EXPERIMENTAL PHILOSOPHY AND PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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Abstract. Experimental Philosophy is a new and controversial movement that challenges some of the central findings within analytic philosophy by marshalling empirical evidence. The purpose of this short paper is twofold: (i) to introduce some of the work done in experimental philosophy concerning issues in philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, and metaphysics and (ii) to connect this work with several debates within the philosophy of religion. The provisional conclusion is that philosophers of religion must critically engage experimental philosophy.

EXPERIMENTAL PHILOSOPHY

Experimental Philosophy (EP) is an emerging movement within the domain of philosophy that makes use of empirical data to inform philosophical research. As evidenced by their liberal use of surveys to probe the pre-philosophical intuitions of 'the folk', practitioners of EP (experimentalists) are fond of gathering empirical data via the tools of psychology and the social sciences. These findings are then used in a variety of ways: (i) analyzing concepts, (ii) assessing philosophical arguments with empirical premises, (iii) developing debunking arguments, and (iv) exposing biases that influence philosophical practice (Machery & O'Neill, 2014). In particular, experimental work involving (i) and (iv) has been used to undermine a number of key claims that are fundamental to several central areas of contemporary analytic philosophy.

EP is widely seen to cut against the grain of 'traditional' philosophical methodology, sometimes referred to as 'armchair' philosophy, which, some argue, relies almost exclusively on *a priori* justification. Given its controversial nature and given the fact that it is relatively new (not more than two dec-

ades), it is unsurprising that there is still widespread disagreement concerning the relative merits of EP. The still nascent findings of EP are being critically examined (refined by some and rejected by others) and the jury is still out. Nevertheless, the preliminary results are intriguing and, in my opinion, must be taken seriously. They raise important questions and pose legitimate challenges to long held assumptions.

Cast in another light, however, EP may not be as controversial as many might think. Even those who (many would agree) are staunch defenders of *a priori* methodology have implicitly endorsed something very much like EP. Here, for example, is Frank Jackson:

> I am sometimes asked… why, if conceptual analysis is concerned to elucidate what governs our classificatory practice, don't I advocate doing *serious opinion polls* on people's responses to various cases? My answer is that I do — when it is necessary. Everyone who presents the Gettier cases to a class of students is doing their own bit of fieldwork, and we all know the answer they get in the vast majority of cases. But it is also true that often we know that *our own case is typical* and so can generalize from it to others. (Jackson, 1998, 36-7)

I want to emphasize two things here. First, Jackson straightforwardly concedes that opinion polls (like the ones run by experimentalists) may be necessary for the project of conceptual analysis. Second, he claims that such polls are usually *un*necessary since we *often* know that our own intuitions are typical and can be generalized. Experimentalists would, I believe, wholeheartedly agree with the basic sentiment of Jackson's first point. However, by plunging into Jackson's recommended opinion polls, they have (perhaps) surprisingly found that the second point may legitimately be challenged — what many philosophers have taken to be typical may not actually be so.

PHENOMENAL CONSCIOUSNESS

To see this, consider a recent study that cuts at the heart of a heated debate that is central to contemporary philosophy of mind — the nature of consciousness. In this debate the concept of *phenomenal* consciousness, made famous over the past several decades by a number of prominent philosophers,[1]

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1   See (Chalmers, 1996), (Jackson, 1982), (Kripke, 1982), and (Nagel, 1974).

has been used to adjudicate debates over the truth or falsity of physicalism. What's importantly claimed about this concept (explicitly and implicitly) is that it can readily be found amongst the variety of concepts that are available to *any* ordinary person. It is a natural way for the folk to categorize certain conscious experiences. Moreover, it is the easily accessible nature of this "central and manifest aspect of our mental lives" (Chalmers, 1996, 207) that provides the rhetorical force behind many of the arguments raised against physicalism.

But is it really the case that the folk carve up the world according to the concept of phenomenal consciousness so cherished by philosophers? More specifically, do the folk categorize mental states like 'seeing red' (made famous by Frank Jackson in the 'Mary' thought experiment (Jackson, 1982)) and 'feeling pain' as both falling under the concept of phenomenal consciousness? Interested in answering these (and other allied) questions, Justin Sytsma and Edouard Machery conducted a variety of surveys to study the folk concepts of subjective experience. In one study Sytsma and Machery probed participants concerning simple robots with the working assumption that participants would, if they shared the concept of phenomenal consciousness prized by philosophers, "treat perception analogously to bodily sensations, tending to deny both to a simple robot" (Sytsma & Machery, 2010, 309). That is, they assumed that participants would deny that simple robots have states like 'seeing red' or 'feeling pain' because these kinds of states are *phenomenally* conscious states and simple robots don't have phenomenally conscious states.

Participants were divided into two groups: philosophers (those with undergraduate or graduate level training in philosophy) and non-philosophers. They randomly received one of four possible vignettes describing an agent and these vignettes were varied along two different dimensions. In half the vignettes the agent was a simple robot (Jimmy) while in the other half the agent was a normal human (Timmy). Moreover, in half of the vignettes the participants were asked if the agent (Jimmy or Timmy) 'saw red' (on a 7-point scale where 1 is 'clearly no', 4 is 'not sure', and 7 is 'clearly yes') while in the other half of the participants were asked if the agent 'felt pain'.

Here are two of the simple robot vignettes used in their study:

> Jimmy is a relatively simple robot built at a state university. He has a video camera for eyes, wheels for moving about, and two grasping arms with touch

sensors that he can move objects with. As part of a psychological experiment, he was put in a room that was empty except for one blue box, one red box, and one green box (the boxes were identical in all respects except color). An instruction was then transmitted to Jimmy. It read: Put the red box in front of the door. Jimmy did this with no noticeable difficulty. Did Jimmy see red?

Jimmy is a relatively simple robot built at a state university. He has a video camera for eyes, wheels for moving about, and two grasping arms with touch sensors that he can move objects with. As part of a psychological experiment, he was put in a room that was empty except for one blue box, one red box, and one green box (the boxes were identical in all respects except color). An instruction was then transmitted to Jimmy. It read: Put the red box in front of the door. When Jimmy grasped the red box, however, it gave him a strong electric shock. He let go of the box and moved away from it. He did not try to move the box again. Did Jimmy feel pain when he was shocked?

The remaining two vignettes were identical except all instances of 'Jimmy' were replaced with 'Timmy' — the ordinary human.

So how did the participants fare? As expected philosophers treated feeling pain and seeing red in a uniform manner. They were *un*willing to ascribe either state to the robot and were willing to ascribe both states to the human. Contrary to expectation, however, non-philosophers did not treat the states in a uniform manner. They were willing to ascribe the state of seeing red to the robot but not the state of feeling pain. Aside from the question of whether or not simple robots like Jimmy really have the relevant mental states, it's interesting that folk and philosophical attributions diverge. This, according to Sytsma and Machery, suggests that the "philosopher's concept of phenomenal consciousness is *not* how the folk understand subjective experience." (Sytsma & Machery, 2010, 312)

I realize, of course, that there are a number of issues that can be raised about the effectiveness of the surveys and whether any conclusions (as strong as Sytsma and Machery's conclusions) regarding the folk concept of subjective experience can be drawn from such studies. Needless to say, the surveys have been critiqued and refined and have pushed the debate forward in various ways. The results are interesting nonetheless and Sytsma and Machery raise a legitimate challenge. Perhaps there is no folk concept of *phenomenal* consciousness that coincides with that of the philosophers. If this were the

case it seems the rhetorical force behind some of the best anti-physicalist arguments based on the nature of consciousness would be undermined.

What is, perhaps, more interesting for my present purposes is what Sytsma and Machery went on to probe in their study. Sytsma and Machery also asked participants how they thought *other* ordinary people would answer the questions embedded in the vignettes. While philosophers and non-philosophers alike were good at predicting how the folk would answer questions regarding Timmy's seeing red, Timmy's feeling pain, and Jimmy's feeling pain, philosophers were noticeably worse than non-philosophers at predicting how others would answer the question regarding Jimmy's seeing red. Philosophers mistakenly thought others would not ascribe seeing red to Jimmy. Consequently, Sytsma and Machery conclude, "in contrast to philosophers, non-philosophers' evaluation of whether ordinary people will ascribe seeing red to the robot is well calibrated." (Sytsma & Machery, 2010, 314)

To return to the second claim I earlier emphasized regarding Jackson's comments about conceptual analysis, it seems that Sytsma and Machery's probes demonstrate that it is not obvious that what is deemed 'typical' by philosophers is actually so. The responses of the philosophers who participated in Sytsma and Machery's studies clearly run counter to this sentiment. Of course, Jackson may argue that this is a rare exception in which philosophical intuition is not well-calibrated in picking out whether an intuition is typical or not. But this is difficult to defend given the growing body of results that challenges this claim. Moreover, even if we granted that only a very limited number of philosophical intuitions were not well-calibrated with regard to what is typical it seems we must grant that experimental work, at least in *this* area of philosophy of mind, would benefit those engaged in the relevant debates.

PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

So there is a case to be made for taking experimental philosophy seriously, at least in some domains. But what does phenomenal consciousness have to do with philosophy of religion? One might be tempted to think, for whatever reason, that philosophy of religion is immune to EP in a way that philosophy of mind, for example, is not. This, I think, would be a mistake. I hope it's fairly obvious how the deliverances of EP, like my abbreviated introduction to Syts-

ma and Machery's work, can impact various issues in philosophy of religion. Consider the so-called Argument from Consciousness (for the existence of God) recently developed and refined by J.P. Moreland.

In a number of places (Moreland 1998, 2008), he has argued that reflection on the nature of phenomenal consciousness can give rise to an argument for the existence of God. His argument can be regimented as follows:

1. Genuinely nonphysical mental states exist.

2. There is an explanation for the existence of mental states.

3. Personal explanation is different from natural scientific explanation.

4. The explanation for the existence of mental states is either personal or natural scientific.

5. The explanation is not natural scientific.

6. Therefore, the explanation is personal.

7. If the explanation is personal, then it is theistic.

8. Therefore, the explanation is theistic.

There is much to be said about this interesting argument, but two premises in particular are relevantly implicated by Sytsma and Machery's experimental work regarding the nature of consciousness.

Premise (1) is at the heart of the central debate in philosophy of mind just discussed — the nature of consciousness. Many working in this area of philosophy are physicalists (Papineau, 2002) and they reject (1). Premise (5) and the possibility of offering a physical explanation of consciousness is also deeply intertwined with this debate (Levine, 2001). What matters is that the plausibility of these premises could potentially be undermined by Sytsma and Machery's experimental work.

How have philosophers defended premise (1)? Take, again, Frank Jackson's famous argument against physicalism based on Mary (Jackson, 1982). Mary is a color vision scientist locked in a black and white room who knows

all the physical facts about color vision but has not, herself, had any color experiences. The success of this argument, many believe, hinges on a crucial claim — the claim that Mary learns a new fact when leaving the black and white room. She learns what it is like to see colors. If she indeed learns a new fact, despite having already known all the physical facts, then physicalism is false. But why think she learns a new fact? Here's Jackson:

> What will happen when Mary is released from her black and white room or is given a color television monitor? Will she learn anything or not? *It seems just obvious* that she will learn something about the world and our visual experience of it. (Jackson, 1982, 130)

His evidence for this critical claim is that 'it seems just obvious.' One reasonable interpretation of this sentiment is that Mary's learning something new accords with common sense — what any ordinary person (that is, 'the folk') would be willing to accept. On this reading of Jackson, we can see that folk intuitions are absolutely fundamental to the success of his argument. What EP attempts to uncover is whether or not the claim that Mary learns a new fact is really a matter of common sense.

Returning to Moreland's first premise, we can legitimately ask about the kind of evidence that is being marshalled in defense of this claim. Because the evidence for (1) is arguably grounded in common sense, getting at folk intuitions becomes exceedingly important. But if the force behind (1) is derived, by and large, by the *philosophical* conception of phenomenal consciousness and its seeming *in*applicability to certain physical objects like brains, a finding that suggested the folk do not even have a concept of phenomenal consciousness could be devastating. Consequently, it would not be a matter of common sense that (1) is true.

Similarly, in defending (5) Moreland argues that the mind-brain correlation is 'radically contingent.' But is the correlation of mental and physical states *really* 'radically contingent'? Interpreted in a straightforward way, Moreland's claim seems to entail the possibility of zombie worlds, where a zombie is an entity physically identical to a normal conscious human being but with no phenomenal consciousness. How is the claim that zombie worlds are possible to be defended? It is based, by and large, on an appeal to intuition or common sense. But if evidence (like that of Sytsma and Machery) supports the claim that most people do not even have a concept of phenomenal con-

sciousness it seems the evidence for the possibility of zombie worlds would be significantly weakened. In fact, a reasonable person could even argue that the possibility of zombie worlds is nothing more than a fiction conjured by philosophers, a concept with no grounding in common sense. Consequently, premise (5) would be undermined.

One, of course, might raise two related worries here. First, how can the fact that the folk do not clearly hold the philosophical conception of phenomenal consciousness have any bearing on whether phenomenal consciousness exists, or whether in particular 'genuinely nonphysical mental states exist'? Second, are there interesting philosophical implications to be revealed here, or rather only interesting sociological and psychological implications about what philosophers and non-philosophers think about various issues concerning religion?

In answer to the first, I must agree that there may be unwarranted ontological inferences being made by appealing to folk intuitions in making claims about the nature of consciousness. This, all will agree, can be risky business. Does the fact that a suitably large number of people intuitively believe that the Sun revolves around the Earth justify us in believing the ontological claims that flow out of the geocentric theory of our solar system? Surely not, but the issue here is not whether making ontological inferences based on folk intuitions is a risk worth taking. The issue is that many influential philosophical arguments concerning the nature of consciousness seem to rest on such inferences. Perhaps there are a variety of reasons for resisting such inferences, but insofar as this is what is being done in many parts of philosophy of mind it's important to see whether the empirical claims regarding folk intuitions that support these arguments are in fact true.

The second worry is related to the first and not much has to be added. We must ask, again, what is the driving force behind many of the philosophical arguments we are concerned with? How do philosophers defend the premises of their arguments? More often than not, the really critical premises are defended by an appeal to common sense — what 'seems just obvious.' And if getting a better understanding of these intuitions is a matter of sociology and psychology then it seems these disciplines must be implicated in the assessment of philosophical arguments. Moreover, as I will mention briefly in the conclusion of this paper, the distinction between philosophy and other disci-

plines (like sociology and psychology) may not be so clear. This, however, is a large topic that would take us too far astray.

The basic point is this: experimental work in philosophy of mind can have interesting implications for philosophical debates concerning the existence of God. In what follows I will review some of the literature in three other areas of experimental philosophy that have implications for several issues in philosophy of religion. It is my hope that these brief introductions would speak for themselves and make obvious the importance of experimental work regarding the future of philosophy of religion.

ATTRIBUTIONS OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND SOULS

In an important series of papers Adam Arico, Brian Fiala, and Shaun Nichols (2011, 2014) developed a model to explain how humans make *attributions* of consciousness. They call it the AGENCY model. The idea is that there are certain cues (the presence of eyes, motion trajectories, and contingent interactions) that trigger human brains to form an AGENT concept and classify the source of these cues as an agent. The triggering of an AGENT concept, in turn, strongly disposes a human to engage in a variety of behaviors: following gazes, attributing certain mental states (like desires and intentions), anticipating goal directed behavior, and imitating behavior. To this list of behaviors, Arico et al. add the disposition to attribute *conscious* mental states.

One thing to keep in mind about this model is that the workings of this model largely occur sub-consciously in a fast, unreflective manner. Like intuitions, the resulting dispositions for behaviors occur automatically when the AGENT concept is triggered.

To test this model Arico et al. ran reaction-time studies where participants were asked to answer whether or not a given property, say, the property of feeling pain could be attributed to a given entity, say, a dog. They used a variety of properties ranging from 'feeling pain' to 'being made of metal' to 'being colored white.' They also used a variety of entities ranging from mammals to insects to plants to inanimate natural objects. One interesting finding of this study is that participants were significantly more likely to attribute simple conscious states (e.g. pain, anger) to insects than to cars or clouds.

Moreover, participants were significantly *slower* in rejecting attributions of simple conscious states to insects than to cars or clouds.

This, Arico et al. argue, lends support to the claim that categorizing an entity as an AGENT indeed disposes one to attribute conscious states. This explains why participants are highly likely and quick to attribute conscious states to insects. Insects have all the relevant cues — they have eyes, have motion trajectories, and engage in contingent interactions. This also explains why participants were highly likely and quick to deny conscious states to vehicles — the absence of the relevant cues. Finally, the model also explains why so few participants denied simple conscious states to insects and why it took significantly longer for participants to make such denials. This is because participants would have had a strong disposition to attribute simple conscious states based on their AGENT concepts being triggered. To make a denial these participants would have had to actively suppress this disposition causing the increase in reaction time.

There are other interesting details and thought-provoking discussions regarding the rich body of results they gathered (in particular data regarding plants). What interests me, however, is that they go on to make a philosophically provocative claim regarding intuitions about the consciousness of other entities. They write:

> A number of prominent philosophers have built explicit theories of mind partly on the basis of our intuitions about what is conscious and what is not. One such case is Ned Block's famous example in which we are to imagine that all the residents of China are rigged up with radio transmitters so as to functionally mimic a living brain (Block, 1978)… Notice, however, that if our proposal is correct, there is a potential explanation for these intuitions that does not involve the denial that the nation of China enjoys conscious states. Instead, it may be that the example tends to provoke these intuitions because the sorts of cues that typically incline a subject toward attributions of consciousness are not salient with respect to the nation of China. (Arico, Fiala, Goldberg, & Nichols, 2011, 348)

The reason we are reluctant to attribute consciousness to the Chinese nation is because it doesn't have any of the typical cues that trigger the AGENT concept which in turn disposes us to attribute consciousness. Because of this we fail to have the intuitive pull that, in most cases, draws us to make attributions of consciousness. This, then, inclines us to *feel* that the Chinese nation is not

conscious (even though it is functionally equivalent to a normal conscious human). But this failure to elicit the relevant intuitions, according to Arico et al.'s view, is merely a consequence of the way our psychological mechanisms are set up to respond to various cues. It may not have anything deep to say about whether a given entity is *really* conscious or not. So there is a potential explanation for why many people resist the idea that the Chinese nation is conscious regardless of whether or not the Chinese nation really is conscious.

Why is this relevant to philosophy of religion? One way the relevance may be developed is to see that belief in non-physical souls (and disembodied gods)[2] is a critical tenet in a variety of religious traditions. Here is what Paul Bloom writes:

> More significant for religion, dualism makes it possible to imagine souls without bodies. Christianity and Judaism, for instance, involve a God who created the universe, performs miracles, and listens to prayers. He is omnipotent and omniscient, possessing infinite kindness, justice and mercy. But he does not, in any real sense, have a body. (Bloom, 2009, 123)

If the AGENCY model can be used to explain why we may be led astray about which entities have conscious states and which do not, it may also be used to explain why humans (perhaps) *falsely believe* in mind-body dualism. For it may intuitively seem to us that we have no physical parts that can serve as the locus of conscious mental states. The best candidate, given what we know about human physiology, is the brain. But when we are confronted with an actual brain all we perceive is a hunk of inert matter. Brains have no cues to trigger the relevant dispositions in us to make attributions of consciousness. So it may seem all too natural for many of us that the soul (or mind), as a center of consciousness, cannot be realized in any physical part of the body. But if souls exist (since, many of the religiously inclined would say, *we* are souls and we exist) and they cannot be identified or reduced to any physical part of our bodies we are forced to conclude that the soul must not be physical. Hence, our belief in mind-body dualism. But, given the AGENCY model, our resistance to attributing consciousness to the brain can be given a purely psychological explanation that may not have any deep metaphysical import.

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2   For more on this and other kinds of religious cognition studied under the umbrella of cognitive science of religion see (Atran, 2005) and (Barrett, 2004).

Given this account of why we don't attribute consciousness to physical entities like brains when brains may very well be conscious, it may no longer be so obvious that non-physical souls exist. It seems to me that philosophers of religion are faced with an interesting challenge based on experimental work carried out by experimentalists like Arico et al. regarding beliefs that are central to a variety of religious traditions.

SEMANTIC REFERENCE AND DIVINE NAMES

Turning briefly to language, a number of heated debates over semantic reference straightforwardly make their way into discussions about religion. Consider the debate over the semantic reference of terms like 'Allah' and 'God.' Do these terms co-refer? Some will argue that the answer must be 'no.' Others, however, are happy to say 'yes' and claim that they refer to the same entity — the God of the Abrahamic traditions. Who is right? Here is how Miroslav Volf enters this debate:

> Should Christians reject 'Allah' as a term for God? … 'Allah' is simply Arabic for 'God' (with the definite article) just as *Theos* is Greek for 'God' and *Bog* is Croatian for 'God'. A slightly different way to make the same point is that 'Allah', like 'God' is not a proper name, but a descriptive term. 'Barack Obama' is a proper name; 'president' is a descriptive term… for the most part we don't translate proper names… we translate descriptive terms. (Volf, 2011, 82)

Volf makes a number of interesting claims in this short passage, but are they true? He assumes that 'God' is a description and not a name. But is this obvious? Kripke, for one, doesn't seem to be so sure:

> In the case of some terms, people might have doubts as to whether they're names or descriptions; like 'God' — does it describe God as the unique divine being or is it a name of God? (Kripke, 1982, 26-7)

Volf's claim that 'God' is a description and not a name seems ripe for experimental work. Where do folk intuitions lie regarding this matter? I wouldn't be surprised if studies generated unexpected results.

Be that as it may, even if we were to concede that Volf was right in claiming that 'God' is a description and not a name, we could easily reframe the debate to re-generate the original tension. We can simply focus on an explicit

name like 'Jehovah' or 'Yahweh' and rerun the debate, but for convenience of exposition I will continue to use 'God.'

The natural question to ask at this juncture is: how do *names* refer to their referents? This question lies at the core of a large literature in the philosophy of language. There are two primary competing theories: the description theory and the causal theory. But which is right? Kripke famously argued for the causal theory and many philosophers believe he made a convincing case. But how did Kripke defend his arguments? Largely by eliciting intuitions based on specific cases. A case Kripke made famous in this regard is his fictional case about Gödel (and Schmidt). Gödel, of course, is the famous mathematician known for proving the incompleteness theorem. Gödel is an interesting case because the fact that he proved the incompleteness theorem is, for the most part, the only thing that most people know about him. Based on these ideas Kripke developed the following counterfactual scenario:

> Suppose that Gödel was not in fact the author of this theorem. A man named 'Schmidt', whose body was found in Vienna under mysterious circumstances many years ago, actually did the work in question. His friend Gödel somehow got hold of the manuscript and it was thereafter attributed to Gödel. On the view in question, then, when our ordinary man uses the name 'Gödel', he really means to refer to Schmidt, because Schmidt is the unique person satisfying the description, 'the man who discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic'… so since the man who discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic is in fact Schmidt, we, when we talk about 'Gödel', are in fact always referring to Schmidt. *But it seems to me that we are not.* (Kripke, 1982, 84)

It is interesting that Kripke's evidence against the claim that 'Gödel' actually refers to Schmidt in this case is his simple intuition. He writes: "it seems to me that we are not." Kripke, of course, while referring to his own intuitions was implicitly using them to make a generalization. He assumed, like Jackson above, that in talking about his own intuitions he would be appealing to the intuitions of those in his audience (and beyond). Given the way many have responded to Kripke's work it is likely that the intuitions of most in his audience (other philosophers) shared his intuitions. So the causal theory of names established itself as a legitimate candidate in the philosophical debates over theories of reference.

If Kripke is right it may be open to those in the debate over the reference of terms like 'God' or 'Allah' to deploy the causal theory of reference as a tool

for defending the co-reference of these terms. They, after all, seem to have a shared causal origin in Abraham and a compelling argument can be made.

But this is where experimental philosophers have stepped in. They are interested in whether the Kripkean intuition about the Gödel case is in fact a broadly shared intuition. To investigate this Edouard Machery, Ron Mallon, Shaun Nichols, and Stephen Stich, in several papers (2004, 2013), have called the generality of the Kripkean intuition into question. Machery et al. have done cross-cultural work regarding the Gödel case to see whether or not intuitions align with Kripke's. Among the many interesting findings they reported on, they discovered a genuine diversity of intuitions between western cultures (e.g. U.S.) and eastern cultures (e.g. China) regarding the reference of names. These findings, along with Machery et al.'s interpretation of the findings, have not gone unchallenged. But the data is there and it raises important questions. Perhaps Machery et al.'s work is tapping into real diversity. If so, it calls the status of the causal theory, and perhaps the claim that 'God' and 'Allah' co-refer, into question.

FREE WILL, DETERMINISM, AND DIVINE FOREKNOWLEDGE

The last topic I will consider is free will. This has been a source of debate for centuries within various religious circles and no resolution seems to be in sight. It is thought, by some, that the existence of God, traditionally conceived, poses a threat to human free will. This is because God is omniscient. If God's knowledge encompasses even future events that have not yet transpired how can we simultaneously maintain that robust choices are available to humans (in the sense that humans could have done otherwise)? Here is a sampling of this tension found in Mainmonides:

> Does God know or does He not know that a certain individual will be good or bad? If thou sayest, 'He knows', then it necessarily follows that [that] man is compelled to act as God knew beforehand he would act, otherwise God's knowledge would be imperfect… (Maimonides 1996, 99-100)

And here is a more contemporary sampling from Nelson Pike:

> There is a pitfall in the doctrine of divine omniscience. That knowing involves believing (truly) is surely a tempting philosophical view. And the idea that God's attributes (including omniscience) are essentially connected to

His nature, together with the idea that an omniscient being would hold no false beliefs and would hold beliefs about the outcome of human actions in advance to their performance… then if one affirms the existence of God, one is committed to the view that no human action is voluntary. (Pike, 1965, 46)

An interesting, but not particularly relevant, feature of Pike's classic paper is that he begins by asserting "that if God is omniscient, no human action is voluntary… seems intuitively false." Apparently Pike believes there is no *prima facie* intuition that there is a conflict between divine omniscience and voluntary action. Whether or not this claim is true, Pike goes on to argue that there indeed is a conflict. Nevertheless, Pike's assertion is open to empirical investigation and, hence, is open to the work of experimentalists.

Be that as it may, the tension between divine omniscience and voluntary action is similar, in many ways, with the problem facing free will in the area of metaphysics. Regarding divine omniscience, if God knows at time t_1 (say a thousand years before Daniel's birth) that Daniel would do x at a later time t_2 then it seems, given the infallibility of God's knowledge, that Daniel must do x at t_2. But then it seems at t_1 that Daniel had no choice whether or not he would do x at t_2. In traditional metaphysics the problem is often couched in terms of the troublesome relationship between free will and determinism. If the universe unfolds in deterministic fashion it seems that humans are 'compelled' to act in ways that were set in motion (millions of) years in advance of any human's birth and consequently do not have robust choices.

Many interlocutors in these debates take for granted that the intuitive position, the position we all share before we engage in philosophical deliberation, is one of *in*compatibilism. That is, the default position is that free will is *not* compatible with determinism (or divine omniscience). Much ink has been spilled by compatibilists over the years to try and demonstrate that the default position is mistaken and that, though counterintuitive, free will is indeed compatible with determinism. So while there is obvious disagreement between the camps, what many incompatibilists and compatibilists have shared is the assumption that incompatibilism is intuitive and is therefore the default position.

But, experimental philosophers have wondered, is incompatibilism *really* the default position? Shaun Nichols and Joshua Knobe (2007) ran experi-

ments to probe the intuitions of the folk on these matters. They introduced the following two universes to participants:

> Imagine a universe (Universe A) in which everything that happens is completely caused by whatever happened before it. This is true from the very beginning of the universe, so what happened in the beginning of the universe caused what happened next, and so on right up until the present.

> Imagine a universe (Universe B) in which almost everything that happens is completely caused by whatever happened before it. The one exception is human decision making. (Knobe, 2014, 71-2)

Then the participants were given vignettes that describe events taking place in one of the two universes. For example, a man named Bill has become attracted to his secretary, and he decides that the only way to be with her is to kill his wife and 3 children. He kills his family. The participants were then asked: if Bill existed in Universe A (the deterministic universe), is Bill fully morally responsible for killing his wife and 3 children? Surprisingly, most participants (72%) answered 'yes.' This suggests that causally determined agents can still be morally responsible.[3] Perhaps the folk see no real tension here—Universe A is compatible with human moral responsibility.

Again, there is much more to be said and there is an ongoing debate involving other philosophers (Nahmias, Morris, Nadelhoffer, & Turner, 2006). The preliminary results, however, seem to indicate that the assumption that *in*compatibilism is the default position in debates over free will may be mistaken. The shape of the debates in this area of metaphysics could change quite dramatically if this were the case and the burden of proof were reversed.

Results like this would also have an obvious effect on the debates over free will occurring within the philosophy of religion. Since most operate under the assumption that there is some intuitive tension involved in simultaneously keeping commitments to human free will and divine omniscience together, discovering that the folk have no such tension (regarding free will and

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3   It should be noted that the probes are focused on moral responsibility and not free will. But most would grant that the kind of free will anyone should be interested in is the kind of free will that undergirds moral responsibility. So probing for moral responsibility just is probing for free will.

determinism) would likely transform the face of this debate.[4] The difficult problems of reconciling divine omniscience and free will may turn out to be *not* as pressing as many philosophers of religion have presumed.

CONCLUSION

I hope it is evident that many of the studies carried out in experimental philosophy have the potential to inform a variety of issues that are central to philosophy of religion. I find a lot of what experimentalists have said and done to be interesting and relevant. I also find their vision of philosophy, a vision that construes philosophy as a discipline that uses *all* available tools to attack problems, to be very attractive.

In fact, Kwame Appiah, in his 2007 presidential address at the Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, argued that the current movement in experimental philosophy was a matter of philosophical restoration, not innovation. Not only was Isaac Newton called a 'philosopher' in the English of his day, but philosophers like Thomas Reid and David Hume engaged in and encouraged activities (relevant to their thinking) that they themselves described in experimental terms. Moreover, in assessing the relationship of a particular empirical science, like psychology, with the historical roots of philosophy, Appiah writes:

> The point is not just that the canonical philosophers belong as much to the history of what we now call psychology as to the genealogy of philosophy. It's that you would have had a hard time explaining to them that *this* part of their work was *echt* philosophy and *that* part of their work was not. Trying to separate their 'metaphysical' from their psychological claims is, I fear, rather like trying to peel a raspberry. (Appiah, 2008, 10)

What this suggests, perhaps, is that by supplementing our contemporary philosophical practices with the methods emerging out of experimental philosophy, we may very well be *restoring* a vision of philosophy that is a truer representation of 'traditional' philosophy than that which is practiced solely in the armchair.

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4   For an interesting discussion of how compatibilism and divine determinism are or are not relevantly similar see (Helm, 1993, 2010), (Flew, 2003) and (Byrne, 2008).

If the broad contours of what I have presented in this paper are on the right track then it behooves philosophers of religion to take EP seriously and, where applicable, engage in experimental work themselves. This is not, however, a call to burn the armchair. Instead it is a collaborative suggestion that aims to avoid limiting philosophical reflection to the *a priori*. Why not throw everything that is available to us (psychology, sociology, neuroscience, etc.) at the debates central to philosophy of religion? I believe philosophers of religion will not merely benefit from the growing body of data being collected and analyzed by experimental philosophers; I believe philosophers of religion, with their distinctive interests and concepts, can bring novel perspectives to the table and push experimental work forward in unforeseen and fruitful ways.

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