

Introduction: Appiah's *Experiments in Ethics*

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Anthony Appiah is a major figure on the philosophical scene, whose work in philosophy of language and (especially) political philosophy has been very influential. Given his status, his new book on experimental and empirical approaches to ethics was bound to attract a great deal of attention. *Experiments in Ethics* deserves and repays the sustained scrutiny to which it has been subjected. In this brief introduction, I will sketch the themes of Appiah's important book, by way of opening the way for the detailed discussion which follows.

Philosophy in the analytic tradition has been revitalized by what we might call the naturalistic turn. This turn toward the sciences has taken two different, though overlapping, forms. Some naturalists are essentially empiricists—attempting to apply the findings of existing science to philosophical problems—whereas, and more recently, some are experimental philosophers, using the methods of science as well as its body of findings to test

philosophical claims.¹ Both kinds of naturalists have challenged common sense certainties, including the certainties of some philosophers. Unsurprisingly, these twin movements have attracted a great deal of controversy within philosophy. Yet as Appiah shows, these movements can be seen as a return to philosophy's roots. Philosophy has traditionally been closely informed by scientific work, and the best philosophers have often engaged in science themselves. It is the era of conceptual analysis divorced from mere empirical engagement that is the aberration, not the turn to the empirical. If philosophy is, as Wilfred Sellars famously put it, the attempt “to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term” it is *required* to engage deeply with the sciences. One positive outcome of Appiah's work, it is to be hoped, is to lower tensions between the traditional and empirically minded camps and encourage more fertile collaborations.

If there is any area in which collaboration seems unlikely, however, it is ethics. Nowhere has the

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¹ I draw the distinction between empirical philosophy—philosophy deeply informed by the sciences—and experimental philosophy—philosophy which uses experimental methods—from Prinz [8].

tension between the two camps been greater. Many traditionalists hold that it is simply a mistake to think that the empirical enterprise, whatever its intrinsic interest, could play a role in informing our normative views. The obstacle commonly cited is the ‘naturalistic fallacy’; the supposed fallacy of moving from purely factual premises to a normative conclusion. If Appiah is to make the case for a far-reaching empirical project in ethics, it seems he must confront the fallacy head on. He does so by attacking the ‘fallacy’ on its own grounds: He constructs a deductive argument moving from nonmoral premises to moral conclusions. He doesn’t, it seems, mean us to take the argument all that seriously: as he says, it ‘has more than a whiff of sophistry about it’ (27). His point is this: though the argument may be sophisticated, it does demonstrate that the claim that moral and nonmoral propositions are categorically different, and the further claim that one cannot be deduced from the other, are from clear, never mind clearly true. We should not be too sure, after Appiah, that we even know what these claims mean. Moreover, as he goes on to show, there are certainly and uncontroversially connections between the normative and the empirical.

All of this is well-taken. Appiah might have added that the open question argument, upon which the naturalistic fallacy is often taken to rest, is itself weak. For any naturalistic property or set of properties, it is supposed to be an open question whether that property or properties is identical to some normative property. A competent speaker can, without making a mistake, wonder whether the two are identical. But the open question argument is sound only if identities have to be a priori, and the identities established by science are a posteriori. A competent speaker may well wonder whether water is H₂O; nevertheless, water *is* H₂O. A posteriori identities are frequently surprising, so the intuitions of competent speakers are neither here nor there.

After these ground clearing remarks in chapter one, Appiah turns to the substance of empirical philosophy. Chapter two deals with the attack on virtue ethics stemming from Gilbert Harman [1] and John Doris [2]. Harman and Doris argue that virtue ethics requires that agents have *virtues*, where a virtue is a stable state of the agent’s character, and which therefore expresses itself across a variety of situations. According to Harman and Doris, the situationist tradition in social

psychology demonstrates that there are no such stable states. Situationism shows (allegedly) that minor situational variants lead to large differences in agent’s behavior. Consider, for instance, the Good Samaritan experiment [3]. In this experiment, Princeton seminarians were asked to give a talk (in one variant, on the parable of the good Samaritan). On the way to the talk, they passed a man—actually a confederate of the investigators—who sat slumped in a doorway, moaning and coughing. The experimenters were interested in whether the seminarians would offer to help the man. They found that one factor was strongly predictive of whether help was offered: whether the subjects were told they needed to hurry to make the talk. The problem this experiment poses for virtue ethicists might be brought out in the following way: we might have thought that it was possible to infer from whether a subject stopped to offer help or not to whether they possessed the relevant virtue (compassion, perhaps). Thus, a helping person would be a virtuous person, while one who walked on by would be a vicious person. But it is not the state of the subject’s character that predicts behavior; it is a seemingly trivial situational factor. Of course, the Good Samaritan study is just one piece of evidence in favor of the situationist view; there are many others, some focusing on helping behavior, some on other behaviors.

Appiah concedes to Doris and Harman that the situationist challenge is strong against a certain way of understanding virtue ethics. The evidence, as Appiah understands it, shows that we do not have cross-situational consistency of behaviour. However, as he shows, it does not follow that it is not possible to cultivate the virtues *in some sense*. Virtues might be finer-grained than has traditionally been understood: they might be dispositions to behave in particular ways in particular situations. Nothing in the situationist challenge shows that there are not virtues, so understood. Indeed, situationism might be thought to require them, to explain the differences that persist across individuals in the same situation. There is, however, another response, which is to insist that virtues as traditionally understood are real; they are simply *rare* [4]. Not everyone hurries by, in the time pressure condition, in the Good Samaritan experiment: 10% of people still stopped to help. These people might be genuinely—cross-situationally—virtuous.

Chapter 3 turns to one of the central projects in (so-called) experimental philosophy: the challeng-

ing of intuitions. Philosophers have frequently relied upon their intuitions to advance arguments. For instance, it is considered a strong objection to a theory of responsibility if I can imagine a circumstance in which an agent satisfied the conditions of that theory but is intuitively not responsible for their actions. As Appiah notes, moral theories are typically required to perform a difficult balancing act with regard to our intuitions. On the one hand, they must systematize common sense morality, and therefore accord with the general run of our intuitions; on the other hand, they are required to be action-guiding, and they can be action-guiding only if they (at least sometimes) challenge our intuitions.

The challenge from experimental philosophy, and from related disciplines, to the reliability of our intuitions comes in a variety of approaches. Some philosophers have attempted to show that intuitions differ with respect to apparently irrelevant factors, such as culture [5], suggesting that these intuitions do not give us insight into the deep nature of concepts, but merely systematize culturally bound responses. Other work aims to demonstrate that one set of intuitions is not rational, because it is driven by emotional regions of the brain [6, 7]. Appiah believes that if we understand intuitions not as deliverances concerning the deep structure of our concepts, but as heuristics, we can defend them against these challenges. Though these heuristics are not infallible, they are reliable in the kinds of circumstances for which they are designed. This is a significant concession to the naturalists, it seems to me, because it suggests that ethics, *as a systematic discipline* is an enterprise in which we cannot engage. If intuitions are all we have in ethics, and intuitions are merely a set of rules of thumb, then it seems likely that ethics will be resistant to thoroughgoing systematization.

In fact, this is a conclusion that Appiah seems to embrace. He thinks that it is only a certain conception of ethics, as a systematic and rule-bound discipline, that is in trouble. In chapter four, Appiah calls for a collaboration between philosophers and scientists in building a new normative discipline. Psychologists and neuroscientists can tell us about the dispositions deeply entrenched in human beings. Further, their work can serve normative purposes. By informing us about the triggers of these dispositions, they provide us with the tools to control them. By informing us about how they

conflict, and how they can be responsive to (intuitively!) irrelevant factors, they can teach us how to improve their functioning. Morality cannot be left just to the philosophers; equally, it cannot be turned over to the scientists since by themselves they cannot tell us which of our dispositions we should act upon when they conflict. Instead, morality requires what Appiah calls double vision, enabling us to pursue a *normative* project deeply informed by empirical science.

Chapter Five ends the book and focuses, appropriately, on the ends of ethics and of life. In this chapter, as well as defending the view that a good life is a flourishing life—and not merely a subjectively happy life—Appiah defends the view implicit in chapters three and four, that morality is messy, and we oughtn't to expect to reduce it to a tractable set of exceptionless rules. The rival view, arguably implicit in mainstream normative ethics, Appiah suggests is the product of two lapses: forgetting that ethics is essentially practical and has its role in addressing genuine problems in life, not in the thought experiments of philosophers, and forgetting that justification in ethics is not an armchair affair, but a social activity. Ethics is a conversation, in which we all—scientists, philosophers, novelists, citizens—participate, and in which none of us has a privileged place. Thus a book aiming to take science seriously ends with a resounding affirmation of humanism.

Experiments in Ethics is a short and lucid book. But its surface clarity hides depths. It covers so much territory so quickly that it would take many essays properly to probe it. The essays that follow begin this process of examining and criticizing Appiah's views in the depths required. I am proud to present them.

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