The Theory and Practice of Experimental Philosophy

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Chapter 0. An Anti-Manifesto

Experimental philosophy is often described as a *movement*, sometimes a *revolutionary movement*, and the image most often associated with it is the burning armchair. With that in mind, we have a confession to make: Neither of us has ever burned an armchair. In fact, we quite like them—they tend to be comfy. But while we’re not out to burn armchairs, we are interested in getting philosophers up out of their comfy armchairs from time to time.

The metaphor of the armchair suggests a conception of the philosopher as engaged in pure thought, disconnected from the outside world. The quintessential example comes from Descartes in the *Meditations*. According to his account, Descartes shut himself away—just him alone with his thoughts—and through mental self-discipline over a period of several days, he arrived at a new foundation on which human knowledge could be built. Thus, Descartes opens his first meditation with the following passage:

> Several years have now passed since I first realized how numerous were the false opinions that in my youth I had taken to be true, and thus how doubtful were all those that I had subsequently built upon them. And thus I realized that once in my life I had to raze everything to the ground and begin again from the original foundations, if I wanted to establish anything firm and lasting in the sciences…. Accordingly, I have today suitably freed my mind of all cares, secured for myself a period of leisurely tranquility, and am withdrawing into solitude. At last I will apply myself earnestly and unreservedly to this general demolition of my opinions. (1998[1641], 59)

The image that Descartes conjures is striking and romantic. We definitely see its appeal. And despite self-identifying as experimental philosophers, much of the time we spend “doing philosophy” is time spent in quiet reflection.
But even Descartes did not philosophize exclusively from the armchair. In fact, he did a good deal of empirical work, and such work is, in our opinion, as much a part of Descartes’ philosophical legacy as are his meditations. For example, in the *Optics*, he offers an account of visual perception, calling on a number of empirical observations in doing so. Consider the episode described at the start of the Fifth Discourse:

Thus you can clearly see that in order to perceive, the mind need not contemplate any images resembling the things that it senses. But this makes it no less true that the objects we look at do imprint very perfect images on the back of our eyes.... You will be even more certain of this if, taking the eye of a newly deceased man, or, for want of that, of an ox or some other large animal, you carefully cut through to the back the three membranes which enclose it, in such a manner that a large part of the humor $M$ [see Figure 0.1] which is there remains exposed without any of it spilling out because of this. Then, having covered it over with some white body thin enough to let the daylight pass through it, as for example with a piece of paper or with an eggshell, $RST$, place this eye in the hole of a specially made window such as $Z$, in such a manner so that it has its front, $BCD$, turned toward some location where there are various objects, such as $V$, $X$, $Y$, illuminated by the sun; and the back of it, where the white body $RST$ is located, toward the inside of the chamber $P$ (where you will be), into which no other light is allowed to enter except that which will be able to penetrate through this eye, all of whose parts, from $C$ to $S$, you know to be transparent. For when this has been done, if you look at that white body $RST$, you will see there, not perhaps without admiration and pleasure, a picture which will represent in natural perspective all the objects which will be outside of it toward $VXY$.... But I must explain here at greater length how this picture is formed; for, by the same means, I can enable you to understand several things which pertain to vision. (2001[1637], 91-93)

In this passage, Descartes discusses an empirical investigation that he conducted—he went out and carefully dissected the eye of an ox to learn something about how the eye functions. Further, this investigation, amongst others, played an important role in Descartes’ account of visual perception, and he took himself to be doing philosophy in putting this account forward.
Experimental philosophy is part of a long tradition. While much of Western philosophy has been done from the metaphorical armchair, much of it has also been done in the field or in the laboratory. Consequently, we do not think of the contemporary incarnation of experimental philosophy—the new experimental philosophy as we will call it—as either breaking with or contemptuous of traditional philosophy. Moreover, by advocating for the use of empirical methods in philosophy, we resolutely do not claim that all philosophizing must involve empirical studies, nor do we seek to cast aside that part of the tradition that is represented by the image of the armchair. We hope to add to contemporary philosophy, not to detract from it.

The image of the burning armchair no doubt served a sociological purpose—it drew a sharp line in the sand, polarized positions, and worked up fervor. And this likely contributed to the rapid growth of the new experimental philosophy over the past ten years. But such divisive rhetoric can also create problems. It promotes replacing the diverse practices found in both experimental and non-experimental philosophy with caricatures. The danger is that we will come to think of non-experimental philosophy as an inherited, tyrannical tradition based on proclamations (intuitions) delivered by those in power, and experimental philosophy as seeking to undermine those proclamations in favor of a new more democratically determined set of
decrees. But non-experimental philosophy is not everywhere based on intuitions (although intuitions are often in play), and the new experimental philosophy is not everywhere directed toward more egalitarian surveys of intuitions (although some of this is to be found in the literature). Recognizing the diversity in both experimental and non-experimental philosophy, and seeing both as part of a larger tradition, we see little reason for them to go to war. The guiding image for this volume, therefore, is not the burning armchair but rather the toolbox.
References


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