooted in puzzles that arise in our ordinary epistemic lives, e.g., our ordinary ways of thinking and talking about beliefs, and our ordinary practices of belief formation. And, if that description fits, you should recognize value in a project that attempts to articulate how people consciously think about beliefs, belief formation, and so on.

[Hofmann et al. \(2014\)](#) use a different technique again for a similar purpose.

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<sup>6</sup>For some philosophical purposes there might even be a call for a more Socratic form of interview in which the interviewer poses simple challenges to the interviewees position.

<sup>7</sup>Ecological validity is defined as "The confidence with which the conclusions of an empirical investigation can be generalized to naturally occurring situations in which the phenomenon under investigation occurs" ([Colman, 2015](#)).

They motivate their study thus:

Despite considerable scientific and practical interest in issues of morality, virtually no research has taken morality science out of these artificial settings and directly asked people about whether and how they think about morality and immorality in the course of their everyday lived experience.

They prompted each of their sample ( $N = 1252$ ) to respond to a survey via their smart phone five times a day for three days. First participants were asked to indicate whether they had committed, been the target of, or witnessed a moral or an immoral act. The follow up questions then included open response questions as to 'what the event was about' and information about its location and so on. These responses were coded according to a manual drawing on [Graham et al.](#) ([Graham, Haidt, Koleva, Motyl, Iyer, Wojcik and Ditto](#)). [Hofmann et al. \(2014\)](#) conclude that their 'everyday-life approach' suggest new categories in addition to those provided by the *moral foundations theory* from [Graham et al.](#) ([Graham, Haidt, Koleva, Motyl, Iyer, Wojcik and Ditto](#)), e.g., honesty and self-discipline. And reveals that difference in the ways liberal and conservative think about moral issues are more nuanced than controlled experiments would suggest.

One area in which I can foresee qualitative data gathering being particularly helpful for experimental philosophers is that of scale development. A scale is a device used in a quantitative study to measure some particular construct(s). In experimental philosophy, one scale which has been developed is the *free will and moral responsibility scale* which is used to gauge the extent to which participants think particular cases involve an agent who is free and morally responsible (see, e.g., [Andow and Cova, forthcoming](#), for this scale in use). Scales comprise a number of 'items' or statements. Participants are asked to indicate their level of agreement with each item (or to say how much they think the item describes them).<sup>8</sup>

Scale development typically involves a number of steps. The first step typically involves generating a lot of items and then refining these to find a subset or some subsets with a high internal validity. One way to do this is for researcher(s) could sit down and come up with a bunch of items which they think might be relevant. However, this is potentially quite limiting if you really want to understand how participants are thinking about the issues for themselves.

The use of qualitative data can help avoid these limitations in at least two ways.

- Open response data from a preliminary survey can be used in the initial stages—as a source of items for later scale development. For instance, most

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<sup>8</sup>A score on the scale is then calculated for the participant. On more simple scales this simply amounts to the mean of their responses to the scale items, but less simple scales might measure multiple dimensions or weight different items by different amounts. But I don't want to get into that.



straightforwardly, exact quotes from participants could be used as items. This can give some assurance that the scale will tease out and measure the most significant aspects of the ways participants are thinking about the relevant issues.

- Qualitative data can also be very helpful in assessing the face validity of items or sets of items (e.g., when applied to the end product, in assessing the external validity of the refined scale). A researcher can subject a set of items to a ‘think aloud study’. Analysis of the gathered data can then allow one to identify problems with items which might cast the validity of any scale using them into doubt (e.g., items that participants systematically understand in a way which doesn’t match the researchers’ expectations).<sup>9</sup>

### 3 Qualitative Methods and Intuitive Processing

In this section, I consider a principled objection to my proposal that qualitative methods have much to contribute to experimental philosophy. This is an objection I take seriously. There is a plausible sounding argument that experimental philosophers should avoid qualitative methods. Nonetheless, I think this objection is mistaken. (To clarify, this section is not concerned with why *in fact* experimental philosophers have made no great use of qualitative methods. There needn’t be an interesting answer to that question. It might be simply that it never occurred to them or that they didn’t get round to it yet or that they are leaving it to someone else.)

Why might one think that qualitative methods were out of place in experimental philosophy? One plausible sounding reason appeal to the idea that experimental philosophy is concerned with *intuitions*. Not all characterisations of experimental philosophy place so much weight on this (e.g., I haven’t above for reasons which should become clear). However, it is very common to characterise experimental philosophy as the empirical investigation of intuitions (see, e.g., [Alexander, 2012](#)). Indeed, it is common to premise the philosophical contribution of the empirical work done by experimental philosophers on the idea that they investigate intuitions. The idea is that intuitions play a role in philosophy and experimental philosophy can somehow contribute to philosophy by contributing to or speaking to that use of intuitions (more on this later).

If that was right, then there might be a reason to think qualitative methods have little to contribute. There is much debate about how to characterise intuitions, however, very common characterisations involve the **following** characteristics: (i) intuitions are non-inferential judgements, i.e., not the product of conscious reason-

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<sup>9</sup>[Feltz and Millan \(2015\)](#) has recently made a similar point, calling for a turn to greater use of ‘protocol analysis’ in experimental philosophy studies relating to freewill and moral responsibility.

ing, and (ii) **intuitions** are fairly immediate, i.e., not slow and carefully reasoned. There might seem to be good reason to think qualitative methods will be next to useless for probing such intuitive thinking. The data which qualitative methods capture directly precisely concerns what one might call more ‘reflective’ thinking. It captures participants’ thoughts about their deliberation processes and their process of reasoning to an answer. (Now in fact there is no obvious reason to think that qualitative data could not in principle tell you anything about subpersonal ‘intuitive’ processing. And in fact others elsewhere have advocated methods such as ‘think aloud’ studies as ways to do precisely that ([Baldacchino et al., 2014](#)) in the context of exploring intuitive expertise. However, there is perhaps reason to think that when it comes to ordinary subpersonal mechanisms underlying, e.g., moral judgment, qualitative methods are far from the best way to explore such things.)

One way to elaborate upon this line of objection draws on what we have learned from psychology about what participants know about themselves. Generally speaking one of the lessons we have learned from modern psychology is that participants often do not have good access to the reasons why they form the judgments they make and why they reach the decisions that they do (or at least that they have much less access to such reasons than we might previously have assumed – for a survey of the relevant literature, see [Schwitzgebel, 2014](#)). Psychologists have, in recent decades, found a lot of evidence that much of our decision-making appears to be guided by processes other than conscious reasoning.

One sign of this is that it is now very common to use a dual-process framework when thinking about cognition (see, e.g., [Evans and Stanovich, 2013](#)). Here’s a rather simplistic summary. This popular picture is that there are broadly two types of judgment delivery system installed in our heads: one is fast (system 1); the other slow (system 2). The former is unconscious, fast, effortless, heuristic, associative and emotional. The latter, conscious, slow, effortful and logical. These two types of process are often supposed to work in tandem: the former delivering a quick answer via a process to which we have no introspective access; the latter then trundles away consciously deliberating to a reasoned answer. For present purposes, it doesn’t really matter whether these two types of processing are best thought of as the result of two *domain-general systems* of processing. (For a useful summary of all the features associated with the two types of processing posited by dual-process and dual-system accounts, see [Frankish \(2010, p.922\)](#).)

One reason dual-process accounts have garnered so much interest is that (a) a rather larger proportion of our decision-making than one might have originally expected seems to fall into the former category—unconscious, fast, non-introspectable, etc., and (b) where our judgments are the result of such fast and intuitive processing, evidence suggests that we are very bad sources of information about the factors which led to our decision—when asked why they made a decision the answers people produce seem often to be pure confabulation (for an overview, see [Carruthers 2010, 2013](#)).

Putting this together we can ask the same questions again. Why might one think qualitative tools have no significant contribution to make to experimental philosophy? It might seem like a reasonable rationale is establishing itself. Intuitions play a role in philosophy. Experimental philosophy should thus be focused on peoples' intuitions about philosophically interesting things and in the intuitive processing underlying those intuitions. So there is little value in exploring what people say when you ask about their decision making.

## 4 The Relevance of Reflective Processing

Let's grant a rough distinction between intuitive thinking (in the narrow sense discussed above of system 1, unreflective, immediate, non-inferential judgments) and more reflective thinking. The objection above is basically the following: philosophers use the products of intuitive thinking; experimental philosophy is therefore philosophically relevant because it investigates intuitive thinking; qualitative methods are no good at investigating intuitive thinking; therefore they have no contribution to make to experimental philosophy.

Here's the essence of my response: philosophers don't just use intuitive thinking (in this narrow sense); philosophers draw on more reflective aspects of ordinary thought about philosophically interesting things too (so qualitative methods have a philosophical contribution to make); the motivations behind experimental philosophy and typical reasons for thinking the data it provides can make a philosophical contribution would in no way justify limiting experimental philosophy to the investigation of intuitive thought (so the philosophical contribution to be made by qualitative data seems to fit into the experimental philosophy project).

To make this response, I'll first consider the more general explanations of the aims of experimental philosophy which have been given in the literature and find in them no justification for an exclusive focus on intuitive thinking. Then, I move on to examine some specific ways in which the empirical data about people's thinking about philosophically interesting things gathered by experimental philosophers can contribute to philosophical debate, and again find among them no justification for an exclusive focus on intuitive thinking. In fact, I will emphasize that all these various ways of motivating experimental philosophy in fact make it clear that qualitative methods have an important role to play and important philosophical contribution to make.

### 4.1 General Motivations

We can get a good picture by getting back to basics. In their *Experimental Philosophy Manifesto*, [Knobe and Nichols \(2008\)](#) open as follows .

It used to be a commonplace that the discipline of philosophy was deeply concerned with questions about the human condition. Philosophers thought about human beings and *how their minds* worked. They took an interest in reason and passion, culture and innate ideas, the origins of people's moral and religious beliefs. On this traditional conception, it wasn't particularly important to keep philosophy clearly distinct from psychology, history, or political science. Philosophers were concerned, in a very general way, with questions about how everything fit together.

The new movement of experimental philosophy seeks a return to this traditional vision. Like philosophers of centuries past, we are concerned with questions about *how human beings actually happen to be*. We recognize that such an inquiry will involve us in the study of phenomena that are messy, contingent, and highly variable across times and places, but we do not see how that fact is supposed to make the inquiry any less genuinely philosophical. On the contrary, we think that many of the deepest questions of philosophy can only be properly addressed by immersing oneself in the messy, contingent, highly variable truths about *how human beings really are*. (my emphasis)

Hopefully, it is clear in such statements that there is nothing that would suggest experimental philosophers should be interested only in intuitions. However, I should note that this interest in 'how human beings really are' and about 'how their minds work' does, even in this manifesto, end up being parsed in terms of intuitions. For instance,

More and more, philosophers are coming to feel that questions about *how people ordinarily think* have great philosophical significance in their own right. So, for example, it seems to us that there are important philosophical lessons to be gleaned from the study of people's *intuitions* about causation, but we do not think that the significance of these *intuitions* is exhausted by the evidence they might provide for one or another metaphysical theory. On the contrary, *we think that the patterns to be found in people's intuitions point to important truths about how the mind works*, and these truths — truths about people's minds, not about metaphysics — have great significance for traditional philosophical questions. (my emphasis)

Given the prevalence of intuition-talk in experimental philosophy it is easy to read such statements as suggesting that what experimental philosophers are really interested in is *intuitions*. And that interpretation is fine if 'intuitions' is merely standing in for 'judgments about philosophically interesting things'. But, if that's the interpretation, such statements say nothing to suggest that the real

interest is in intuitions *in the very specific sense of intuitions discussed above*. In fact, quite to the contrary, this interpretation would include reflective thinking too and thus put up no barrier to that idea that qualitative methods can contribute. On the other hand, if you do try to read ‘intuitions’ in the more specific sense, then the position seems rather strange; it is far from clear what in the more general stated motivations (e.g., in the previous quoted passage) would mandate this slide from a general interest in how people think to a more specific interest in their system 1, non-inferential, etc., intuitions. So, in other words, it seems that one should take the more permissive reading.

I foresee a potential objection here. Why should we take the more general motivations to accurately capture the nature and philosophical relevance of experimental philosophy? Maybe the opening of this manifesto, and other more general statements of the motivation for doing experimental philosophy, are simply too loose and not careful enough. Maybe the real interest is not a more general interest in how people think about philosophically interesting stuff, but really is an interest in their intuitive thinking (in the more specific sense). That isn’t right. To see why, let’s look at some more specific ways in which the empirical data about how people think which is gathered by experimental philosophers has been claimed to be of potential philosophical value.

## 4.2 Specific Motivations

There are five main ways in which experimental philosophers’ data about how people think about philosophically interesting things has been touted to be philosophically valuable. I’ll examine them in turn.<sup>10</sup>

**Enriching philosophers’ evidence base** Experimental philosophy has been claimed to contribute by providing more evidence for philosophy of the same type they already use (albeit perhaps from a more diverse sample and collected more systematically). Philosophers have always given weight to ordinary ways of thinking about things. Philosophers of time, for example, pay attention to our ordinary understanding of time, they want an account which ultimately is not only coherent (and perhaps empirically adequate) but which makes sense of our ordinary ways of thinking about time, passage, the past, etc. All else equal, according with our ordinary ways of thinking about time is a sign that a theory is true and conflicting with our ways of thinking a sign that theory is false. Experimental philosophy can

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<sup>10</sup>A referee points out that one might think that there are important connections between the more specific motivations considered in this section and, indeed, that one might think many of them are at heart the same motivation. By separating them out here, I don’t mean to suggest they are completely distinct. The aim is to show that the standard ways of conceptualizing the potential philosophical import of experimental philosophy in no way imply that only evidence concerning intuitive thinking (in the more specific sense) would be philosophically valuable.

help by revealing all sorts of features of our ordinary ways of thinking about the world which were not apparent by introspection, or consulting with those around us, and so can serve to provide us with better evidence (this is the hope of the 'positive program' in experimental philosophy – although not all experimental philosophers share this hope, see [Alexander et al. 2010](#)).

Note that nothing here suggests that an exclusive focus on our fast, intuitive, judgments about cases would be appropriate. For example, when considering whether a theory of time fits with the ordinary way we think, the focus isn't solely on intuitive judgments (in some narrow sense). All manner of things are relevant: the way we talk about past events; the way we think about what is possible for people to achieve in the past, present and future; it simply-feeling-odd-to-us to talk about dinosaurs being as real as our children. Consider what we would make of the following situation: suppose our intuitive quick and unconsidered response to a case was blah, but that, upon a moment's reflection, every ordinary person immediately thinks that blah is incorrect. Would or should philosophers only be interested in the immediate reaction? The answer is a clear no. Perhaps philosophers should give it some attention. It is an interesting feature of the kinds of thing we are. But we are also the kinds of thing which have and value considered responses to philosophically interesting cases. So it seems clear that more qualitative methods have something to contribute in this way of *providing more evidence for philosophy of the same type they already use*.

**Challenging philosophers' supposed evidence base** Experimental philosophy has been claimed to contribute by leading us to reconsider what we have previously taken to be evidence. Consider what I have just said about philosophers giving weight to ordinary ways of thinking. Sometimes experiments can contribute by revealing features of our ordinary ways of thinking about the world which might lead us to reconsider the amount of weight we give to such considerations in our theorizing (this is the aim of the 'negative program' of experimental philosophy [Alexander et al., 2010](#)). The influence of certain factors on our ways of thinking might, on reflection, be taken as a sign that our ordinary ways of thinking are being misled, e.g., that they are sensitive to irrelevant factors.

Note again: nothing here suggests that an exclusive focus on our fast, intuitive, judgments about cases would be appropriate. It is true that philosopher's thinking is influenced by fast immediate responses. Sometimes, perhaps often, these immediate judgments are simply taken up by more explicit reasoning processes and have a significant effect on theory. So it makes sense to be interested in the provenance of our judgments about philosophically interesting phenomena. And, given our comparative ignorance about fast intuitive judgments, we should perhaps be more worried about such judgments than those which are the product of more explicit processing. However, there seems to be no reason not to be interested in the the way people consciously reason about things. The provenance of immediate

responses is interesting but is only one facet of a fully developed empirical programme investigating how people think about time, morality, art, knowledge, etc. More qualitative research could reveal, e.g., common assumptions or associations which may be playing a role in our thinking about philosophical issues but which are problematic for some reason. So it seems more qualitative methods have a significant part to play here too. (Of course, causal links are difficult/impossible to establish with purely qualitative methods. And one might need to do this to show that, e.g., intuitions are affected by a certain irrelevant factor. But remember, I am not suggesting that qualitative methods be used in isolation. They can help an attempt to challenge philosophers' evidence base by provide a source of well-informed hypotheses.)

**Catalyzing reflection** Experimental philosophy has been claimed to contribute by catalyzing reflection on ways of thinking which philosophers have taken for granted. All disciplines have to take somethings for granted. However, it is healthy for such ways of thinking to be questioned and subjected to reflective scrutiny. The thought is that experimental findings, for example, that different types of people think in different ways about morality, can serve as a very effective catalyst for philosophical reflection about morality (Knobe and Nichols, 2008, 11).

But, again, there is no motivation here for an exclusive focus on intuitions. Different cultures have different religions, world-views, legal systems, cultural practices, gender roles, and so on—indeed these are precisely the types of difference Knobe & Nichols have in mind—all these things go far beyond the immediate responses people have to cases. Finding out that members of a different culture reason about X and conceptualize X in a very different way to you can serve as an important catalyst for reflection, sure. But, it is not only facts about intuitions which can serve this role. Indeed, it seems that the fact that people consciously construct and reflectively endorse completely different moral systems seems likely to serve as a much more powerful catalyst than their having divergent immediate responses (although, I accept that this an empirical claim and potential hostage to empirical disconfirmation). So, clearly qualitative methods have a role to play in providing these catalysts.

**Otherwise informing our understanding of ordinary ways of thinking** Experimental philosophy's contribution doesn't have to be linked to evidence or catalyzing reflection. Philosophers sometimes treat ordinary ways of thinking as a starting point. Sometimes it is thought to be part of the job of a philosopher to make sense of our ordinary ways of thinking. Experimental philosophy can therefore contribute by discovering surprising aspects of our ways of thinking: aspects which were not apparent from the armchair. Once philosophers become aware of surprising aspects of our ways of thinking, they can then think carefully about the

relevant aspects. They might simply provide a better idea of the ordinary ways of thinking that it is the philosopher's job to make sense of. Or it might help us examine which ordinary ways of thinking we are happy to treat as a starting point. Experiments simply provide additional things to be philosophized about.

My point will be becoming familiar. Data about intuitions (in the restricted sense) has an important contribution to make in this way. However, so does qualitative data relating to more reflective ways of thinking. Because, when philosophers treat ordinary ways of thinking as a starting point for inquiry, or as something it is the philosophers job to make sense of, they do not restrict themselves to intuitive ways of thinking. We want to make sense of our ways of thinking about moral responsibility. That is to say, we are also interest in aspects of thinking which qualitative methods provide a way to explore. We are interested in practices of praise and blame. We are interested in the sorts of principles people formulate for themselves. We ask about the role that the idea of responsibility plays in our wider moral framework. We are interested in the ways that people consciously reason about these things.

**Conceptual analysis** Finally, experimental philosophy has been claimed to contribute to philosophy by contributing to the project of conceptual analysis. Whether as an end in itself or as a stepping-stone to inquiry about the world, philosophers have always been interested in the structure of our concepts and in the relations between our concepts. Views about what concepts are vary, as do views about what conceptual analysis is interested in analyzing. Be that as it may, it is common to treat data concerning how we apply concepts, or about how acceptable we find certain applications of concepts, as evidence about the concepts themselves. Philosophical experiments can provide a rich source of such data for the project of conceptual analysis (see, e.g., [Knobe, 2007](#)). They can detect subtle differences between cases. They can detect subtle differences in how willing we are to attribute knowledge, intentional action, etc., to such cases. They can detect subtle differences which are not readily apparent introspectively. That being so, they enable us to build up a much better picture of how we think about such concepts, about the various factors relevant to our application of those concepts.

Can qualitative data not contribute too? This isn't quite so straightforward a question. The idea of conceptual analysis is a little slippery. It is not always clear what the target of conceptual analysis is supposed to be. There is disagreement among philosophers as to what they are doing when they do 'conceptual analysis'. This is worth noting because there is an available sense of conceptual analysis which would be such that data about intuitive thinking would be relevant and data about more reflective thinking would not. For example, Suppose that concepts such that the most useful information available to us in their analysis is information about people's fast, immediate, non-reflective judgments classifying cases as either falling within the extension of the concept or not. Such concepts would be



something like the following: psychological structures existing at a subpersonal level with application conditions (of some form) which somehow represent features of the world.

However, I think it should be pretty clear that this sense of conceptual analysis is pretty restricted and that most philosophers who analyze concepts are interested in more than having a clear understanding of the ways in which humans quickly divide up the world at the subpersonal level. (That is not to say that philosophers are not interested in concepts in this more restricted sense—just that they are interested in something else too.) For example, suppose we were interested in analyzing the concept of action. It seems that philosophers are generally interested in more than this. Other data is relevant to people’s concepts in any more philosophically interesting sense: when people reflect on the cases again, what type of considerations leap out at them; which types of cases are they most confident that they classified correctly; what relations do they consciously make with other concepts; what priority do they give their first impressions about concept application once they reflect on issues of moral responsibility; and so on. And qualitative data could be invaluable in providing that richer understanding of people’s concepts.

## 5 Clarifications

- *I am not raising an objection to experimental philosophy as currently practiced.* Saying that X could be augmented by the incorporation of Y is not an objection to X. However, I think that there has sometimes been too much of a focus on intuitive thinking (in the restricted sense of fast and non-inferential processing).
- *I am not saying there is a problem with experimental methods for investigating the sort of thing which experimental philosophy investigates.* I am recommending that experimental philosophers supplement their current toolkit. Use of qualitative research, e.g., to get some traction how people are thinking can provide an excellent basis upon which to design the necessary quantitative methods of experimental philosophy (including surveys, scales, and the like) to track participants’ thinking (including more reflective thinking) in quantifiable terms for use within experimental studies.
- *I am not saying that philosophers shouldn’t be interested in subpersonal, fast and intuitive classification of philosophically interesting cases.* They should. But they are and should be interested in more reflective thinking too.
- *I am not claiming experimental philosophers have never collected qualitative data.* They have (although typically in the form of open response survey questions,

generally to perform manipulation checks and such like within an experimental project).<sup>11</sup> The claim is that qualitative methods have much more to contribute than they have so far. I am also not claiming to be the only philosophers who has ever called for a greater use of more qualitative tools.<sup>12</sup>

- *I am not claiming that empirical work which drew purely on qualitative data would be of any value.* Perhaps it might. Perhaps it mightn't. There's no obvious reason to think that it could never be. But I haven't aimed to argue either way. For all I have said, it might be the case that any project which (a) used qualitative data to investigate how people think about philosophically interesting things, and which (b) did not supplement this with more quantitative methods, would be of only very limited or no philosophical value.
- *I am not claiming that there is nothing to be gleaned from quantitative data about more reflective reasoning.* As I hope I have made clear throughout, I think that quantitative methods are simply a far-from-perfect tool for the job of tapping participant's conscious thought processes and that it makes sense to supplement them with qualitative methods.
- *I am not endorsing any kind of 'qualitative philosophy'.* Qualitative researchers sometimes buy into dubious (or at least controversial) 'philosophies', e.g., the idea that there is no objective truth, that all knowledge is constructed, that such notions are morally problematic, and so on. I am inclined to think that endorsing any such think would be a gross mistake. However, fortunately one need not buy any of that stuff in order to make use of qualitative tools.
- *I am not claiming that incorporating qualitative tools is easy nor that they don't have shortcomings.* Generalizing from qualitative data is problematic both because of the nature of the data and the size of the samples one typically has to work with. Qualitative techniques are laborious. This means that that the number of participants one can feasibly run is much lower than in more typical experimental philosophy studies. And for certain types of analysis you need to have members of the research team who are not aware of the precise hypotheses of the project. Drawing themes out of qualitative data can require a lot of interpretation on the part of the researcher and so does make it particularly difficult to ensure a level of objectivity. Allowing flexible forms of interview mean that many variables may alter between participants. Qualitative tools can be used really only to explore themes and construct theories

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<sup>11</sup> Although there are some exceptions which I haven't discussed in the above, for example, [Berniunas and Dranseika \(2016\)](#); [De Cruz \(Under Review\)](#); [Monroe and Malle \(2010\)](#); [Skulmowski et al. \(2015\)](#). **David Moss, Crowley and Beach**

<sup>12</sup> Some similar comments are made albeit briefly by a number of others (e.g., [Devitt, 2015](#); [Feltz and Millan, 2015](#); [O'Brien, 2015](#)).

rather than to test concrete hypotheses or establish causal relations, as a result they can sometimes, at least in the short term, lead to less clarity about how people are consciously thinking about the relevant issues rather than more clarity. So, I am definitely not saying there are no shortcomings. However, take note! The fact that the correct toolkit – for the job of ‘immersing oneself in the messy, contingent, highly variable truths about how human beings really are’ – includes tools which have *these* shortcomings, ought not to be too much of a surprise. And, remember, there is no suggestion here that experimental philosophers should up-sticks and adopt a purely qualitative methodology.

Those clarifications out the way, and before I conclude, I want to see off one last objection. I’m going to consider rather an extreme version of the objection. It should be clear how I would respond to less extreme versions.

The objection says: all conscious thinking (i.e., the only stuff qualitative methods have access to) is post hoc confabulation; our conscious thoughts tell us nothing about our real decision making, classification of cases, etc.; they tell us only a complete fiction invented by some sort of modular commentary box—the only part of the mind at a personal level—which has no access to our subpersonal thinking other than via the senses; we have no introspective access; we make sense of our own behaviour and decisions by observing ourselves in precisely the same way as we make sense of the behaviour and actions of others; so, *qualitative methods do not give us access to anything philosophically deep or interesting about ourselves*. If the world is as the objection paints it, when we claim that something is X all our reasoning about why it is X bears absolutely no relation to the reasons we declared it to be immoral in the first place (unless by coincidence, as we have no introspective access to those reasons).

Now a model this extreme is probably not correct (but I don’t aim to argue for that here).<sup>13</sup> My response to this objection is to note that, even if this extreme model of a post hoc disconnected mind were correct, the conclusion that qualitative methods do not give us access to anything philosophically deep or interesting about ourselves doesn’t follow. Why doesn’t the conclusion follow? Quite contrary to the idea that in such a scenario qualitative methods wouldn’t give one access to anything philosophically interesting, I think that they would give one access to perhaps the most philosophically interesting part of the whole setup. In such a scenario we probably should be interested in the causal story as to how certain decisions get made and how certain intuitions come to be had, however, much more interesting would be the conscious reasoning, justifications and theorizing that we do after the fact—precisely because, in that scenario, that is where most of our ordinary thinking about philosophically interesting things takes place.

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<sup>13</sup>For example, as a reviewer points out, it seems unlikely that reflective reasoning can tell us nothing important about intuitions.

## 6 Wrapping Up

The point of experimental philosophy is to bring empirical methods to philosophy in order to probe how people think about philosophically interesting things such as knowledge, morality, freedom, etc. The point of this paper has been to argue that qualitative methods—which play no significant role in experimental philosophy at the moment—have a very significant contribution to make to this project. I have tried to stave off one particular line of resistance: that experimental philosophy is and should be focused (almost) exclusively on intuitive processing rather than the more reflective thinking to which qualitative methods give a researcher access. I have argued that given the general motivations behind experimental philosophy, and given the particular types of philosophical contribution that experimental philosophy has been touted to be able to make, there is no reason to think that experimental philosophy should be focused exclusively on subpersonal intuitive processing and would be justified in deeming qualitative methods to have no contribution to make.

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