

## Two Origin Stories for Experimental Philosophy<sup>1</sup>

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Both advocates and critics of experimental philosophy often describe it in narrow terms as being the empirical study of people's *intuitions* about philosophical cases. This conception corresponds with a narrow origin story for the field—it grew out of a dissatisfaction with the uncritical use of philosophers' own intuitions as evidence for philosophical claims. In contrast, a growing number of experimental philosophers have explicitly embraced a broad conception of the sub-discipline, which treats it as simply the use of empirical methods to inform philosophical problems. And this conception has a corresponding broad origin story—the field grew out of a recognition that philosophers often make empirical claims and that empirical claims call for empirical support. In this paper, I argue that the broad conception should be accepted, offering support for the broad origin story.

It is common to see experimental philosophy described as a controversial new movement in philosophy that uses empirical methods from the social sciences to investigate people's *intuitions* about philosophical thought experiments.<sup>2</sup> Often this is expanded to set experimental philosophy against traditional philosophical methodology, with experimental philosophers being taken to conceive of traditional philosophy as relying on the use of philosophers' own intuitions and responding to this practice.<sup>3</sup>

In fact, the CFP for the present special issue of *teorema* on experimental philosophy described the subfield in just this way:

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<sup>1</sup> Forthcoming in a special issue of *teorema* on experimental philosophy. I would like to thank Jonathan Livengood and two anonymous reviewers for *teorema* for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Although I won't discuss it in this paper, one might question just how *new* experimental philosophy is. In fact, the phrase "experimental philosophy" dates back to the early modern period. And depending on how broadly one understands the current iteration of experimental philosophy, it can be brought more closely into alignment with the old experimental philosophy and the long tradition of calling on empirical observations to inform philosophical accounts (although notable differences will remain on any reasonable account). See Anstey and Vanzo (2016) and Sytsma and Livengood (2015) for discussion.

<sup>3</sup> There is a good deal of disagreement in the philosophical literature about just what intuitions are, about how frequently they are appealed to in contemporary philosophy, and about how central they are to philosophical practice. I will set these debates to the side, pretending that it is simply clear what is meant by "intuitions" in these discussions. My focus is instead on how to understand "experimental philosophy." That there are such worries about intuitions, however, lends urgency to the question about experimental philosophy: if experimental philosophy is restricted to the study of philosophically relevant intuitions, then its importance will be directly linked to the importance of intuitions in contemporary philosophy.

Experimental Philosophy is a relatively recent movement that questions the supposedly traditional philosophical methodology... Experimental philosophers... advocate the collection of data through surveys that elicit the intuitive judgments of subjects in order to test the adequacy of theoretical principles or claims.

Statements like this describe experimental philosophy in terms of the use of empirical methods to study philosophical intuitions and offer an origin story for this practice.<sup>4</sup> The story is that experimental philosophy developed as an explicit response to the perceived use (or abuse) of intuitions in contemporary philosophy. While such descriptions are common in the recent metaphilosophical literature, I believe that they are misleading. The primary reason is that not all work that is well-described as work in experimental philosophy is concerned with intuitions. And looking more closely at this work, we can discern an alternative, more general, origin story for experimental philosophy: experimental philosophy emerged from the recognition that philosophers often rely (implicitly or explicitly) on empirical claims, coupled with a commitment to the idea that empirical claims call for empirical support.<sup>5</sup>

Here is how I will proceed. In Section 1, I draw out the first origin story for experimental philosophy—x-phi as response to the use of intuitions in contemporary philosophy—giving examples from the literature. In Section 2, I argue that this view of experimental philosophy is too narrow, and that this narrowness is problematic. Finally, in Section 3, I present an alternative origin story for experimental philosophy that subsumes the first—x-phi as response to the use of unsupported empirical claims in contemporary philosophy—and show that this story also finds support in the literature.

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<sup>4</sup> I intend the use of “origin story” not to give a definitive history of experimental philosophy, but a thematic history highlighting the underlying motivation for the practice.

<sup>5</sup> I will refer to these two commitments jointly as the “methodological naturalist principle.” While a great deal more can, and should, be said about what naturalism and methodological naturalism amount to in philosophy (as a reviewer for *teorema* accurately noted), it is just these basic commitments that I will have in mind in speaking of the naturalist underpinnings of experimental philosophy.

## 1. X-Phi as Response to the Use of Intuitions

It is commonplace for philosophers to describe experimental philosophy in a *narrow* sense that restricts it to the study of philosophically relevant intuitions.<sup>6</sup> To give but a few prominent examples from the early days of x-phi:

This movement is unified behind both a common methodology and a common aim: the application of methods of experimental psychology to the study of the nature of intuitions. (Alexander and Weinberg, 2007, 56)

Experimental philosophy is the name for a recent movement whose participants use the methods of experimental psychology to probe the way people make judgments that bear on debates in philosophy. (Nadelhoffer and Nahmias, 2007, 123)

The phrase “experimental philosophy” refers to a new philosophical movement that proceeds by conducting systematic experimental studies of people’s ordinary intuitions. (Knobe, 2007, 119)

Unlike the philosophers of centuries past, we think that a critical method for figuring out how human beings think is to go out and actually run systematic empirical studies. Hence, experimental philosophers proceed by conducting experimental investigations of the psychological processes underlying people’s intuitions about central philosophical issues. (Knobe and Nichols, 2008, 3)

Or more recently:

In recent years, experimental philosophy has emerged as an exciting new approach to the study of people’s philosophical intuitions. Experimental philosophers apply the methods

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<sup>6</sup> It is not always clear whether an author intends the characterization that they offer of experimental philosophy to serve as a definition that would place (narrow) boundaries around the sub-discipline. As a reviewer noted, many of the examples offered below could reasonably be read as generics intended to capture much, but not all, of the work being done in experimental philosophy. In fact, at least one experimental philosopher has been explicit on this score. While I offer several quotes from Weinberg suggesting a narrow conception of experimental philosophy, in a recent paper he more carefully refers to “the *major branch* of experimental philosophy concerned with using the methods of the cognitive and social sciences to understand the nature and functioning of what I am calling here our human philosophical instruments” (2015, 172, italics added). He continues in Footnote 3: “This is not meant as a *definition* of experimental philosophy, and when pressed to offer one, I am inclined to paint with a much broader brush, something like: recognizing philosophy’s empirical commitments, wherever they may be found, and applying the best methods available for evaluating such commitments, whatever they may be. Obviously much experimental philosophy has been concerned with methodological matters such as the ones addressed here. But I hasten to add that much important recent work under the aegis of x-phi is not of that sort, such as Eric Schwitzgebel’s work on the behavior of professional ethicists, or Stotz and Griffith’s survey work on the gene concept across subdivisions of the biological scientific community, and indeed the most prominent work in experimental philosophy by Joshua Knobe, on the nature of our folk psychological capacities.” This point acknowledged, there is nonetheless a danger in offering narrow characterizations, even if they are not intended as definitions. The danger is that they will be read as definitions and taken to exclude empirical work that does not concern intuitions from experimental philosophy. And I’m afraid that many critical appraisals of experimental philosophy operate on just such a reading.

of the social and cognitive sciences to the study of philosophical cognition since these methods are better suited than introspective methods to the study of what people, especially other people, actually think. (Alexander, 2012, 2)

My own rough understanding of what makes something a work of experimental philosophy is this: it takes surveys of people's judgments about the sorts of thought experiments that occur in the philosophical literature as the basis for some further bit of reasoning. (Chudnoff, 2013, 107)

Experimental philosophers use empirical surveys and experiments to develop an understanding of philosophically relevant intuitions that helps us determine whether we should accept or reject them. (Fischer and Collins, 2015, 4)

Experimental philosophy... conducts experiments about our folk intuitions. Thus, on the basis of these experiments, we can learn about our folk intuitions—and not directly about what these folk intuitions are about. (Nanay, 2015, 226)

Such descriptions fit together with a particular story about the emergence of experimental philosophy—that it emerged as a response to the prevalence of appeals to intuitions in contemporary philosophy.

The relationship is reciprocal. Defining “experimental philosophy” narrowly as the empirical study of philosophically relevant intuitions raises the question of why we should study such intuitions. And the natural response is to note the prevalence of uncritical appeals to intuitions in philosophy more generally, arguing that experimental philosophers believe that the empirical study of intuitions is needed as a corrective to this practice. Going the other direction, thinking of experimental philosophy as arising in response to the prevalence of uncritical appeals to intuitions in philosophy promotes defining the sub-discipline in terms of the empirical study of intuitions.

This origin story is often rather clear in discussions of experimental philosophy operating on a narrow definition of the practice. For example, such a story is given to set-up the definition from Alexander and Weinberg (2007, 56) quoted above:

It has been standard philosophical practice in analytic philosophy to employ intuitions generated in response to thought-experiments as evidence in the evaluation of philosophical claims. In part as a response to this practice, an exciting new movement—experimental philosophy—has recently emerged.

A similar account sets up the passage from Alexander (2012). Thus, his volume opens by noting the importance of intuitions to contemporary philosophy:

We ask philosophical intuitions—*what we would say or how things seem to us to be*—to do a lot of work for us. We advance philosophical theories on the basis of their ability to explain our philosophical intuitions, defend their truth on the basis of their overall agreement with our philosophical intuitions, and justify our philosophical beliefs on the basis of their accordance with our philosophical intuitions. This may not be all that we do and maybe not all of us do it. But enough of us do it, and often enough, that this way of thinking about philosophy has come, at least in certain circles, to be *the* way to think about philosophy. (1)

Alexander then argues that while philosophers have traditionally explored intuitions via introspection, assuming that their intuitions are representative of the wider population, this assumption is problematic. The upshot is that “a better approach is needed” (2), and that better approach is experimental philosophy. The causal link is clear: Alexander asserts both that experimental philosophy “grows out of” (11) and “emerges from” (27) this way of thinking about philosophy.

Of course, Alexander is not alone in this assessment of the rise of experimental philosophy. For example, a similar origin story is given in explicit terms in a recent paper by Weinberg (2016). He discusses the “intellectual genealogy of experimental philosophy,” associating it with “a strong (if minority) current within philosophy of dissatisfaction with intuitive methods” (74). Weinberg summarizes that experimental philosophy “initially took root in an awareness within some corners of philosophy that our intuition-based methods may well be more susceptible to error than had been previously thought, and in particular, susceptible to errors that might be difficult or even impossible to detect and root out from within the armchair”

(74). And, at a first pass, this account fits with what we find in some foundational early papers in experimental philosophy.

In what is arguably the first paper in the current iteration of experimental philosophy, Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich (2001, 429) argue that “a sizable group of epistemological projects... would be seriously undermined if one or more of a cluster of empirical hypotheses about epistemic intuitions turns out to be true,” including that epistemic intuitions vary from culture to culture. They then present new empirical evidence in support of some of these hypotheses. Most importantly for present purposes, Weinberg and colleagues indicate that they were inspired in this project by a consideration put forward in Stich’s book *The Fragmentation of Reason*:

What Stich noted is that the following situation seems perfectly possible. There might be a group of people who reason and form beliefs in ways that are significantly different from the way we do. Moreover, these people might also have epistemic intuitions that are significantly different from ours. (435)

This was then bolstered by the work of Nisbett and colleagues (e.g., Nisbett et al., 2001) suggesting that there are systematic differences in thinking style between Westerners and East Asians, including differences that are plausibly relevant to epistemic intuitions.

The work of Nisbett and colleagues led Weinberg and colleagues to suspect that the situation described by Stich was not only possible, but actual, and to hypothesize that they would find cultural differences between Westerners and East Asians in response to thought experiments from the analytic epistemology literature. Similar considerations are found in other foundational papers in experimental philosophy, such as the work of Machery, Mallon, Nichols, and Stich (2004) on intuitions about reference, which also takes motivation from the findings of Nisbett and colleagues. Specifically, Machery and colleagues frame their argument in terms of testing an empirical assumption found in work on reference, noting that philosophers working in this area

seem to “take their own intuitions regarding the referents of terms, and those of their philosophical colleagues, to be universal” (B8)—an assumption that empirical work in cultural psychology calls into doubt.

Given such examples, it is not surprising that when Swain, Alexander, and Weinberg (2008) follow-up on the work of Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich (2001), they take themselves to be contributing to experimental philosophy and describe it in a narrow sense:

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. (140)

While this account of the origin of experimental philosophy emphasizes that it arose as a *challenge* to the prevalent use of intuitions in contemporary philosophy, it is also generally recognized that it was not long before a divide emerged between those with a more *negative* attitude toward appeals to intuitions and those with a more *positive* attitude. Thus, Weinberg (2016, 71) writes:

Some of the earliest meta-level writings on x-phi offered distinctions between a methodologically critical dimension of experimental philosophy, which has since become known as the negative program, and a range of positive programs aiming to derive support for specific philosophical theses from their experimental results, and I believe that this distinction has entered the conception of the movement in the profession at large. Relatedly, we can see the steadily growing ranks of philosophers who synthesize both x-phi methods and traditional methods in their researches.

A corresponding sentiment is found in Alexander (2012, 2) who notes that “experimental philosophy can both complement more traditional approaches to philosophical questions and help identify ways in which this approach should be reformed.” Similarly, in their recent discussion of “Armchair-Friendly Experimental Philosophy,” Mortensen and Nagel (2016, 53) recognize that “the relationship between experimental and traditional philosophy is often seen as hostile,” but assert that “experimental philosophy at its best is friendly to traditional philosophy.”

This type of neutrality between experimental philosophy and traditional philosophy is written into the account of the emergence of experimental philosophy given by Fischer and Collins (2015). As we saw above, they describe experimental philosophy in narrow terms. In fact, Fischer and Collins hold that experimental philosophy “builds on the assumption that, for better or worse, intuitions are crucially involved in philosophical work” (3), with the parenthetical serving to emphasize that one could pursue experimental philosophy from either a negative or a positive perspective. Experimental philosophy’s connection to the assumption that intuitions are central to contemporary philosophy is then drawn out by offering a thematic description of the development of analytic philosophy.

Fischer and Collins think of philosophical themes in analogy to musical themes (7). The idea is that a theme provides coherence to an array of philosophical practice while also allowing variation in how it is carried out, and allowing that not all work will fall under the theme: “In a nutshell, a theme serves a philosophical community not so much by giving an accurate description of its activities as by forging the community and providing a launch pad for fresh specific approaches.” (8-9). Fischer and Collins discuss two primary themes in the history of analytic philosophy, with the original theme (A) being replaced by a new theme (N) that captures “the common denominator of Canberra-style analysis, modal rationalism, and the use of thought experiments in philosophy more broadly” (11):

(A) We resolve philosophical problems through conceptual analysis that crucially includes linguistic analysis (but no psychological research). (7)

(N) Philosophers elicit, invoke, assess, and synthesize intuitions. (11)

The new theme places intuitions at the center of philosophical practice. And Fischer and Collins see experimental philosophy as eventually emerging as a subtheme to the new theme:



(E) Experimental philosophers employ findings and methods from the social sciences, crucially including psychology, to elicit, explain, and assess philosophically relevant intuitions. (20)

This progression suggests the origin story I have been discussing, with experimental philosophy emerging from the focus on intuitions in philosophy under (N). It should be noted, however, that unlike the previous illustrations, Fischer and Collins do not treat experimental philosophy as emerging as a *challenge* to traditional philosophy.

Fischer and Collins's neutral portrayal of experimental philosophy corresponds with the point noted above that one can bring empirical methods to bear on intuitions from either a positive or a negative perspective. Recognizing this, they argue that "experimental philosophy is not a party to the dispute between methodological rationalism and naturalism, but offers a new framework for settling it" (23). Fischer and Collins write that methodological rationalists "draw upon intuition or pure reflection alone, and so hold out the promise of an autonomous philosophy that seeks no warrant or guidance from empirical inquiry"; in contrast, methodological naturalists "explore different ways of addressing philosophical problems by drawing on a posteriori methods and findings from science" (3). The idea is then that experimental philosophy is neutral with regard to this debate because empirical methods could be employed with the hope of showing that "philosophers do not need to consider intuitions other than their own to gain insight into folk concepts" (23).

A pair of related worries arise at this point, however. Insofar as empirical methods were needed to pave the way for the subsequent use of intuition, it seems that the methodological naturalist has abandoned the "promise of an autonomous philosophy that seeks no warrant or guidance from empirical philosophy." And insofar as experimental philosophers are "drawing on a posteriori methods and findings from science"—even if it is ultimately to vindicate the

representativeness or reliability of philosophers' own intuitions—they would seem to be embracing methodological naturalism.

Overall, it seems that something has gone wrong in ending up with a characterization of experimental philosophy on which it is so easily disconnected from the methodological naturalist principle noted above. And I suspect that this wrong-turn is connected to the adoption of a narrow conception of experimental philosophy. For once we focus just on the study of intuitions, it is clear that one could employ empirical methods with aims that were either critical or supportive of appeals to intuitions in philosophy. The result is that experimental philosophy itself is neutral with regard to this bit of disputed territory between methodological rationalists and naturalists. But this is to lose the war by focusing on the battle, since the experimental philosopher is nonetheless embracing methodological naturalism by bringing empirical methods to bear on a philosophical problem. I take this to give us reason to reconsider the narrow conception of experimental philosophy.

## **2. The Broad Conception**

While it is common for discussions of experimental philosophy to operate with a narrow definition, a growing number of experimental philosophers have either argued for or explicitly endorsed a broad conception of experimental philosophy that removes this restriction (Sytsma and Machery, 2013; Rose and Danks, 2013; O'Neill and Machery, 2014; Schupbach, 2015; Sytsma and Livengood, 2015; Weinberg, 2015; Buckwalter and Sytsma, 2016; Stich and Tobia, 2016).<sup>7</sup> For example, in Buckwalter and Sytsma (2016, 1) we open with the following description:

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<sup>7</sup> And some critics have taken notice, recognizing that their criticisms do not apply to the whole of experimental philosophy on a broad conception—a point that has been urged by Rose and Danks (2013) and Sytsma and

Experimental philosophy is a way of doing philosophy. The basic idea is to use empirical methods and techniques associated with the sciences to help investigate philosophical questions. This is a very broad and inclusive definition of experimental philosophy. While it has been defined in various ways, often more narrow in scope, the guiding notion behind experimental philosophy is that observation and experimentation are tools that can be used to conduct philosophical inquiry.

In support of this type of broad conception of experimental philosophy, it has been noted that some practitioners have defined the practice in this way and that the narrow conception would exclude some work that they believe either is, or should be, part of the corpus. I think that there is a stronger reason for advocating a broad conception of experimental philosophy, however, that is suggested by these discussions, including the above passage: the broad conception recognizes that experimental philosophy is guided by the methodological naturalist belief that empirical evidence is often relevant to philosophical inquiry.

In our brief discussion in Sytsma and Machery (2013), we offer a broad account of experimental philosophy on which it “involves using scientific methods to collect empirical data for the purpose of casting light on philosophical issues” (318). This was contrasted with narrow definitions that restrict the practice to the study of intuitions. We suggested that such definitions are too narrow, as they exclude work that we considered to be a clear part of the experimental philosophy literature, such as Eric Schwitzgebel’s work on whether philosophical training in ethics promotes moral behavior (Schwitzgebel, 2009; Schwitzgebel and Rust, 2009, 2010, 2016; Schwitzgebel et al., 2011). A similar point is raised by O’Neill and Machery (2014, xxii).

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Livengood (2015, Chapter 4). For example, Timothy Williamson (2016, 22) writes: “The phrase ‘experimental philosophy’ can mean many things. In a broad sense, it covers any experimental inquiry with a philosophical purpose.... On that reading, few philosophers today object to experimental philosophy as such.... A few diehard Wittgensteinians may still claim that no outcome of scientific experimentation is of special relevance to philosophy, whose role they confine to dissolving conceptual confusions. This chapter assumes that philosophy is a theoretical discipline with more constructive ambitions than that.” See Sytsma (2010) and Sytsma and Livengood (2012) for discussion of one such Wittgensteinian project.

Sytsma and Livengood (2015, Section 3.1) offer an extended discussion of a number of examples that we consider to be part of the experimental philosophy corpus, but that do not clearly involve the investigation of intuitions—from Schwitzgebel’s work on ethics and moral behavior, to Nichols’s (2002) work on the genealogy of norms and his (2007) use of quantitative methods to investigate positions on free will amongst philosophers in the early modern period, to Byron’s (2007) use of bibliometric data to challenge the claim that philosophy of science neglected biology in the early part of the previous century, to Reuter’s (2011) linguistic corpora studies on pain expressions, to Livengood et al.’s (2010) work on philosophical training and cognitive reflectivity, to Paxton et al.’s (2012) work on the underrepresentation of women in philosophy, to Angner et al.’s (2011) work on John Henryism and happiness, to Nadelhoffer et al.’s (2013) work on folk retributivism looking at how people behave in a simple economic game. And many more examples could be given. We argue that such work is part of the experimental philosophy literature, and as a such that accounts that restrict the practice to the study of intuitions are too narrow.<sup>8</sup>

Rose and Danks (2013) offer a similar reason for adopting a broad conception of experimental philosophy. They argue that “there is no clear reason to focus on intuitions to the exclusion of other types of philosophically relevant cognitive data” (514) and illustrate this via recent work on cognitive representations of causal structure. The broad conception of experimental philosophy that Rose and Danks offer is somewhat different than the one given above, however. They define it as “simply the collocation in the same body of (i) philosophical

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<sup>8</sup> A reviewer for *teorema* pointed out that some of the examples offered here do not involve experiments strictly speaking, such that “experimental philosophy” would appear to be a bit of a misnomer on the broad conception. I believe that this is correct, but would add that if “experimental” is taken in a technical sense, then it is a misnomer whether one adopts a broad or a narrow conception. Thus, many studies concerning intuitions in the literature do not involve true experiments but quasi-experiments (e.g., Machery et al., 2004) or descriptive studies (e.g., Murray, Sytsma, and Livengood, 2013). See Sytsma and Livengood (2015, Chapters 5 and 7) for discussion, including an articulation of this terminology and how it applies to these examples.

naturalism and (ii) standard, everyday cognitive science” (512). While this draws attention to the connection between experimental philosophy and naturalism, it might be urged that the restriction to cognitive science—while broader than the restriction to the study of intuitions—is still too narrow. One reason is that it would arguably exclude much of the work discussed in the previous paragraph. Rose and Danks note this type of worry, however, and write that their “conception of experimental philosophy could be applied more broadly... to include ‘experimental philosophy of biology,’ ‘experimental philosophy of physics,’ or even, as he has pointed out to us, the recent experimental work by Schwitzgebel on the external world as a form of ‘experimental philosophy of cosmology’” (515). Allowing a suitably broad expansion here, their definition falls in line with the one offered above.

It is worth noting that Rose and Danks aren’t the only ones to treat experimental philosophy as a subset of cognitive science. In a recent paper, Knobe (2016) argues for the provocative claim that “Experimental Philosophy is Cognitive Science.” His basic concern is that much of the actual work that has been done in experimental philosophy does not readily fit with the descriptions given of either the negative or positive programs, and to support this he presents the results of a quantitative analysis of papers in experimental philosophy between 2009 and 2014. He found that only a small fraction fell under one of these programs (1.3% and 10.4% respectively). Despite this, Knobe suggests a narrow conception of experimental philosophy, writing that “experimental philosophers clearly do study something about people’s intuitions” (41).<sup>9</sup> His very own study suggests against such a restriction, however. After all, Knobe’s study of what experimental philosophers do is not a study of people’s intuitions. Despite this, I think it

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<sup>9</sup> Again, this passage can be reasonably read not as offering a restrictive definition, but as characterizing much of what goes on in experimental philosophy. That said, I believe that the worry expressed in Footnote 5 holds here as well.

would be very strange to exclude it from the corpus. One reason is that this study would seem to be motivated by the same basic commitment as his other work in experimental philosophy—what experimental philosophers do is an empirical question, and empirical questions should be investigated using empirical means.

In Sytsma and Livengood (2015) we follow a similar tack, noting that how philosophers understand “experimental philosophy” is an empirical question that can best be answered by employing empirical methods. We begin by noting that some canonical sources describe experimental philosophy in a way that fits with a broad conception, while others describe it in a way that fits with a narrow conception.<sup>10</sup> While we find some support for a broad conception in the literature, it is far from univocal; further, one might worry that we did not survey these sources in a systematic fashion and that they may not be representative of the views of experimental philosophers or philosophers more generally.

To help address such concerns, we conducted an empirical study. We collected responses from 370 philosophers to a range of questions concerning their views of experimental philosophy, including questions that aimed to assess whether they adopt a broad or a narrow conception of the sub-discipline. We assessed this in two ways. First, we asked participants to assess the following claim on a seven-point scale ranging from “1. very strongly disagree” to “7. very strongly agree”:

In order for a paper to count as a paper in experimental philosophy, the author(s) must make use of empirical data on the intuitions of some group of people.

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<sup>10</sup> Rose and Danks (2013, 514-515) offer a similar reason for resisting the narrow conception, noting that “some of the explicit ‘definitions’ of experimental philosophy clearly take a broader view” and taking this to indicate that the narrow conception “does not seem to capture much of the actual practice.”

We found that self-identified experimental philosophers tended to disagree with this claim (mean of 3.24, median of 3), while non-experimental philosophers tended to neither agree nor disagree with it (mean of 3.88, median of 4).

Second, we gave participants a series of short descriptions of empirical work and asked them whether they considered it to be an example of experimental philosophy. One of these cases was based on Schwitzgebel (2009) discussed above:

The investigator wants to know whether explicit cognition about morality promotes moral behavior. The investigator proceeds by comparing the rate at which ethics and non-ethics philosophy books go missing from academic libraries. The investigator consults library records at 32 libraries in the United States and the United Kingdom to determine the percentages of books in each category that are missing from the libraries. The percentages are then compared.

We found that most of the self-identified experimental philosophers classified this as an example of experimental philosophy (67.8%), despite it not involving the study of intuitions, while just under half of the non-experimental philosophers (46.0%) classified it as experimental philosophy.

Based on these findings, we concluded that although there is disagreement amongst philosophers about whether “experimental philosophy” should be understood broadly or narrowly, it was *reasonable* to adopt a broad definition (18). While we drew a cautious conclusion from our study, we also provided reason to believe that philosophers *should* adopt a broad conception, noting that it brings an important observation to the foreground: “philosophers can fruitfully employ empirical methods in attempting to answer philosophical questions and solve philosophical problems, and they have frequently done so” (5). Similar points have been raised by other experimental philosophers who adopt a broad conception. For example, Rose and Danks (2013, 515) argue that “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.” Likewise Schupbach (2015, 1) writes:

“Experimental philosophy” calls for a renewed focus on empirical methods in the pursuit of philosophical insight. According to experimental philosophers, philosophical positions and arguments often involve empirical commitments. When they do, we can make progress by testing those commitments with empirical studies.

In a similar vein, O’Neill and Machery (2014, xx) note that “naturalists have often expressed reservations about experimental philosophy,” and chalk this up to their holding a narrow conception of the sub-discipline. But adopting a broad view, this tension looks puzzling, and O’Neill and Machery propose that “to fulfill their goals, empirical philosophers should often turn themselves into experimental philosophers” (xxv).

Pulling these insights together, experimental philosophy should be understood on a broad conception because the same principle that motivates the empirical study of intuitions—including from either a negative or a positive perspective—motivates the use of empirical methods in philosophy more generally. The underlying reason that experimental philosophers working within the negative and the positive programs have investigated intuitions is that they find the use of intuitions in contemporary philosophy to involve empirical assumptions that can, and should, be investigated empirically. But this naturalist principle doesn’t just apply to the use of intuitions. And the broad conception recognizes this, offering a more coherent and natural articulation of the sub-discipline.

### **3. X-phi as Response to the Use of Unsupported Empirical Claims**

I have argued that experimental philosophy should be understood on a broad conception that does not restrict it to the study of intuitions. It might be objected, however, that such a conception does not respect the origins of the sub-discipline: while empirical methods can be



applied more broadly, experimental philosophy came about in response to the prevalent use of intuitions in contemporary philosophy, with the community developing around this focus, and this history justifies a narrow conception. In other words, the origin story for experimental philosophy that I detailed in Section 1 might be thought to provide reason to adopt a narrow conception of experimental philosophy.

While I am generally sympathetic to the relevance of historical development in addressing questions about disciplinary boundaries, I do not think that this response holds up in this case. The reason is that it is not clear that the rise of experimental philosophy is best understood in terms of the origin story detailed above. Rather, I find that that origin story is simply one aspect of a wider story on which the experimental turn in philosophy was motivated by the methodological naturalist principle noted above—that is by the twin beliefs that empirical assumptions, both implicit and explicit, are common in philosophy and that empirical assumptions call for empirical testing.

In 2007 I took a grad seminar on experimental philosophy from Edouard Machery. I believe that this is either the first, or one of the first, classes offered on the subject. At that time, the corpus was small, and it was joked that we read pretty much the entirety of it over the course of the semester. This included two papers noted above—a draft of what would become Schwitzgebel (2009) and Byron (2007)—that do not concern the study of intuitions. Not surprisingly, the sense of the sub-discipline that I formed from this class coheres with the broad conception and the naturalist motivation noted above. Of course, my impressions hardly serve to establish the reasons behind the rise of experimental philosophy. It does indicate one view from the inside, however, that occurred relatively early on and that was directed by a prominent “first-generation” experimental philosopher. Furthermore, many of the figures associated with rise of experimental

philosophy that I've discussed or quoted in this essay—people like Machery, Stich, Nichols, Knobe, Nadelhoffer, Nahmias, and Schwitzgebel—have conducted studies that do not directly concern the study of intuitions.<sup>11</sup> One explanation for this striking fact is that their empirical work, including their work investigating intuitions, is motivated by a more general naturalist bent.

Recall the discussion of Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich (2001) in Section 1. They point to an argument put forward by Stich (1990) as inspiration for their project. I'll argue that Stich is best read, however, as having more general naturalist leanings, just one aspect of which is a concern with the uncritical use of intuitions in contemporary philosophy. Before turning to a more careful look at Stich (1990), consider that in a couple of recent papers he has endorsed a broad conception of experimental philosophy:

Experimental philosophy is empirical work undertaken with the goal of contributing to a philosophical debate, though of course that may not be the only goal... Philosophically motivated ethnography, like Richard Brandt's pioneering study of Hopi ethics, certainly counts as experimental philosophy, on my interpretation of the term (Brandt 1954). Indeed, though I am sometimes described as one of the pioneers of the experimental philosophy movement—or, more ominously, as “the Godfather”—I think Brandt was the real pioneer of contemporary experimental philosophy. (2015, 21; see also Stich and Tobia, 2016)

Of course, Brandt's work is not obviously concerned with the study of intuitions—and certainly not *merely* with the study of intuitions. Further, I think it is safe to say that Brandt was a general influence on Stich, helping to inspire a concern for the frequency with which philosophers have put forward empirical claims sans empirical support. For instance, Doris and Stich (2005, 129) both commend Brandt's “[pioneering] effort to integrate ethical theory and the social sciences” (129) and urge a general methodological naturalism in moral philosophy.

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<sup>11</sup> I've cited such work from Machery, Nichols, Knobe, Nadelhoffer, and Schwitzgebel in Section 2, and there are no doubt a number of additional examples that could be given. With regard to Nahmias, for instance, see his recent work with Thompson, Adleberg, and Sims on why women leave philosophy (Thompson et al., 2016). And I am currently completing a longitudinal study on the cognitive effects of philosophical training with Stich that extends on the work by Livengood et al. (2010).

A similar naturalist ethos is evident in Stich (1990). In that book, Stich begins with a bit of intellectual autobiography with regard to how he came to the various themes that he explored. While this includes worries about the use of intuitions about thought experiments, what is more evident is a general worry about the implications of recent empirical findings concerning human cognition for a number of philosophical theses, including “certain aspects of Donald Davidson’s much-discussed theories in the philosophy of language and with some kindred ideas in the philosophy of mind developed by Daniel Dennett” (11), as well as Goodman’s account of inferential justification. With regard to the latter Stich notes that “the Goodmanian approach tacitly presupposes a number of empirical theses, and each of these stands in some serious risk of turning out to be false” (18).

This naturalist sentiment is echoed in the concluding remark on the origins of the themes Stich would be exploring:

There is a long tradition in epistemology which would reject out of hand any proposal that makes epistemological questions dependent on empirical findings or technological developments. But that is a tradition which I, in the company of a growing number of philosophers, take to be sterile and moribund. Another, younger tradition in epistemology, tracing to James and Dewey, finds nothing untoward in the suggestion that epistemology is inseparable from science and technology. (28)

Such thoughts are clearly in accord with the methodological naturalist principle that I have argued motivates experimental philosophy and that is best captured by the broad conception of the sub-discipline. And it is in this context that Stich puts forward the consideration that Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich (2001) take inspiration from. As such, I think it is reasonable to read this work not as vindicating the origin story for experimental philosophy laid out in Section 1, but as falling under the wider origin story in which x-phi is seen as a response to the general use of unsupported empirical claims in contemporary philosophy, not just the uncritical use of intuitions.

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