

# X-Phi Without Intuitions?<sup>1</sup>

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Forthcoming in Anthony Booth and Darrell Rowbottom, eds., *Intuition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

One central purpose of Experimental Philosophy (hereafter, x-phi) is to criticize the alleged reliance on intuitions in contemporary philosophy. In my book *Philosophy without Intuitions* (hereafter, PWI), I argue that philosophers don't rely on intuitions.<sup>2</sup> If those arguments are good, experimental philosophy has been engaged in an attack on a strawman<sup>3</sup>. The goal of this paper is to bolster the criticism of x-phi in the light of responses.

Proponents of x-phi typically respond to the kinds of arguments adduced in PWI in one of two ways:

**The X-Phi-Doesn't-Need-Intuitions Reply.** Experimental philosophy doesn't (need to) target intuitions: its criticism of philosophical practice stands even if it isn't the case that philosophers rely on intuitions.

As a heuristic, think of the reply along these lines: We can go back to influential papers in experimental philosophy and replace 'intuition' with a different term. So, in passages like "Experimental philosophers have begun conducting empirical research to find out what *intuitions* are generated in response to certain cases. But rather than supporting and explaining the practice of appealing to intuitions as evidence, the results of this research challenge the legitimacy of appealing to *intuitions*" (Swain et al. 2008, p. 140, italics added), we can delete 'intuition', replace it with some other term, 'XYZ', and:

- a) The central claims are still true.
- b) X-phi surveys are relevant to XYZ.

The second strategy for responding to the kind of criticism found in PWI is the Direct Reply:

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Stewart Cohen, Josh Dever and two anonymous readers for helpful feedback.

<sup>2</sup> I also take this to be one of the central messages of Timothy Williamson's *The Philosophy of Philosophy*. It is also a point made forcefully by Max Deutsch (2009, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> The x-phi movement is sometimes described as divided into a negative and a positive or constructive camp. For the constructive experimental philosophers, the study of intuitions can *help* us do philosophy. The focus in this paper is on the negative camp, but it is worth noting that the positive version of the program is equally committed to the assumption that philosophers rely on intuitions as evidence. It endorses that assumption and then tries to make a positive contribution by discovering interesting facts about the patterns of intuitive reactions. As a result, the objections in this paper (and in PWI) are, if effective at all, equally effective against both camps.

**The Direct Reply.** The arguments in PWI fail—philosophers do rely on intuitions.

My own view, argued for extensively in Part I of PWI, is that the word ‘intuition’ is such a semantic and pragmatic mess that those interested in the philosophy of philosophy are better off if positions and arguments are not articulated using that and cognate terms. As a result, I will treat all of the proposals below as instances of the X-Phi-Doesn’t-Need-Intuitions Reply (even though some of the proponents of x-phi will insist on using the word ‘intuition’ for some of the phenomena appealed to).

### **The X-Phi-Doesn’t-Need-Intuitions Reply**

To illustrate how integral ‘intuition’-talk is to x-phi it will be helpful to briefly remind the reader of how proponents of the movement typically describe their motivations and results. Here are some representative articulations of the x-phi project:

According to standard practice, *a philosophical claim is prima facie good to the extent that it accords with our intuitions, prima facie bad to the extent that it does not.* Given that intuitions about thought-experiments are standardly taken as reasons to accept or reject philosophical theories, then we should be interested in finding out what the relevant intuitions are. (Swain et al. 2008, p. 140, italics added)

According to the party line, the exploration of these appeals to intuitions is the goal of x-phi:

A number of experimental philosophers in recent years (e.g., Machery, Mallon, Nichols, & Stich, 2004; Swain, Alexander, & Weinberg, 2008; Weinberg, Nichols, & Stich, 2001; see also Sinnott-Armstrong, 2008) have begun to challenge analytic *philosophy’s longstanding practice of deploying armchair intuitive judgments* about cases. (Weinberg et al. 2010, p. 331, italics added)

The results, we are told, don’t look good for the longstanding practice:

*Experimental philosophers have begun conducting empirical research to find out what intuitions are generated in response to certain cases. But rather than supporting and explaining the practice of appealing to intuitions as evidence, the results of this research challenge the legitimacy of appealing to intuitions.* Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich revealed that epistemological intuitions vary according to factors such as cultural and educational background; Machery et al. document a similar cultural variation in semantic intuitions; and Nichols and Knobe have discovered that the affective content of a thought-experiment can influence whether subjects have compatibilist or incompatibilist intuitions. (2008, p. 140, italics added)

The topic of this paper can be put very simply: Suppose the arguments in PWI are correct and appeals to intuitions play no role in philosophical practice. This looks like a disaster for the proponents of the quoted passages. Their project is founded on a

false idea of what philosophy is and so their surveys have no relevance to what we philosophers do.

It is when faced with this challenge that some experimental philosophers backtrack. They claim that ‘intuition’-talk was nothing but an innocent terminological mistake—they were simply following standard philosophical usage. Nothing substantive hangs on this choice of words and there are easy ways to correct for the poor choice of words, we’re told. Alexander and Weinberg say:

Although the results are often glossed in terms of intuitions to follow standard philosophical usage, inspection of the experimental materials reveals little talk of intuitions and mostly *the direct evaluation of claims*. (2007, p. 72, italics added)

We find that kind of backtracking even in popular presentations of x-phi. Here, for example, is what Edouard Machery says,

...philosophers assume that *judgments about philosophical cases or thought experiments* (what is often called, misleadingly, “intuitions”) are likely to be true or reliable. A huge amount of work in experimental philosophy casts doubt on this view, by showing that these judgments are influenced by irrelevant variables such as culture, age, order of presentation of cases, and so on. (3am magazine interview<sup>4</sup>)

The goal of this paper is to convince the reader that experimental philosophers underestimate the difficulties involved in the revision they here gesture at. They talk as if what is required is nothing but a slight terminological revision, but it is not. In what follows I consider eight options for how to reformulate the x-phi project. They all fail.

One preliminary: In important ways, this paper is not self-contained. At several points in what follows, I will refer the reader to arguments and evidence presented in PWI. It would be pointless and repetitive to go over that ground again here so at some crucial points arguments here build on material in considerably more detail in PWI. The goal here is to highlight those elements of PWI that are relevant to the X-Phi-Doesn’t-Need-Intuitions-Reply.

### **Option 1: Replace ‘intuitions’ with ‘judgments’ or ‘beliefs’**

This option, in its full generality, is clearly absurd, but the absurdity helps illuminate the more general problem. So let’s consider the question of whether x-phi surveys have relevance if their target is not the reliance on intuitions, but instead philosophers’ ‘judgments’ or ‘beliefs’. To see the absurdity of this proposal, consider these philosophical judgments I make:

- Quotation is governed by the axiom: ‘A’ quotes “A”.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/without-concepts/>

- Agreement and disagreement patterns do not provide evidence for relativism about predicates of taste.
- A monadic truth predicate is more fundamental than a relational truth predicate.
- Disagreement diagnostics for shared content are better than same-saying diagnostics for shared content.

To conduct a survey about what, e.g., undergraduates in New Jersey and Hong Kong believe about quotation or monadic truth would be pointless in the extreme. So, if we find out, for example, that 8.2 percent more students in HK believe in monadic truth than in NJ, that isn't helpful to my philosophical practice, the goal of which is to find out whether truth is monadic or not. It is pointless because to engage with my beliefs about monadic truth you have to engage with my reasoning and the evidence that I have. The surveys don't do that and so don't speak to my philosophical concerns.

In what follows I will assume that all parties to this debate agree with this and that Option 1 must be rejected. What is needed is obvious: *a more specific characterization of the kind of judgment in question*. The next six proposals are all attempts to narrow in on a subset of judgments that x-phi surveys target.

### **Option 2: Replace 'intuitions' with 'philosophically relevant judgments about cases'**

According to Option 2, the relevance of x-phi studies is limited to philosophically relevant beliefs (or judgments) about so-called 'cases' or 'thought experiments'. Alexander and Weinberg write:

Going back arguably at least to Frege (and, in some sense, all the way back to Socrates), it has been a standard practice in analytic philosophy to employ intuitions generated in response to thought-experiments as evidence in the evaluation of philosophical claims. (2007, p. 56)

Purged of 'intuition'-talk, this passage suggests that the intended target is not just any philosophical judgment, but those that concern thought experiments. I'll set aside the difficulties of making clear what a 'thought experiment' is and how to understand 'philosophically relevant' (though I think those are important and overlooked problems, see PWI, Section 9.1). Instead, I'll focus on a more immediate problem. Recall that Option 1 was rejected because x-phi surveys failed to engage with my reasons or evidence (for, e.g., the claim *that truth is monadic*). The same problem arises in connection with the option now under consideration. Consider Case N:

**Case N.** A little girl, Nora, takes a big bite of a strawberry ice cream and utters: "This is delicious!"

While reflecting on Case N, I make the following judgment:

- Nora's judgment is monadically true.

Again, I say this because I have thought very hard for many years about the difference between the relativized truth predicate and monadic truth predicate and now endorse a view according to which judgments involving the predicate ‘delicious’ are monadically true. The book *Relativism and Monadic Truth* is an extended presentation and defense of this view. Again, I take it to be obvious that surveys about how undergraduates in New Jersey and Hong Kong respond to the question “Is Nora’s judgment monadically true?” have no philosophical significance. Even if we found a difference of 8.2 percent between NJ and HK undergraduates, it wouldn’t move me and it would have no bearing on the debate about whether truth is monadic or relativized.

**Option 3: Replace ‘intuitions’ with ‘philosophically relevant judgments about cases that we have no evidence for and don’t base on reasons’**

Weinberg says:

Intuitions are odd critters: intellectual happenings in which it seems to us that something is the case without arising from our inferring it from any reasons that it is so, or our sensorily perceiving that it is so, or our having a sense of remembering that it is so. (2007: 318)

Nichols, Stich, and Weinberg say:

As we use the notion, an epistemic intuition is simply a spontaneous judgment about the epistemic properties of some specific case—a judgment for which the person making the judgment may be able to offer no plausible justification. (2001: 432).

Again, there is a way to purge these passages of ‘intuition’-talk and the remaining proposal is what I suspect is at the core of x-phi’s picture (or caricature) of philosophical practice: at the foundation of much philosophy is a set of case judgments made by philosophers without evidence or reasons—they are made spontaneously, quickly and ‘intuitively’. We read e.g. a Gettier case, or a Truetemp case, and—boom!—a judgment about the case just comes to us. If it were true that philosophers relied on such spontaneous responses as foundational evidence, then it might be very interesting to learn that they vary widely with philosophically irrelevant factors.

The problem for x-phi is that this model of case judgments is false. In all of the cases anyone has ever mentioned as examples of philosophical case judgments, the judgments are made based on reasons and evidence and are assessed on that basis. This is a point at which I have to refer readers to earlier work. PWI goes through many cases (or thought experiments) in detail and finds none that fit the Option 3 caricature. I will provide only one illustration here (not included in PWI). Consider Stewart Cohen’s (1999) famous airport case. This is a paradigm of how contemporary epistemologists appeal to judgments about thought experiment. To see whether it is a legitimate target of Option-3-x-phi, we have to investigate whether the targeted

judgment is one that spontaneously, ‘without reason’, etc. The case is first introduced in the context of an attempt to spell out fallibilism. Cohen says: “Fallibilism allows that we can know on the basis of non-entailing reasons. But how good do the reasons have to be? Reflection on cases show that this can be a difficult question to answer” (1999, p. 58). We are then presented with the famous case:

Mary and John are at the L.A. airport contemplating taking a certain flight to New York. They want to know whether the flight has a layover in Chicago. They overhear someone ask a passenger Smith if he knows whether the flight stops in Chicago. Smith looks at the flight itinerary he got from the travel agent and responds, “Yes I know—it does stop in Chicago.” It turns out that Mary and John have a very important business contact they have to make at the Chicago airport. Mary says, “How reliable is that itinerary? It could contain a misprint. They could have changed the schedule at the last minute.” Mary and John agree that Smith doesn’t really *know* that the plane will stop in Chicago. They decide to check with the airline agent. (p. 58)

Note that Cohen *does not* then go on to offer up a spontaneous, non-reflective judgment. On the contrary, he starts to give reasons for and against various assessments of the case:

What should we say about this case? Smith claims to know that the flight stops in Chicago. Mary and John deny that Smith knows this. Mary and John seem to be using a stricter standard than Smith for how good one’s reasons have to be in order to know. Whose standard is correct? Let’s consider several answers:

- 1) Mary and John’s stricter standard is too strong, i.e., Smith’s standard is correct and so Smith can know the flight stops in Chicago (on the basis of consulting the itinerary).

Is this a good answer? If we say that contrary to what both Mary and John presuppose, the weaker standard is correct, then we would have to say that their use of the word ‘know’ is incorrect. But then it is hard to see how Mary and John should describe their situation. Certainly they are being prudent in refusing to rely on the itinerary. They have a very important meeting in Chicago. Yet if Smith knows on the basis of the itinerary that the flight stops in Chicago, what *should* they have said? “Okay, Smith knows that the flight stops in Chicago, but still, we need to check further.” To my ear, it is hard to make sense of that claim. Moreover if what is printed in the itinerary is a good enough reason for Smith to know, then it is a good enough reason for John and Mary to know. Thus John and Mary should have said, “Okay, *we* know the plane stops in Chicago, but still, we need to check further.” (pp. 58-59)

He then goes on to consider two more options: (2) that John and Mary are right and so Smith’s standard is too weak. (Smith cannot know, but John and Mary can know—after checking further with the agent), and (3) that all the standards are too weak (the

option that leads to skepticism). He considers the options carefully and his conclusion is reached tentatively; the difficulty and complexity is emphasized throughout. As I show in PWI, this is paradigmatic of how philosophers engage with cases.<sup>5</sup>

The central point I want to emphasize is this: If a proponent of x-phi endorses Option 3, a philosophical judgment (or activity of some kind) is an appropriate target for x-phi just in case it has certain features (they have to be, e.g., *intellectual happenings in which it seems to us that something is so even though we don't have reasons for judging that that it is so*, etc.). We are, for each candidate target, owed some evidence that it (the judgment or activity) has those features. X-phi practitioners never provide such evidence and seem to not even recognize a burden to provide it. As the reader can confirm by looking at the quoted Cohen passages above, even cursory glance at the paradigm targets make it extremely unlikely that such evidence will be forthcoming. Philosophical engagement with cases simply doesn't fit the Option 3 mold.

#### **Option 4: Replace 'intuitions' with 'philosophically relevant beliefs about cases made quickly or using System-1 processing (as opposed to System-2 processing)'**

Option 4 is very close to Option 3, but it gains, at least in some eyes, respectability by being framed in terminology borrowed from a branch of experimental psychology. Here is Jennifer Nagel's characterization of the kind of judgment good x-phi should target (she is using 'intuition'-vocabulary, but the context makes it easy to see how that can be replaced with an 'intuition'-free description of the relevant kind of judgment):

Both in philosophy and in psychology, intuitive judgments are seen in contrast to the judgments we produce through deliberate reasoning. Because this point is emphasized in a particularly clear fashion by Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber, I follow the outlines of their view in what follows, and use their terms 'intuitive' and 'reflective' for the two contrasting kinds of judgment. Mercier and Sperber describe intuitive judgments as generated by 'processes that take place inside individuals without being controlled by them' (Mercier & Sperber, 2009, 153). The spontaneous inferences produced by these processes modify or update what we believe 'without the individual's attending to what justifies this modification' (ibid.). (2012, p. 498)

This kind of intuitive (System 1) judgment is contrasted with reflective (System 2) judgment. Here is Nagel's helpful sketch of the latter:

In reflective judgment, by contrast, we engage in explicit reasoning and devote personal-level attention to the grounds of the conclusions we reach. Because of the strict capacity limitations on conscious attention, reflective thinking is sequential in character; where intuitive judgment can integrate large amounts

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<sup>5</sup> See Part II of PWI where I provide ten additional detailed case studies.

of information very rapidly in associative parallel processing, reflective judgment is restricted by the bottleneck of limited working memory space (for detailed discussion, see Evans, 2007). However, what it lacks in speed, reflective judgment makes up in flexibility (a point particularly emphasized in Stanovich, 2005) (pp. 498-9)

Option 4 proposes that x-phi targets judgments of the first category, not the second. My response is by now predictable: for anyone doing philosophy, it will come as a huge surprise to be told that philosophers' judgments about cases belong in the first and not the second category. It is, for reasons given above, simply false that the parts of philosophy Nagel and other practitioners of experimental philosophy target fall into the first category (the one many psychologists label 'intuitive'). No evidence has ever been provided by any proponent of x-phi and recent studies of philosophical practice throw serious doubt on it.<sup>6</sup> The passage from Cohen illustrates the general point. Cohen thought about the airport case for years, it wasn't quick and it is obvious from the text that it doesn't fit Nagel's description of what x-phi targets. In sum: while there is no doubt that System 1 judgments are an important psychological category that psychologists now have interesting insights into, this fails to have any relevance to philosophers' judgments about cases.<sup>7</sup>

#### **Option 5: Replace 'intuitions' with 'philosophically relevant judgments about cases based on nothing but conceptual competence'**

A natural thought: The problem with Options 3 and 4 is that the judgments in question are claimed to have *no* evidence in their favor. What we are looking for, rather, are judgments with a *distinctive* kind of evidence in their favor. One common view is that the target judgments about cases are those based *solely on conceptual competence*. Here is yet another of Weinberg's characterizations of his target:

...no empirical evidence is required, because one is presumed to have stipulated all the contingencies in the construction of the hypothetical, and one is thus applying only one's mastery of the concepts involved and not any empirical knowledge. (2007, p. 320)

So the target judgments are not without *any* justification, they are instead based on a distinctive source of evidence: conceptual competence. This version of x-phi goes hand in hand with the view of philosophy—and reflections on thought experiments in particular—as an a priori, armchair, enterprise.

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<sup>6</sup> See PWI, Part II.

<sup>7</sup> I should note that Nagel also says, "Even if we need some mixture of intuitive and reflective cognition to follow the story, it is possible that we use intuitive processing across the board in determining whether the key mental state in the story is an instance of knowledge or mere belief" (2012, p. 500). This indicates a kind of mixed picture. I suspect that when this is worked out, the result is a version of Option 6 below.



There is a much to be said about this way of describing philosophical judgments, and (as with Option 3) much of what I have to say is spelled out in considerably more great detail in PWI (see chapters 7, 8, 9 and in particular 10). I will simply highlight three important concerns:

1. An x-phi practitioner who advocates Option-5 needs to do a great deal of work in order to establish that a particular claim is an appropriate target – i.e. that it is ‘based on nothing but conceptual competence’. No proponent of x-phi has ever tried to substantiate this about any of their targets.<sup>8</sup> Nor have they provided evidence that the original authors of the thought experiments treated them in that way. To do that would require serious philosophical work: before preparing a survey, the x-phi practitioner would have to tell us what she means by ‘concept’, ‘competence’ and ‘based on nothing but’ and then show how, in the target cases, the relevant judgment has (or is believed to have) these properties. Significant parts of PWI are devoted to showing how *prima facie* implausible this is as a description of typical x-phi targets. In chapters 7, 8, 9 and 10, I first develop diagnostics for when a philosopher is attempting to rely on nothing but conceptual competence – i.e. for when a restriction of the form ‘don’t base the judgment on anything but conceptual competence’ is in effect. I then consider a series of case studies in Chapter 8 and none of them fit that description.<sup>9</sup>

2. It might be illuminating to compare the way PWI and Williamson (2007) argue against Option 5. Williamson (2007, Chapter 4) considers a range of variations on the idea that in order to possess a concept C (or understand a word W) an agent has to assent to certain propositions involving C or be justified in believing certain propositions involving C (or assent to certain sentences containing W or be justified in assenting to certain sentences containing W). He presents powerful arguments against such views. If Williamson is right, ‘conceptual analysis’ as it is traditionally understood is impossible to engage in. The search for conceptual justification is like the search for unicorns. This would present a problem for Option 5-version of x-phi: they would be targeting an activity it is impossible to engage in (they are in effect targeting nothing). PWI, on the other hand, argues against Option-5 without assuming Williamson’s strong conclusion (i.e. PWI doesn’t assume that the notion of *a judgment relying on nothing but conceptual competence* is empty). PWI’s line of argument goes something like this: suppose for the sake of argument that it is possible to make a judgment ‘relying on nothing but

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<sup>8</sup> And I don’t mean this as a form of hyperbole – it is literally true: no one has even tried.

<sup>9</sup> This is despite the fact that many philosophers – in moments of meta-reflection- might describe what they do as some form of conceptual analysis. That is simply a misdescription of what they *actually* do. A general theme of PWI is that we should not take philosophers’ meta-descriptions at face value (no more than we should take mathematicians or economists descriptions of the nature of their disciplines at face value).

conceptual competence'. If that were the case: how would we know (or have reason to think) that someone is trying to do that? Chapter 7 presents diagnostics and Chapter 8 uses those to investigate a series of case studies. The conclusion is an unambiguously negative one: it is a mistake to think that philosophers who reflect on thought experiments shun evidence that goes beyond what can be reached by 'relying on nothing but conceptual competence'.<sup>10</sup>

3. Suppose a proponent of x-phi meets the challenges in (1)-(2) above. Suppose she has established about a particular target judgment that it is based 'solely on conceptual competence' (or that author intends for it to be so based). She will then have to show how responses to surveys are relevant to an evaluation of that judgment. It is hard to overemphasize how difficult a task this is. She must, in effect, show that subjects 'rely on nothing but conceptual competence' *when responding to the survey* (and are not, for example, just making a spontaneous, System 1 judgment). Otherwise, the judgments of the survey respondents and the judgments of the targeted philosophers aren't of the same type (and so, again, there is a mystery why the one should tell us anything about the other). No x-phi survey has ever even attempted to produce evidence of this kind of match.<sup>12</sup>

Before leaving Option-5 it is worth drawing attention to a little argument that can be extracted from the Weinberg-quote that started this section. Recall Weinberg saying, "...no empirical evidence is required, because one is presumed to have stipulated all the contingencies in the construction of the hypothetical..." The argument seems to be of the form: "The reasoning must be based just on conceptual competence, because we've been given so much starting information to reason from." But that's a bizarre line of thought: surely, the amount of details built into the case is *prima facie* evidence that the reasoning *isn't* by conceptual competence, since it can be reasoning from those details. Compare: I study some organism closely in the lab, and on the basis of the study conclude that it's a mosquito. It doesn't follow that my conclusion must have been based on nothing but conceptual competence, because I had so much data from the lab that there was no further useful data that could have been added to it.<sup>14</sup>

### **Option 6: Replace 'intuitions' with 'philosophically relevant judgments about cases that we have too little "standard" evidence for'**

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<sup>10</sup> One advantage of the PWI strategy over Williamson's: Suppose Williamson is right. An advocate of Option-5-x-phi- could grant that and say that their target is the activity of *tryign* to do philosophy as a form of conceptual analysis (ie try to do what Williamson argues is impossible). PWI shows that they don't.

<sup>12</sup> For an elaboration of these points, see PWI, Ch. X.

<sup>14</sup> Thanks to Josh Dever for drawing my attention to this problem argument in the passage from Weinberg.

You might think that what x-phi needs as a target is a set of judgments that the agent has thought a lot about and has arguments for and against, but where there is still a little bit of room for ‘something else’. This ‘something else’ leaves room for x-phi surveys. Weinberg (forthcoming) makes a proposal along these lines. He suggests that there is a set of judgments (call them ‘I-judgments’) with properties (I1)-(I3)<sup>15, 16</sup>:

- **I1:** The judger takes herself already to have evidence for *p*, in a manner substantial enough to license *p prima facie* as a justifier without need of further offered justification.
- **I2:** The justification the judger takes herself to have for *p* “is not itself wholly based on perceptual input, memory, testimony, or inference from such judgments” (note that this leaves open the possibility that the intuitive judgment may *partially* involve such sources—thereby distinguishing this proposal from Option 3).
- **I3:** The judger assumes that there is some non-standard justification for *p* that complements the justification she has from ‘standard sources’.

So, roughly, Weinberg’s idea is that there are important claims about cases that the agent has a confidence level in that exceeds what the ‘standard’ evidence justifies. The agent also believes that some ‘non-standard source of evidence’ will fill the evidential gap and justify the confidence level. Those are the judgments targeted by x-phi surveys. One alleged advantage of Option 6 is that it avoids the objection raised against Options 3 and 4, i.e. that philosophers rely on a variety of sources of evidence for their judgments about cases. This becomes irrelevant since the x-phi fan can say, “Yes, of course Cohen and others in your case studies present reasons and evidence for their claims, but so what? I didn’t mean to rule that out—I just want a case where there’s also a mysterious ‘something else’ and that’s x-phi’s target.”

This option suffers from the same problems as Option 5. On the current proposal, the x-phi practitioner assumes that the target claim relies, in part, on some unspecified ‘non-standard’ evidential sources. The ‘unspecified’ part here is in effect just rhetoric since the only option for ‘non-standard evidential source’ that is live in the current debate is ‘reliance on conceptual competence’. Absent some alternative, all the concerns raised in connection with Option 5 apply (or, if you insist on talking about ‘some unspecified evidential sources’ replace ‘conceptual competence’ in the objection to Option 5 with ‘some unspecified non-standard evidential sources’ and all the same worries will apply).

Rather than repeat all of the points made in response to Option 5, I want to reemphasize one of the objections. Here is the concern articulated using ‘non-standard evidential source’ instead of ‘conceptual competence’: Suppose some target has been

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<sup>15</sup> Weinberg also thinks this is how ‘intuition’ should be characterized, so he takes this as a defense of the claim that philosophers rely on intuitions. Since this paper assumes we are better off purging our discussions of ‘intuition’ vocabulary, I ignore this aspect of Weinberg’s proposal (though see Cappelen (forthcoming) for a refutation of this aspect of Weinberg’s proposal).

<sup>16</sup> It’s unclear whether these are necessary or sufficient conditions.

properly identified. An x-phi practitioner would have to commit to an account of what this ‘non-standard source of evidence’ is, and in the light of that she would have to show that responses to surveys reveal something significant about this non-standard source. This requires showing that those who respond to the surveys base their judgments on this non-standard source (and not, for example, making a spontaneous, System 1 judgment). No attempt has yet been made to establish that.

**Option 7: Replace ‘intuitions’ with ‘judgments of philosophically relevant beliefs about *esoteric* cases’**

In one of his papers, Weinberg makes yet another attempt at characterizing the target of x-phi. He suggests that the primary target of x-phi is the practice of making judgments about ‘esoteric, unusual, farfetched’ cases. Weinberg says:

Intuitions may be fine as a class, taken on the whole, and the opponent has neither the need nor the desire to attack that whole class. But philosophers do not invoke a vast undifferentiated mass of intuitions in defense of their claims—rather, we cite particular intuitions about particular hypothetical cases. And the opponent is concerned that some significant number of these cases may be far less than ideal for this sort of appeal. For the practice appears to set no constraints on how esoteric, unusual, farfetched, or generally outlandish any given case may be. Everyone is familiar with the likes of Davidson’s Swampman and Searle’s Chinese room, but one can look at the very recent literature and find the likes of double-lesioned testifiers, new evil demons, and fissioning/fusioning/teleporting pairs (or are they?) of persons. So this anything-goes aspect of the practice is what makes it particularly ripe for the opponents’ challenge. (2007, p. 321)

Purged of ‘intuition’-talk something like the following claim remains:

**JW1:** Philosophers’ practice of making judgments about esoteric, unusual and farfetched cases is particularly unreliable and dubious. They are the judgments that are vulnerable to the experimentalist’s challenge.

I find the appeal to the esoteric, unusual and farfetched puzzling since these features are not in any way correlated with the degree of difficulty of a judgment. Lots of strange and unusual cases are very easy to judge in a reliable way. Here is a very esoteric, unusual and farfetched case:

**Easy Esoteric and Farfetched Case:** Suppose there are two pink elephants in my office. Then yet another pink elephant comes into my office (and the first two pink elephants stay in the room). Question: How many pink elephants are in my office?

Presumably, Weinberg does not think that if a philosopher reflects on this case, she is engaged in the dubious and suspicious part of our philosophical practice. The experimental challenge better not target this ‘thought experiment’. The flipside of this

is that many of the normal (not farfetched, not unusual, not esoteric) cases are very hard. Perry's famous paper, "The Problem of the Essential Indexical", starts out with a perfectly ordinary case—a kind of event that happens all the time. One of the main points emphasized by Burge in "Individualism and the Mental" is the ordinariness of his cases—how they are ubiquitous.<sup>17</sup> But, as the last thirty years of philosophy have proved, these are extremely hard cases to make judgments about. I suspect the charitable interpretation of Weinberg is that he is focusing on esoteric, unusual and farfetched cases that are difficult and that it is the great degree of difficulty that distinguishes his target, not that they are esoteric, unusual or farfetched. So, let's consider JW2:

**JW2:** Philosophers' practice of making judgments about very difficult cases is particularly unreliable. It is such judgments that are vulnerable to the experimentalist's challenge.

JW2 moves dangerously close to triviality. Of course we are less reliable when we make very difficult judgments. That's true in general—it is not a surprising feature of philosophical practice. When we try to answer very hard questions, we are not as reliable as we are when we try to answer easy questions. Surveys of undergraduate responses to vignettes won't make finding the answer easier.

### **Option 8: Define 'experimental philosopher' as any philosopher who does relevant experiments**

This option constitutes a radical change in strategy: In a recent paper, Rose and Danks propose experimental philosophers abandon what they call 'The Narrow Conception of Experimental Philosophy':

...discussions of experimental philosophy have often been ambiguous about what exactly experimental philosophy is. For example, Knobe & Nichols, in the introduction to their 2008 volume, propose that "experimental philosophers [are those who] proceed by conducting experimental investigations of the psychological processes underlying people's intuitions about central philosophical issues" (p. 3). Similarly, Nadelhoffer & Nahmias (2007) write: "Experimental philosophy is...a recent movement whose participants use the methods of experimental psychology to probe the way people make judgments [i.e., have intuitions] that bear on debates in philosophy." (p. 123) Liao, Weigmann, Alexander, & Vong (2011) observe that "a number of philosophers have conducted empirical studies that survey people's intuitions about various subject matters in philosophy" (p. 2), and describe their own work as using "this method of experimental philosophy" (p. 2). These quotes and other writings suggest a *narrow conception* of experimental philosophy: experimental philosophy involves philosophers

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<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of Perry's and Burge's cases and their relevance to this debate, see PWI, Sects. 8.1-2.

conducting psychological experiments for which the primary target is intuitions or judgments. (forthcoming, pp. 4-5)

In place of this narrow conception, they propose a broad conception:

We should instead adopt a *broad conception* of experimental philosophy: experimental philosophy is simply an instantiation of the long tradition of philosophical naturalism—the view that empirical data are relevant to certain philosophical questions—coupled with actually conducting some of the relevant experiments, as necessary. (p. 6)

In a way, Option-8 is sympathetic to the spirit of this paper and to the line of argument in PWI. Of course, no one should object to the idea that philosophers do experiments (consider, for example, Barry Smith’s extensive experimentation while writing about the philosophy of wine<sup>18</sup>—who could object?). What is important to emphasize is that this is compatible with *everything written by experimental philosophers being false, attacking a strawman, and having no relevance whatsoever to the debates to which they were supposed to be relevant*. The redefinition of ‘x-phi’ goes no way towards defending work that has already been done by experimental philosophers against the objections in e.g. PWI and Williamson (2007).

### **Comparison with the ‘Expertise Reply’**

A comparison with the so-called expertise reply to x-phi (and what Weinberg et al. (this volume) call ‘The Methodological Reply’) might help illuminate motivations behind this paper.

*The Expertise Reply*: The problem with x-phi isn’t that it studies intuitions, but rather that it studies the intuitions of the wrong subjects. The mistake, according to this reply, was to focus on undergraduates. If, instead, the surveys were of professional philosophers, the practice would be valuable and philosophically relevant.

*The Methodological Reply*: “According to methodological approaches, genuine philosophical intuitions are the products of careful philosophical reflection” (p. X).

These lines of reply to x-phi are misguided because they buy into the same mistaken picture of philosophy that spawned x-phi in the first place. The picture is that we engage in philosophical reflection and training and then when presented with survey questions, the responses are of a *fancy kind - reflective survey replies*. But this is not how philosophy is done. Philosophers engage in careful reflection and reason-giving, but they don’t do that to become more sophisticated survey respondents. X-phi’s basic

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<sup>18</sup> For examples of this version of experimental philosophy, see for example the events page of the London Experimental Oenology Seminars, see here: <http://experimentaloenology.wordpress.com/past-activities/>

mistake is to treat philosophizing as an undergraduate multiple-choice exam: yes/no/maybe to  $p$ ? That is not how philosophy is done.

**Objection: Don't you care about cognitive biases?**

Even taking onboard the above criticisms, there's sometimes a lingering sense that a wholesale dismissal of x-phi is unreasonable. After all, on one construal they are simply trying to discover cognitive biases. Do I mean reject all attempts to discover biases that philosophers might suffer from? In response to this concern, it might help to sketch the kind of dialogue I sometimes have with proponents of x-phi. In what follows, **X-P** is someone trying to explain to me the value of x-phi surveys and **HC** presents my reply.

**X-P:** Don't you care about cognitive biases?

**HC:** Yes, I do. The literature on heuristics and biases is very interesting.

**X-P:** Good, then what we experimental philosophers have found should interest you: philosophers are subject to all kinds of surprising biases, e.g. ordering effects.

**HC:** What do you mean by 'philosophers'? You mean philosophers when they do philosophy or in some other capacity?

**X-P:** Well, we haven't done any experiments on philosophers yet, but what the evidence points to is this: when philosophers give responses to survey questions about vignettes, they are subject e.g. to ordering effects.

**HC:** Okay, but that's not philosophers doing philosophy. Doing philosophy is thinking about and then giving reasons for a judgment about a case and the judgment is evaluated based on the quality of the reasons given. No part of philosophy is like responding to survey questions about vignettes. So even if this data were right, it wouldn't tell us about biases in philosophical practice. It would tell us that when philosophers respond to vignettes, they are subject to ordering effects, but that's at best an unsurprising factoid of no philosophical value.

**X-P:** I disagree: Lots of philosophers just make quick, brute, immediate, spontaneous, judgments about cases. Those judgments play a *huge* role in philosophy and the biases we have uncovered will help us understand that part of philosophical practice.

**HC:** That's an empirical claim about philosophy. You have, literally, *nothing* to back that up and there's overwhelming data against it (see, e.g., Part II of PWI).

Now, at this point in the dialectic we can go through the kind of arguments spelled out above, but the point about biases can then be picked up again:

**X-P:** So is your view that we should not care about or try to find biases in philosophical practice? We should just ignore them? Isn't that an irresponsible intellectual attitude?

**HC:** That's not my view. There are lots of biases in philosophy. Where you and I differ is on how to discover and evaluate those. I think we discover those by doing philosophy—by finding assumptions and presuppositions that bias philosophical reflection. Construed that way, I see myself as spending a great deal of my time as a philosopher discovering philosophical biases. The discussion at the core of this paper is a good illustration: I think much meta-philosophy is biased in favor of the view that philosophical practice is intuition-based. That bias has distorted meta-philosophical reflections. But discovering that bias and justifying opposition to it doesn't involve surveys. It is about doing philosophy like we were trained to do it: it involves thinking hard about arguments, uncovering hidden assumptions and then questioning them. Note that this doesn't mean that I don't think there are all kinds of non-philosophical factors that at some level influence the practice of philosophy. Proponents of x-phi provide a great illustration. It's striking, to put it mildly, that so many prominent experimental philosophers have either studied under or worked with Stephen Stich (these include Edouard Machery, Jonathan Weinberg, Ron Mallon, and Joshua Alexander). It is likely that these close personal connections make them biased in favor of the movement Stich founded. That, however, is obviously irrelevant to an evaluation of the x-phi movement or to the more specific claims they make.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

The offhand remarks we get from x-phi lovers about how to do x-phi without intuitions are unhelpful. They give the impression that it's a tiny adjustment hardly worth mentioning other than in a parenthetical remark. That's deeply misleading: the issues raised are complicated and the threat to x-phi is serious. In sum, a foundational problem threatens x-phi: The movement has been based on a speculative, non-empirical approach to its subject matter. Before you can claim that a survey (or a study of any kind) shows something important about an activity or a group of people, you need to carefully study what those people do and what that activity is. Proponents of x-phi have bought into a caricature of philosophy and they need to do more careful empirical work to identify a genuine target. Here is an analogy of what has been going

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<sup>19</sup> Stew Cohen suggested that in the spirit of reconciliation, this piece of dialogue be added: **X-P:** Okay, maybe x-phi surveys are irrelevant to finished work by professional philosophers, but, surely, even professional philosophers occasionally engaged in quick, non-reflective philosophical reflections and conversations—can x-phi studies be relevant to what they do during those informal moments? **HC:** Maybe, it's an empirical question—one would need to do empirical studies to show the relevance, it can't be just a priori assumed. And one would then need evidence of the kind of effect this had on the finished work.



on: Suppose experimental philosophers decided to investigate philosophers' diet, rather than their judgments about thought experiments. We can all agree that the following would be an extraordinarily ill-conceived strategy: pick some chemical, XYZ, and then conduct various experiments on it *before* checking whether philosophers consume XYZ. Even if the philosophy-diet-experimenters discover that XYZ is unhealthy and dangerous, nothing follows about the health of philosophers or their dietary habits.

Why does any of this matter? Can't those of us who don't care for x-phi just leave the x-phi lovers alone to do their business? Is it a harmful activity? My answer to this last question is a tentative 'yes'. Not only does x-phi promote a false picture of philosophy, but, insofar as the program is successful, it will *change* philosophy. Suppose I am right in my claim that philosophers don't rely on intuitions or anything that can be measured by responses to x-phi surveys. With the institutionalization of x-phi, interest in and reliance on surveys have gradually become an integral part of professional philosophy. So though x-phi was born in sin, so to speak, its institutional foothold has made it true that philosophers care about survey responses, since *they (i.e. experimental philosophers) do*. I agree with one of Stich's motivating thoughts: Philosophy should not be based on the kinds of judgments people make when responding to surveys. That is an awful (borderline absurd) way to do philosophy. The institutionalization of x-phi has made it the case that many philosophers now think those kinds of judgments are important. *They have, in effect, created the practice they set out to undermine*. If that is right, then even x-phi lovers should agree that their influence is damaging.

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